Is individual mentoring the only answer?

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Abstract
Unlike many other countries, Norway has no induction programme or reduction of teaching load for newly qualified teachers. However, an interesting model has been developed through the “New Teachers in Norway” project. This project involves teacher education institutions and schools, novice and experienced teachers as well as teacher educators in the learning process. Future enterprises that are currently discussed in a Parliamentary Proposition have an individual focus. The only suggestion is that all new teachers should have a mentor. The aim of this paper is to investigate how the needs of novice teachers correspond to the aims of the national project and the future plans of Norwegian policymakers.

Keywords: novice teachers, mentors, reflective dialogues, networks, learning communities

Introduction

Norway is at a crossroads regarding its future policy for newly qualified teachers. The question of how new teachers should be introduced to teaching has been discussed in the Norwegian Parliament several times (NOU 1996; MER 1996; Government report, 2003). Unlike many other countries within the OECD (OECD, 2005), Norwegian policy documents have concluded that there is no need for an induction year or any kind of reduction of educational duties in the first year in the profession. The debate concerning the situation of newly qualified teachers in Norway has again been raised in Parliamentary Proposition 11, 2008–2009 (MER, 2008). So far, newly qualified teachers in Norway have been offered participation in a national project New Teachers in Norway organised in networks between schools and teacher education institutions. This is set to be changed. The only initiative mentioned in the Parliamentary Proposition is individual mentoring within the school. Through the national project newly qualified teachers have been offered to participate in learning communities outside their own school together with mentors and teacher educators. This paper aims to investigate how novice teachers who participate in the national project New Teachers in Norway experience their first year as teachers, and how their needs correspond to the support they are offered through the national project, and the future plans announced in Parliamentary Proposition 11, 2008–2009 (MER, 2008).

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Background

As an alternative to induction, after 2003 voluntary mentorship was initiated through a national project called New Teachers in Norway (Government Report, 2003). Each school is supposed to appoint a local mentor to the novice. It is up to the local school to decide how the mentoring is formally organised. Mentors and newly qualified teachers meet regularly in the local network meetings administered by the teacher education institution. These meetings are arranged at different schools each time. Different models connected to network meetings and mentoring are examined. Mentors and novice teachers are, for example, assembled in separate, small peer groups. The participants bring their own experiences into the group and through supervision based on reflection novice teachers as well as experienced mentors and teacher educators are supposed to learn from each other.

The national project was evaluated by the research institution SINTEF (Dahl et al. 2006). The New Teachers in Norway project aims to support new teachers’ professional development, contribute to increased knowledge about mentoring and improve teacher education (Bjerkholt & Hedegaard, 2008). The main conclusions from the evaluation report are that network meetings across schools, and local mentorship, are initiatives that should be further developed. The report warns against too much emphasis on the individual teacher seceding from the school community. Even if the results are limited, the evaluation shows that the project contributes to the development of teacher education.

Yet a serious problem is that participation in the project is voluntary for schools. Another problem is that participation in the project comes in addition to full-time teaching. This means that few schools in Norway are engaged. In the 2005–2006 period, only 5% of newly qualified teachers participated in the project. The response rate to SINTEF’s evaluation report was 60%. The report claims that novice teachers in upper secondary schools were less content than other teachers, although the reasons for that have not yet been discussed. The missing discussion combined with the fact that only 20% of the teachers and 4% of the mentors who responded to the SINTEF report represented upper secondary schools means there is a strong need for research concerning the current situation of newly qualified teachers in upper secondary schools in Norway.

Why mentoring?

Many countries have long traditions of formalised mentoring of newly qualified teachers but, according to Langdon (2007), the aim and purpose of mentoring seems to differ from country to country. Supported by the OECD report Teachers Matter (2005), he shows that the political justifications seem to go in two different directions. The aim of the first one is to focus on adjustment. The novice teacher is a person who is helpless and needs support in order to become like the others. Based on the study of 25 countries he claims that politicians in these countries want to fix problems,
increase recruitment and avoid drop-outs from the profession. The main task of the mentor is to give advice to the newcomer. The other approach is built on the newly qualified teachers’ personal abilities and possibilities for contribution to the school as a learning community. The purpose of mentoring is to encourage newcomers in the direction of self-assessment and reflection in collaboration with other teachers. According to Langdon, England is an example of the first approach, and New Zealand is an example of the second one.

Maynayard & Furlong (1993) refer to three different mentoring models called the apprentice model, the competence model and the reflection model. The apprentice model looks upon the mentor as a model, the competence model refers to standards, while the reflection model sees the mentor as a critical friend supporting the new teacher in his or her learning process.

