

# Novice teachers' workplace experiences of collegiate support

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## Summary

### Introduction

Being a teacher requires professionalism and, in case of an inexperienced teacher, a lot of effort. Research has shown that the first years of practice are of crucial importance with regard to the professional development of the novice teacher as the initial school and teaching experiences either encourage or discourage any ambition to have a career as a teacher (Ginns et al., 2001).

To support novice teachers, induction year programmes with varying support activities have been developed and launched in many countries, including Estonia. Several previous studies show that induction activities support novice teachers' adaptation in their first years of teaching (e.g. Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). On the other hand, researchers have questioned the effectiveness of support systems designed for novice teachers in schools with unsupported professional cultures, and have revealed that few schools are prepared to offer novice teachers a comprehensive array of induction support (Birkeland & Feiman-Nemser, 2012). Therefore, it has been found that the topic of induction activities and support for novice teachers requires further research and that the need to understand the novice teachers' viewpoint of an institution as one of the support means for a novice teachers' survival (e.g. Bullough, 2012).

Research has shown that the quality of school leadership is the dominant factor when evaluating the working conditions (Ladd, 2011) and that a fair and democratic leadership, good school management, and proper recognition of efforts contribute significantly to teachers' feelings of satisfaction (Lam & Yan, 2011). School principals are described in research literature, as the key sources of support and guidance playing an important role in relieving novice teachers' feelings of isolation and loneliness and provide positive reinforcement, without which novices may feel frustrated and abandoned (McKerrow, 1996). Therefore, supportive school principals

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should persistently foster work relationships and remove barriers by providing resources necessary for implementation, in other words to, enable others to act (Clark & Byrnes, 2012).

The aim of this qualitative study is to analyse novice teachers' descriptions of adaptation to the social working environment and the presence, or lack, of support from the members of the institution. The following research questions were formulated:

1. How do novice teachers describe their adaptation to the school community?
2. What kinds of support are provided to novice teachers by colleagues?
3. What kind of support would novice teachers like to receive from their colleagues?

### Methodology

The sample consisted of 13 novice teachers working at different comprehensive schools, all of whom attended the induction year's seminars.

The data was collected in the induction year seminars during one academic year, using audio recordings of the full sets of the seminars. During the audio recorded seminars the novice teachers could, and did, talk freely about external issues in addition to general induction year compulsory module issues.

Audio recordings were fully transcribed and analysed using qualitative thematic data analysis techniques. We followed the analysis guidelines of the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). To increase the credibility of the findings, two authors undertook parallel identification of themes and sub-themes. In line with the research questions, we generated an initial list of ideas about what was in the data. As a second phase, the coding of interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set was carried out. Subsequently, the emerged codes were organised under themes and sub-themes. For example, codes „positive mentoring relationship”, „neutral mentoring relationship”, „negatively perceived mentoring relationship” formed a sub-theme „Functioning mentoring relationship”. The latter sub-theme was organised with the sub-theme „Expectations for a mentor” under a theme „Mentoring and collegial support”. After that, the themes were reviewed in collaboration with researchers – to check if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the complete dataset. In the final phase of data analysis, we used the summary table that was a result of coding and categorising, to write a summary of sub-themes and themes using *QCAmap* software.

Four thematic categories emerged from the data analysis: collegiate expectations, the principal as the supporter of novice teachers, formal mentoring and collegial support, and shared understandings.

### **Major results and discussion**

Previous studies (e.g. Ladd, 2011; Leithwood, et al., 2004) indicate that the predominant factor among the working conditions is the quality of school leadership. Thus, the principal has a crucial role in developing people as well as offering intellectual support and stimulation to enable them to improve their work. The results of this particular study partly verify this claim as the novice teachers of the Induction Year's seminars were also aware of, and emphasised the importance of, the principal. The novice teachers perceived the principal as a supporter mainly in the early stage of their work and described the principal's activities through their own personal contacts with the principal. Apart from that, the novice teachers did not discuss what the role of a principal is in shaping the school culture, and if or indeed, in which areas the novice teacher has matching values with the principal. On the other hand, the novice teachers in their reflections did not express an expectation of the principal to communicate with them in any way, to solve the differences of opinion related directly to mentoring or support their professional development in any way.

This could be explained by the fact that in their first year, novice teachers might not comprehend the mechanisms of a school as an institution and the roles of all of the community members. Therefore, as novice teachers do not see all of the roles of a principal and do not learn about them due to the scarcity of communication, they are also unable to describe it in their reflections. Thus we see that on behalf of supporting a novice teacher as effectively as possible, more regular and frequent contact between the novice teacher and the principal would be required, despite the fact that the former might not perceive it as useful. Even in the recruiting and early adaptation phases, the principals should make an appointment with the novice teachers to discuss expectations, possibilities and known needs for support on both sides. Through the creation of a confidential atmosphere and an understanding of both sides' expectations and needs, as well as levelling the understandings of the values of the school as an institution, future co-operation of all sides may be assumed to be more fruitful.

Alternatively, it is important to consider the principals' own awareness about the kinds of support novice teachers need and how it is offered. Are the principals' knowledgeable about the basic principles of mentoring in

general, and on which to base the choice of a suitable mentor for a teacher? Although the framework of the Estonian induction year system does train mentors, the training of principals has yet to be included. As inclusion would benefit the system as a whole, the training of principals does need more attention and research.

The results of this particular study are thought-provoking as, according to current Estonian regulations, mentors assigned to novice teachers by principals must have passed mentor training (or have extensive teaching experience) and should, thus be aware of the general principles of mentoring as well as of applying them. Nevertheless, not all of the novice teachers received this level of support. Indeed the novice teachers referred to mentors who are not knowledgeable about the main principles of mentoring and do not co-operate sufficiently with novice teachers. Consequently, the co-operation between novice teacher and mentor is hindered and the base for shared understandings about learning and teaching aggravated. Co-operation plays a crucial role in supporting novice teachers. However, co-operation infers taking other people into consideration, keeping an open mind and an attitude that values the opinions of all the members of institution. Hence the novice teachers had strong feelings about shared understandings and collegial support in order to adapt to their new workplaces and co-operation as a process. Collegiate expectations play a no less significant role in those processes. The novice teacher should be provided with suitable conditions for communicating with their colleagues and also for sharing their own experiences. Through these activities, the novice teacher gains greater awareness of self, is supported in their professional development and supports the development of the school as an institution.

*Keywords:* novice teachers, induction year, colleagues, school principal, adaptation