Chapter 11
A Learning Community for Teacher Induction

Ellen Moir and Susan Hanson

Introduction

The New Teacher Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz (NTC), opened in 1998 with a mission to transform the way new teachers enter the profession through intensive, mentor-based induction. New teachers need an induction program focused on instruction and the guidance of successful, experienced teachers trained to accelerate the advancement of their classroom practice. High-quality induction programs are part of a larger scaffold that not only supports the competence of new teachers, but also builds the capacity of veteran teachers who serve as mentors to be dynamic school leaders who know how to create environments in which all teachers, new and experienced, can grow and thrive. The NTC’s theory of teacher development emphasizes ongoing skill and knowledge growth focused on building student success in school-based communities of practice. This chapter describes key components of our multilayered approach to building professional learning communities that support teacher induction and teacher learning in schools.

A Learning Community for Teacher Induction Is Born

In the mid-1980s, as Director of Teacher Education at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Ellen Moir was responsible for overseeing the clinical faculty in the teacher preparation program. As part of a new supervision model, exemplary teachers from local schools were invited to teach methods courses in collaboration with faculty and to supervise student teachers. Full-time clinical supervisors had reduced caseloads, enabling them to visit each student teacher weekly. While the teachers had all been exemplary classroom teachers, they were not necessarily...
effective mentors. To support their growth, as well as to ensure congruence across supervisors whose responsibility it was to sign off on credential requirements, Ellen brought the staff together in weekly study groups. The clinical supervisors improved their ability to observe candidate growth and development, they learned about the needs of pre-service teachers, and they shared their work with one another. As the conversations deepened by looking at artifacts of practice such as lesson plans and sharing ideas, Ellen could see that not only were they improving their skills to meet the main intent, but more importantly, they were learning together about teacher growth, how to guide the candidates’ practice, and move their thinking forward.

In 1988, California initiated the California New Teacher Project, enabling Ellen to start the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project and hire four exemplary teachers to work full time as mentors. Ellen’s positive experience with the study groups for supervising teachers led her to immediately launch a weekly meeting for the mentors. Entitled the Mentor Forum, this study group for mentors has existed in Santa Cruz for 20 years.

When I started these mentor meetings I realized that we didn’t know that much about brand new beginning teachers. I had always worked in preservice. I wanted to better understand what is it that first year teachers need to be able to know and be able to do. What do they need? Not many people had been working in this area.

When I started the induction program, I mirrored this process. I could see benefits. There are not many people in the country that really study and focus on teacher learning – pre-service teacher learning, induction teacher learning, new teacher learning – at very specific, concrete levels. You can develop a teacher program, have standards, competencies, but what does it really look like when a teacher is operationalizing these pieces and how do we organize ourselves so we can give rich feedback and support new teacher growth and development? That’s why I developed the Forums. They grew into being a community of practice.

The norm for new teachers after their pre-service had been just “sink or swim.” Some schools had an informal buddy system in which new teachers were matched with experienced teachers. Though buddy mentors can provide emotional support and introduce new teachers to the norms and expectations of the school and district, they are not provided the training and resources to link mentoring to the norms and expectations inherent in effective teaching and professional growth.

The old system in our district was just a buddy system. You never got into the classroom of the beginning teacher while they were teaching. There was never any opportunity for observation or reflection. You would meet after school, before school, or at lunch, and they would talk about their problems, and it was a lot of band-aiding, and suggesting ways around the problem such as scripts with parents, managing systems they might try in their classroom.

What new teachers really need is an intensive induction program focused on instruction and the guidance of successful, experienced teachers trained to mentor. And both mentors and new teachers need time off from other duties to work together to improve teaching.