According to Jones (2006), the English induction programme is based on the two first models, and the notion that new teachers need defined demands and systematic evaluation throughout their first year. The consequences are that supervision is characterised by practical advice which completely broadens the gap between theory and practice. On the contrary, Jones claims that mentors should be encouraged to investigate their own practice in contrast to others’ in order to engage in the local as well as global debate on knowledge.

Kelley (2006) claims that engagement in reflective processes is what counts most for the newly qualified teachers’ further professional development. While the apprentice and competence models tend to preserve the existing culture inside the school, the reflection model is basic for a learning school community.

Teaching as a profession is, by nature, an ongoing learning process. Accordingly, schools and teacher education institutions should be regarded as communities of learners. The term community of practice is often used to describe workplaces (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998, 2000). A distinction can be made between a community of practice and a community of learners (Helleve, 2009). In a community of practice, the novice teacher should be understood as a peripheral participator. Beginning and experienced teachers work together in schools, which is how the newcomer becomes an expert. What it means to be an expert differs according to the profession of the community; whether a person chooses to be a carpenter, nurse or a teacher, he or she will learn what is considered professional practice within that profession. Practice in a learning community is learning. A community of learners is centred on the activity of learning (Brown 1994; Brown & Campignone, 1994; Darling 2001; Helleve & Krumsvik, 2009; Matusov, 2001; Sumison & Paterson 2004; Wubbels, 2007). This view of learning means that mentoring cannot be regarded as an individual process between two people. From this perspective, a school or a teacher education institution is a learning community where continuing learning is the main aim of all participants, teachers and teacher educators as well as students. In the last few years, there has also been increasing attention to teacher educators’ professional development (Loughran,
An interesting aspect of the Norwegian project New Teachers in Norway is that it involves experienced teachers and teacher educators as well as novice teachers in the learning process. This study is limited to investigating novice teachers’ needs.

**Context**

The research was conducted by two teacher educators at the University of Bergen. As a subgroup of the national project New Teachers in Norway, the local project described in this study was conducted in the Bergen area and is called New Teachers in Hordaland.

The participating novices were teaching different academic and vocational subjects in secondary school. All had recently completed a one-year postgraduate teacher education programme (PGCE). As part of the project, the new teachers were given a local mentor in the school and met in a network with other new teachers about four times per term for supervision and peer learning. Both the mentor and network meetings were in addition to their ordinary jobs. Consequently, participation lacked continuity.

It should be noted that these informants are likely to represent a special group of newly qualified teachers. They succeeded in finding employment despite strong competition from other candidates, and they were regarded by the school management as very competent candidates. They were all committed teachers who regarded teaching as their primary choice of profession. Some of them had come into teaching as a career change.

Nine schools participated in the network, and the informants were chosen from three different schools that represented three kinds of upper secondary schools. One was a very old and traditional school that taught academic courses only, whereas the other two schools, one well-established, and one new, both offered academic as well as vocational subjects. Five of the informants were chosen from the established school, two from the traditional school and two from the new school. Only one of the interviewees was male. The numbers and gender distribution correspond with the numbers and gender distribution of the teaching staff in the three schools.

**Methodology and analysis**

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview conducted with each of the nine novices at the end of the school year. The questions were designed to address issues not sufficiently answered in Norwegian and European reports about how it is to be a new teacher in upper secondary school and what kind of support teachers need (Dahl et al. 2006; OECD 2005). The current study is part of a more extensive research project of novice teachers, which includes a quantitative questionnaire. In the interviews relevant to this study, selected questions from the quantitative questionnaire were asked and followed by probing questions to gain a deeper understanding of various aspects of how newly qualified teachers feel about their work. The teachers
were asked about which challenges they faced, how they handled those challenges and what kind of support they received and felt they needed. The interviewer was known to the interviewees as one of the teacher educators involved with the project New Teachers in Norway. Each interview was recorded and lasted about 45 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and Nvivo software was used for the analysis. The responses were analysed separately for each question, and the two researchers looked for categories within the responses to each question. To ensure the reliability of the findings, the researchers separately categorised positive as well as negative experiences and aspects. The presented categories are illustrated by selective quotes that emerged through a moderation process involving the two researchers. In order to increase the internal validity of the study, Kvale’s seven stages of analysis were used to examine the interviews (Kvale, 2001). The researchers wrote a meaning condensation and the meanings expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations. Through meaning categorisation the interviews were coded into categories. In order to answer the research questions, the following presented categories were chosen:

- What kind of challenges do they meet as newly qualified teachers?
- What kind of support do they need?
- Where do they find it?

