A PROGRAM MODEL FOR THE INDUCTION OF INNER CITY TEACHERS

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Abstract

This article describes the Winnipeg School Division’s Induction Program Model for New Inner City Teachers, designed and implemented by the Director of its Professional Learning Centre newly established in 2008. A participatory action research approach drawing upon multiple methods was used to increase understandings and evaluate initial impacts of the program involving 88 teacher participants (42 mentors and 46 mentees) during the first two years of the pilot stage. Findings related to the core components examined are presented: the mentoring component, the action research component, the job-embedded learning component, and the professional development sessions. Early evaluation data are generating strong evidence of positive program design and impacts that can be used to further inform and refine the model.

A Program Model for the Induction of Inner City Teachers

This article is based upon a presentation made at the conference Educational Leadership: Doing the Right Thing, organized by the Manitoba Education Research Network in spring 2012. In our presentation, we outlined the Winnipeg School Division’s induction program1 for early service teachers working in inner city schools, and findings of an evaluation of the program designed to provide information and recommendations for key decision makers and funders about the program and its impact. In the first section of this article, we set the context for the work of the newly created Professional Learning Centre situated centrally in the division’s Inner City District. The second section offers a description of the induction program, section three details the program evaluation design, and the fourth section deals with what has been learned from the program evaluation. Finally, the fifth section addresses the question of the future of the induction program.

Setting the Context

Leaders within the Inner City District of Winnipeg School Division have historically offered professional development opportunities comprised of multiple learning sessions that intentionally address the unique inner city school context of participating teachers.

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1 The Winnipeg School Division acknowledges Manitoba Education and The Winnipeg Foundation for assisting with the funding of the induction program in the first two years of the pilot phase.
Under the direction of Superintendent Pauline Clarke, a proposal was completed in spring 2008 to create a Professional Learning Centre (PLC) for the Inner City District, with the goal of launching a three-year induction program for both early service teachers (teachers new to the Inner City District) and early service school leaders (new vice principals). However, this article reports only on work with teachers (Collis & Clarke, 2008). This idea would be relatively new terrain for school divisions across the province.

Therefore, the proposal was grounded in Canadian and international research on induction programs elsewhere, including the work of the New Teacher Center in Santa Cruz, California (Strong, 2005; Strong & St. John, 2001), experiences in the United Kingdom (Department of Education, 2012), and the Toronto District School Board’s mentoring program for beginning teachers (Strachan, 2009/2010). In some ways, the proposal was our organizational response to prevailing notions within the professional literature that “improving student learning, especially in high-need, low-income schools, requires increasing the professional capacity of schools” (Moore Johnson, 2009).

As a prelude to program planning, focus group meetings with new teachers, school leaders, and community members were held in 2006 and 2007. Armed with the input and knowledge of induction programs elsewhere, the Inner City District induction program was created to address the local context through job-embedded learning with an eye on promoting effective teaching practices in urban schools. The intent was to emphasize reflective practice while delivering relevant curriculum within learning partnerships. Plans were made to extend early service teachers’ knowledge of the socio-cultural context and low income neighbourhoods, so they would be better equipped to serve and advocate for the needs of inner city families and children using strengths-based approaches. Furthermore, teacher cohorts were established to foster a networked learning community across the district (Wenger, 1998).

Two other notions were important as we proceeded with the planning and implementation of the new induction program. First, paramount to the design was the knowledge that in-depth mentor training should be a critical feature of any professional development model aimed to facilitate adult learning and teacher transformation (Strong, 2009). This perspective is based upon evidence gleaned from the research literature on effective mentoring programs and division leaders’ first-hand experiences at a summer institute conducted by Laura Lipton. Second, we knew that ongoing program evaluation would be essential to understanding and improving the practice and the impact of the induction program. Therefore, assistance was invited from two outside program evaluation consultants who, in partnership with us, helped to design and implement a program evaluation plan for the initial two years.

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2 Pauline Clarke was the Inner City Superintendent during the proposal development and first pilot year. She is currently the Chief Superintendent of the Winnipeg School Division. Karin Seiler is presently the Inner City Superintendent.
The evaluation plan was custom designed to fit our program and context, and was envisioned to be participatory in nature. The participatory approach to the program evaluation also provided mentorship on planning and conducting program evaluation to the PLC director, professional staff, and participants, allowing the participants to undertake ongoing program evaluation on their own once the externals’ work was completed. The evaluation plan included teacher reflection by program participants within the more systematic context of action research (Stringer, 2008), with the idea of making a potentially greater degree of professional awareness and transformation possible. Indeed, we wanted to honour the image of teachers as capable professionals and not simply technicians, and we did not want to practise “mentorship light.”

The Induction Program Model

Good mentors are central to engaging early service teachers in a rich set of learning experiences that can result in more effective teaching practices and student achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). With an aim to develop good mentors, the program provided each of the mentors up to five days of release time for each of the first two years. For four of these ten days, mentors received intensive training specifically for developing mentoring skills. The training was initially led by the program director in the first year and then by Laura Lipton in the second year, co-author of *Mentoring Matters* (Lipton & Wellman, 2003), a text resource used in the program. The training was designed to develop strong growth agents who learn to skillfully conduct learning-focused conversations with beginning teachers for the purposes of enhancing their ability to critically reflect and think deeply about teaching and learning. The mentorship training supported mentors in learning to shift stances fluidly between consulting, collaborating, and coaching, based upon what their mentees needed, as well as a host of communication patterns that could build trust and rapport as they worked to increase the teaching capacities of their mentees.

The mentors – called Advanced Skills Teachers in the program – attended overview sessions outlining the goals and elements of the program, which were followed up with sessions for meeting and beginning work with their learning partners. Together with their mentees, mentors also attended networking sessions that afforded opportunities to learn from other district educators, or community members and agencies, about practices and programs that fit with the overriding themes of the induction program, such as Aboriginal Education, school-family relationships, responsive teaching practices, assessment for learning, student engagement, inclusion, and teaching for understanding. Mentors and mentees spent time devoted to job-embedded learning (JEL), that is, “teacher learning that is grounded in day-to-day teaching practice and is designed to enhance teachers’ content-specific instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning” (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, & Powers, 2010, p. 2). To support JEL, four to six half-days of release time were provided for learning partners to plan curriculum collaboratively, conduct classroom observations and visitations, converse, give and receive feedback, conduct inquiries and action research, engage in reflective talk and problem solving, and
focus on supporting student learning through quality program planning for complex urban classrooms.

The research tells us that educational leaders must also address teacher isolationism and fragmented efforts when working to improve teaching practice and learning outcomes, and that mentoring programs have contributions to make here (Heider, 2005; Johnson & the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). Especially in highly challenging school contexts, teaching needs to be viewed more as a collective than an individual responsibility. To address this insight, the program provided ample opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively and to co-construct knowledge. While such opportunities send a strong message that teachers need to be up-standers for each other, and not working alone, the program worked in ways that personalized the needs of teachers as adult learners. For this reason, it is important to note that the program was informed by principles of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978) and adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Mezirow, 1991). These principles suggest that adults are goal oriented, relevancy oriented, autonomous and self-directed social learners who are also pragmatic meaning seekers. The program leaders were also mindful about making connections to the prior pedagogical and curricular knowledge and experiences that the adult participants brought to the program.

A unique feature of the induction program is that it is built on structures, human resources, and relationships already existing within the Inner City District of 21 schools. Mentors were drawn from the district and volunteered for their roles through an open application process. Learning support teachers, working in clusters of three inner city schools, also functioned as mentors where they were already engaged in learning relationships with teachers. The program then afforded them more time and resources with which to augment their work. Schools in clusters were already meeting and networking around common educational issues. Therefore, whenever possible, mentors were sought from schools already established in clusters or across clusters. Planners also kept the needs and similar interests of learning partners in mind. In other situations, mentors performed a service to district colleagues who were working in different schools. By design, learning partnerships were to extend over three years, in order to provide consistency and to enhance relationship building. In some cases, adjustments were made due to changes in the workplace: promotion, study leave, re-assignment, parental leave, transfer, sick leave, retirement, and so on.

Program Evaluation Design and Procedures

A participatory program evaluation design was employed for the induction program, which involved division leaders working in concert with two external colleagues who were experienced in conducting educational research and program evaluation. The internal program review drew upon the action research paradigm, which enables professionals to study and improve their own practice (Hendricks, 2009; Stringer, 2008). In this particular project, the program evaluators were positioned as outsiders working in collaboration with insiders (Anderson & Herr, 2005).
The purpose of the evaluation was to provide information and recommendations for decision-makers and funders about the induction program model and its impact on early service teacher practice. The following questions guided the evaluation:

- What are participants’ perceptions of the mentoring process, the job-embedded learning component, the action research component, and the professional development sessions?
- What impact is the program having on mentees’ learning and their teaching practice?
- What impact is the program having on mentors’ learning and their mentoring practice?
- What are participants’ perception of the program overall?

Multiple data sources and collection procedures were employed to address the evaluation questions and to allow program evaluators to practice triangulation. To assess the impact of the different program components, as well as the program overall on mentees and mentors, the following tools were used: year-end questionnaires, year-end focus group interviews, observations of mentoring sessions, written reports of action research projects, and written feedback on professional development sessions.