**Findings**

**What kind of challenges do they meet?**

This group of teachers has a solid professional background in the subjects they teach. However, there are many problems that relate to imparting knowledge to the pupils. Teachers are supposed to make weekly and monthly plans, yet they find that preparing for one lesson is difficult enough because they lack the necessary overview. Other challenges connected to subjects are assessment and exams. As student teachers, they may have participated in assessment work in a practicum, but to be alone with the responsibility is a different and much more difficult situation. Experienced teachers have formal rules for how to examine pupils. For novice teachers, examination as well as assessment can be a serious and scary experience.

> When I understood that my pupils were supposed to have an oral exam, there was no one to help me. I had to ask and do research and find out everything myself. And I made a couple of mistakes, like not knowing the rules. (7)

The newly qualified teachers in upper secondary school seem to be least prepared for the problems connected to human relations, adapted teaching and class management. One teacher says he has learned that being a teacher means setting limits for others. This includes setting limits for pupils, classes and colleagues, and for leaders, about
how much extra work he will do. The expanded use of computers in Norwegian schools has increased the need to set limits. Teachers may be contacted by pupils on Friday evenings or Saturday mornings and blame themselves for answering and then feel they are never free from work. Newly qualified teachers may be given the worst classes. One teacher claimed that the class he is teaching is the worst ever seen in his school.

One pupil is running around playing a flute, carrying his desk over his head. He has undressed and is only wearing his pants. You would not believe it was true.

Even if this is an extreme situation, a main challenge for the teachers is that they become engaged in the huge problems many pupils have to cope with. For example, they may have to handle psychiatric problems, and questions concerning families who are supposed to stay in Norway on humanitarian grounds, and yet still have to leave. These problems are not easily left behind when the newly qualified teacher leaves school at the end of the day. One teacher said the problems she experiences with her pupils occupy her mind all the time.

I thought the problems would be about teaching my subject. But that has caused me the least challenges. It is the human relations.

One characteristic is the wide range of challenges and problems, from small details to great existential questions the teachers are faced with. The novice teachers feel they lack control, an overview and information connected to a strong feeling of always being short of time.

Support: What do they need and where do they find it?

The newly qualified teachers certainly need support, but at the same time they also contribute positively to the school community. Two of the newly qualified teachers were supposed to teach a subject that had never been taught before. Planning and preparing for a new subject is a huge task even for an experienced teacher. In this case, there was no opportunity to seek support within the school community.

And that is a challenge because it has never been done before. It is a new curriculum, and a new field; a subject that has never been taught in school before.

To plan and initiate a new subject is apparently looked upon as a great challenge, but also as an honour. Many newly qualified teachers are competent concerning educational technology. One of them was given responsibility as the “super manager” of the learning management system (LMS) for the whole school.

The newcomer is new until the first year is finished. The need for information is to know who is responsible for what, and who he or she should contact. This includes
colleagues as well as institutions outside the school, such as those responsible for pupils with special needs. The information should be structured and given at fixed times, according to the novice teachers.

The lack of information and an overview are connected to the lack of control the novice teachers experience. There should be a place to drop problems and a place for reflection together with experienced teachers and peers. Another concern is that teachers who teach the same class might not necessarily teach the same subjects. Long-term plans, assessment and examination should be discussed with experienced teachers within the same subject field, according to the new teachers. One teacher mentioned that participating in a team with fixed meetings was a great support.

I feel that it is important to share plans and discuss with colleagues who are teaching the same subject, particularly concerning midterm tests and assessment. And perhaps to do the same tests (8)... but if it is planned you could have the same test and you could get feedback from colleagues on the way you did the assessment. (6)

How to find support was the greatest concern for the novice teachers. They lacked information, something which is an administrative challenge for the school. The new teachers want the information to be given regularly throughout the year. Routines and events differ during a school year.

Because there are thousands of questions, you have so many questions when you start. And I dare to ask, but I know many others who don’t. And they are scared and afraid and wonder “Oh, what am I going to do?” In the beginning there should be some sort of course in school. Every week there should be some theme you should know about. But perhaps it is difficult for the school to remember what you don’t know when you start as a new teacher? (7)

The opportunity to observe experienced teachers in their classrooms and to learn from their practice is also a strong concern. One of the teachers said that she was standing close to her experienced colleague, thinking.