Qualitative data gleaned from focus groups and open-ended questionnaires and survey items were analyzed and themed using the interpretive strategies suggested by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) and Stringer (2008). Quantitative data generated from participant responses to fixed items on questionnaires and surveys were analyzed using basic descriptive statistical methods (Elliot & Woodward, 2007). Content analysis (Busch et al., 2005), coupled with a scoring rubric, were applied when assessing teachers’ written action research reports. Finally, the mentor-mentee learning conversations were examined using interaction analysis methods (Rex, Steadman, & Graciano, 2008), through a particular analytic lens. For this data set, the analytic framework encompassed 18 specific skills and tools that were targeted during the mentoring training and identified in the supplementary text resources (Lipton & Wellman, 2003; 2007).

**Discussion of Findings**

This section discusses core findings of the program evaluation of the initial two years for early service teachers and their mentors. Overall, 88 teachers were involved in the induction program, 42 mentors and 46 mentees. Teacher participation rates in the program evaluation activities varied by type of assessment tool, cohort group, and program year; and ranged from 50% to 80%. Overall, very good sub-group representation and response rates were achieved, which contributes to the trustworthiness of the findings. As mentioned above, a number of questions guided the program evaluation, and we will discuss the findings by question.
Participants’ Perceptions of the Mentoring Process and the Job-Embedded Learning Component

Mentor and mentees found the mentoring a strong component of the program, which echoes findings of other mentoring program evaluations and research (Algozzine, Gretes, Queen, & Cowan-Hathcock, 2007; Strong, 2009). Mentees were satisfied overall with the mentoring that they received, and mentor and mentees generally strongly endorsed the mentor-mentee matches. In cases where mentor and mentee were not located in the same school, it was considered by those involved to be a logistical problem affecting their opportunities to meet, a finding that is not uncommon in the research literature (Johnson & The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, 2004). The effectiveness of the mentoring process was impacted by the fact that a large group of the mentoring partners in both teacher cohorts met only minimally (once or twice) in the second year. In general, the learning-focused interactions in the mentoring process (Lipton & Wellman, 1999) seemed to shift from being primarily consultative in the first year to a more collaborative and coaching approach in the second year.

Participants’ Perceptions of the Action Research Component

Overall, the majority of the participants judged the action research project to be a strong feature of the induction program. Assessments of the submitted action research reports showed that participants’ understanding of the action research process was by and large mixed. While key elements were generally discerned, participants found it difficult to employ data analysis strategies that matched their chosen research questions and the data to be gathered. The action research process was notably easier for participants who were engaged in action research for the second time. These findings are in line with Peraro’s (2005) research, which suggests that at least 5 years are needed for the process of teacher research to become a well-developed, natural, and habitual part of an educator’s practice. Participants identified some common challenges and concerns associated with the action research process: data collection, lack of focus, lack of time, increased workload, the formality of process, difficulty comprehending research language, impingement on time available to address other pressing needs, and requirements for additional support. The most prominent challenge that mentees and mentors encountered with their action research projects was time: time to meet with their mentor and mentee, respectively, as well as time to complete the project.

Overwhelmingly, the research on professional development suggests that educators need to be “afforded the time, space, structures, and support” (Croft et al., 2010, p. 8) to engage in professional learning. Almost all teacher mentors said that their engagement with the project made them better mentors. This finding is in line with research on the benefits of action research: developing strong mentor-mentee relationships (Levin & Rock, 2003), increasing confidence, empowerment, and self-efficacy (Bradley-Levine, Smith, & Carr, 2009; Farrell, 2003), augmenting professional learning (Capobianco & Joyal, 2008), and developing teacher identity (Burn, 2007).
Participants’ Perceptions of the Professional Development Sessions

The teacher mentors judged the topics of the PD sessions as being helpful to their role as mentors, and almost all of the participants were satisfied with the number of PD sessions offered through the program. As the feedback solicited after each PD session suggested, those who attended a particular PD workshop considered the workshop professionally challenging and stimulating, although most reports of contemporary research on professional development (see, for instance, “Professional Development,” 2011) indicate that single PD sessions on various topics lack continuity and coherence and are not particularly useful to participants. A possible explanation for this finding might be that these sessions were planned with participant input and aimed to address needs expressed by focus group discussants held prior to the start of the program.

There was overwhelming evidence that advanced skills mentors were applying the skills that they had learned at the Lipton workshop, confirmed through the observational data gathered. The highest level of usefulness of the PD sessions was expressed by subgroups for whom the PD sessions had immediate applicability. Attendance at the PD sessions offered as an integral part of the program and for which release time was provided was strong. Supplementary after-school sessions were also offered, but were not particularly well-attended. The timing of these PD sessions – after school – was identified as a challenge by about half of the participants, which probably explains the relatively low attendance rate across almost all cohorts.