Oh, Lord if I could take a look into your plan books. I would enjoy that so much. And there are many other teachers I would like to ask. (9)

The newcomer seeks to learn from the experienced teachers’ experiences. Their concern for their pupils might be difficult for one person to help with. When dealing with bad behaviour, and inclusive and adapted education, they want to talk to other teachers who know the same pupils. The teacher who was given the “worst class in school ever seen” said this about his mentor:

No, first of all he asks me how I am doing. He cares. He contacts me. Okay, we know you have a tough situation. Is there anything we can do? (4)
The mentor is not able to find any solutions. What counts is that he or she cares for and understands the newcomer. As well as teamwork regarding different subjects, there should be an appointed mentor. The novice teachers want a person who is available and who they can contact without feeling they are a nuisance.

Yes, that you are a bothersome person when you come to ask. What is it again? That you can dare to ask and know that this person actually has it as part of the job. That means that hopefully this is something that this person finds interesting. You understand very soon if this person has a positive attitude. (9)

To meet other newly qualified teachers was said to be very important. Through the network meetings they can unburden themselves of problems and realise that other newly qualified teachers have the same or even worse problems.

It is so important. It has often been like my life buoy ... There is some kind of security in the fact that others also think that it is too much and feel uncertain of how to handle the situation. There is this feeling of community; that others are in the same boat. (1)

Newly qualified teachers from other schools meet other needs that experienced colleagues at the same school are unable to. The opportunity to see that others have to cope with the same problems is one dimension. The connection to teacher education through lectures in the network meetings is another. The lecture themes are the same as in initial teacher education, for example, class management and assessment. What is striking is that these themes seem to have more relevance when the teachers can relate them to their own experiences in the classroom. Another advantage is having time for reflection with peers and teacher educators.

Because I notice that in the busy working day, when I say that I am not able to be the teacher I want to be, I still know that I do some of the things. I think I should have read my own answers to the examination because I had so many important thoughts. (9)

A striking feature is that the initiatives they experience as useful are also looked upon as a burden. The reason is that mentorship and participation in the local network comes on top of their ordinary workload. Some teachers who struggle with class management argue that they resist leaving their classes and even drop the network meetings for the same reason. This happened to the teacher with “the worst class ever seen.” Paradoxically, this means that novice teachers, who perhaps need coaching and collective reflection most of all, might be left out.

The newly qualified teachers seem to be asking for a wide range of enterprises and a variety of people to relate to. The demand for information and overview is connected to the lack of control they experience. There should be a place to take problems and a place for reflection with experienced teachers and peers. They want to have feedback on what they are doing and to be seen by the leadership, to be praised when
they deserve it and to know when something is wrong. They want the opportunity to observe experienced teachers in their classrooms and to learn from their practices, combined with the opportunity to listen to lectures on theoretical topics. As well as intermittent contact with experienced teachers, there should be the opportunity for fixed appointments as well as informal mentoring whenever needed. The novice teachers want mentors with a wide variety of qualities. They appreciate the chance to meet teachers from other schools and teacher education at the network meetings. The most important, according to the newcomers, is having time to collaborate with others, and to be able to do this without having a guilty conscience. They need support, but they also contribute to school development with new knowledge. They need a mentor, although their needs cannot possibly be met by one single mentor.

**Discussion**

This section will discuss the challenges and need for support the novice teachers reported in this study and how these needs correspond to the aims of the national project and the future plans in Norway. Newly qualified teachers need some kind of support. This fact is thoroughly proved by international research (Aschinstein, 2006; Flores & Day, 2007; Korthagen et al. 2006; Smethem, 2007). This study shows, however, that newly qualified teachers also add something new to the community (Ulvik et al. 2009). This corresponds to findings from other studies showing that not only do newly qualified teachers look upon themselves as resources, but they are also looked upon as important contributors by the rest of the community (Ulvik & Langorgen, 2008). This indicates that being a novice teacher does not mean you are disabled and helpless. The novice teacher is simply at a certain stage of professional development (Day & Gu, 2007).