Impact of the Program on Mentees’ Learning and Teaching Practice

There was general agreement across all teacher mentor and mentee cohorts that the mentees improved their practice significantly through the mentoring component of the program, although half of the year two teacher mentees felt that their involvement in the program did not have a significant impact on their teaching practice. It was interesting to note that there was somewhat of a mismatch between how the teacher mentors described the impact of the program on their mentees’ teaching practice and how their mentees themselves described the impact.

Early service teachers reported the following positive impact: increased competence, confidence, comfort, independence, willingness to take risks, and overall professional satisfaction, as well as decreased anxiety and stress, and evidence of positive changes in their students’ learning, progress, and behavior. Tangible evidence of positive changes in mentees’ learning, as reflected in their pedagogical thinking and practice, was also provided to some degree. Teacher mentors substantiated the claims of their mentees by making similar observations and by pointing to positive changes in their mentees’ teaching and their students’ learning. Teacher mentors made reference to
actual observations of their respective mentees’ teaching practice as evidence of their mentees’ changed practice.

**Impact of the Program on Mentors’ Learning and Teaching Practice**

Defining the roles of both mentors and mentees in the program, and ensuring that mentors are formally trained through targeted professional development, were both acknowledged by the participants as key to effective mentoring, which is a finding that aligns with the work of West and Saphier (2009). The PD sessions that focused specifically on developing and improving mentoring skills for advanced skills teachers emerged as most useful in the judgment of the participants. There was overwhelming evidence that advanced skills teachers were applying the skills that they had learned at the Lipton PD workshop. There was evidence gathered during observations of a sample of mentoring sessions of the use of all 18 skills identified through the PD training sessions on developing learning-focused relationships and leading learning-focused conversations. Most skills were visible in each of the observed mentoring sessions.

**Participants’ Perceptions of the Program Overall**

All teacher groups recommended that the mentoring and action research elements of the program should continue. For the teacher mentees, the mentoring relationship was the most important feature of the program. For the teacher mentors, the PD sessions, in particular those on learning-focused conversations, were the most important feature of the program. They also recognized that the process of professional development needs to be ongoing, long term, and sustained, which provides credence for the three-year timeframe of the program. There was no prominent problem with the program design identified by the teacher mentors, while half of the second year mentees identified a mismatch between mentor and mentee (different teaching assignments and located at different schools) as problematic. All participants acknowledged the need for increasing the time for professional development. Prioritizing, advance planning, and fixed scheduling were viewed by teacher mentors as critical ways to facilitate increased time and commitment for participation in professional development programming by all involved in the program.

**Looking to the Future**

Data provided through comprehensive program evaluation reporting (Morin, Falkenberg, & Collis, 2009; Morin, Falkenberg, Collis, & Smith, 2012), ongoing review of the related literature (e.g., Totterdell, Bubb, Woodroffe, & Hanrahan, 2004), and conversing about our professional development with critical friends inspire us to continue the important work of building strong teacher partnerships and networked learning communities in the Inner City District, Winnipeg School Division. We intend to continue our exploration of job-embedded learning and action research as vehicles for teacher inquiry and theory-
generation about teaching practices that are most effective in supporting inner city learners’ academic achievement. Our work with Laura Lipton around learning-focused relationships will continue, as evaluation findings showed robust evidence that division mentors have been positively impacted by the training and are successfully acquiring and applying the mentoring skills so critical for supporting the transformation and growth of early service teachers. Program leaders will provide supplementary training to reinforce and amplify mentoring skills of “committed listening” and “other mindedness” discovered to be so crucial in leading learning interactions with mentees.

As we look to the future and the complex reality in which we work as inner city educators, our agenda only gets broader and more ambitious. Fortunately, to assist with the long road ahead and to support the growing cadre of program participants (now six teacher and two school leader sub-groups), an additional teacher has been added to the professional team at the PLC. We plan to maintain focus first and foremost on effective teaching and other topics pertinent to our context, such as assessment for learning, teacher reflection, diversity, and formal and informal leadership. Attention must be given to the many facets of education for social justice, such as community advocacy, strength-based approaches, and understanding of low income circumstances. In our view, it is important for the program to take on more of a community focus, extending professional learning into inner city neighbourhoods so that teachers experience the district first hand as our children and families experience it. Indeed, we want to sustain our collaborative partnership with outside program evaluators and secure stable funding. Finally, we are eager to share the insights from this experience with the larger educational community.

References


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