Apparently, the need for support is on two different levels; the newcomers need information and they need to discuss and reflect upon experiences that probably have no correct answer. The lack of routines for information and overviews are a concern of the teachers in this study. Schools are complex institutions. Regular information given throughout the first year seems to be important. An appointed mentor makes it acceptable to ask silly questions, which is important. This means that novices need an appointed mentor to contact as daily support when they lack overview and information. But this is not enough. The novice teachers indicate they need to collaborate with colleagues for different reasons, including challenges related to their subject areas and human relations. The challenges the novice teachers are concerned with seem to affect experienced teachers as well, such as assessment, and pupils with serious problems. There are different solutions and probably no correct answers. Flores & Day (2006) claim that if newly qualified teachers encounter a situation that is too demanding they are likely to become less motivated and to react traditionally. The best kind of support for both newly qualified and experienced teachers seems to be to work in a learning community that has a sharing culture (Wang et al. 2008).
Other important enterprises for the newcomers are the network meetings for newly qualified teachers and their mentors. The meetings are held outside their own school community. They visit other schools, and meet peers and mentors from other schools, and teacher education representatives. They are offered a place for reflective collaborative dialogue outside the ordinary workplace. This arena offers a dimension for learning they could not possibly acquire in their own school. The opportunity to collaborate with the teacher education institution is not what the novices mention first. However, some of them are concerned with the theoretical aspects of class management and assessment. The opportunities the network meetings create for reflection are also present in the newly qualified teachers’ descriptions of what is important to them. Summing up, what newly qualified teachers seem to need is a mentor, but also a wide range of opportunities to discuss and reflect with experienced colleagues, peers inside and outside their own school as well as teacher education institutions.

The challenges the novice teachers face seem to affect experienced teachers as well. This means that the possibilities for reflection and learning that mentors are given through the network meetings in the New Teachers in Norway project are a potential learning area not only for the novice teacher, but also for the mentor, the teacher educators and the school as a learning community. If the focus is on the community rather than the individual learner, teacher education institutions as well as schools should be regarded as learning communities (Helleve, 2009).

The aims of the national project New Teachers in Norway are to contribute to the professional development of newly qualified teachers, increase the knowledge of mentoring and improve teacher education. According to this local project at the University of Bergen, newly qualified teachers meet peers, mentors from other schools and teacher educators. The meetings are held at different schools each time. Through the network meetings, experienced and novice teachers meet teacher educators. The possibility of network meetings among teacher educators, experienced and newly qualified teachers opens reflective dialogue across communities. An issue that often emerges in the discussion concerning teaching and teacher education is the gap between research and practice. Internationally, there seems to be a growing awareness that bringing researchers and practitioners together seems to be a way of bridging this gap (Korthagen, 2007). Across schools and teacher education, experienced and newly qualified teachers and teacher educators meet in order to learn from each other. According to the SINTEF report (Dahl et al. 2006), the model based on collaboration between teacher education and schools is unusual in Europe. The report warns against future initiatives with too much emphasis on the individual teacher. Referring to Manyard and Furlong’s three models for mentoring, teachers who are participating in the New Teachers in Norway project have been offered the reflection model. What about the future?
Implications

Are Norwegian politicians moving in the direction of the apprentice and competence model, or in the direction of the reflection model? Mentoring is the only concrete suggestion in Parliamentary Proposition 11, 2008–2009 (MER, 2008). Whether the time for mentoring is supposed to come on top of a full-time teaching workload for novice teachers and mentors has not yet been discussed. Collaboration between teacher education institutions and schools is positively referred to in the Proposition, but is not mentioned as an enterprise that will be developed further. According to the OECD report (OECD, 2005), the aim or philosophy underpinning the induction programme for newly qualified teachers influences the kind of programmes they will choose. The suggestions made in the Parliamentary Proposition may indicate that Norway is moving away from the induction model that is based on collaboration between schools and teacher education institutions known as learning communities. On the contrary, future plans seem to be based on an individual perspective on mentoring. Teachers and teacher educators are involved in an ongoing learning process. Being a novice teacher is a critical part of this learning process. There is a strong need for enough time to become informed and to participate in collaboration with colleagues through an induction period. Learning is contextualised and teacher education cannot possibly prepare student teachers completely for the complex world they will encounter in different kinds of schools. Newly qualified and experienced teachers, and teacher educators, should be given the opportunity to learn from each other. The New Teachers in Norway project integrates schools and teacher education institutions in learning communities where novice and experienced teachers and teacher educators are given the opportunity to learn from each other. Our study shows that novice teachers ask for a broad range of collaborative enterprises. The individual support they are given through one appointed mentor is important, but not enough. It also shows the importance of novices’ competence and fresh knowledge. According to Norwegian political documents such as Parliamentary Proposition 30, 2003–2004 (MER, 2003), schools are meant to be learning communities. The aim and philosophy of the future induction programme should be thoroughly discussed by Norwegian politicians. Is the future aim to mend and preserve the existing school culture, or to stimulate school development through learning communities?

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