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Title: Exploring induction and professional development opportunities for early career teachers in selected South African public schools

Abstract

This thesis intended to explore and develop an understanding of current practices and specific processes used to induct early career teachers in a few selected South African public schools. To develop this understanding, this study posed the question: What are the existing practices of induction and professional development available in selected South African public schools to provide early career teachers with learning opportunities to strengthen their repertoire of professional skills? This overarching question was explored through the following sub-questions: (i) What are the main on-the-job/professional challenges experienced by early career teachers? (ii) How are early career teachers inducted and professionally developed in their respective schools and district? (iii) How do existing practices of induction and professional development influence early career teachers' practices and commitment to the profession? And, (iv) How, if at all, can early career teacher induction and professional development practices be improved and sustained?

My research was an empirical phenomenological study that gathered data through focus group interviews, individual interviews, observations and document searches and analysis. The participants were 23 ECTs from five public high schools, which composed two township and three former Model C schools, three school-based mentors from one of the five schools and four district officials who were responsible for the induction of newly hired teachers in the district schools. I found, in response to sub-research question (i), that ECTs were facing serious challenges, especially with the technical aspects of their professional work such as disciplining learners, lesson planning, assessing learners, compiling statistics and managing time. They were also struggling with their respective schools' social politics outside the classroom where senior teacher colleagues were resentful and very hostile towards them and this phenomenon was particularly profound in the township schools' context. ECTs' challenges were worsened by the fact that schools were hardly supporting the ECTs and left them to devise their own survival strategies which were not always in the best interest of the learners, the teaching profession or the country as a whole. In response to sub-question (ii), the data showed that most schools do not have formal structures in place to induct and professionally develop ECTs. Of the five schools that participated in the study, only one school (Peculiar High School) and the district office had formal ECT induction structures. In respect of these two, the data showed that the school largely conceived ECT induction as support by focusing on the acculturation of new teachers into the school community and providing guidance on various aspects related to the new teachers' professional duties. The district, on the other hand, seemed to conceive teacher induction as administrative monitoring with increased performance standards for teachers as their emphasis was on ensuring that the new teachers comply with various policy frameworks that govern their work. In response to sub-question (iii), the data showed that, because of the absence of well-

conceived and systematic induction programmes, ECTs were largely dissatisfied with their job situations. As a result, the study identified three categories of ECTs in relation to their practices and their levels of commitment to the profession: (i) the turnover intents (ECTs who were dissatisfied that they were resolute on leaving the profession); (ii) the 'bad apples' who were intrinsically inclined to merely survive in the profession without the drive to positively impact their learners or the profession, and lastly, (iii) the 'agentic individuals' who were self-directed to stay in the profession and use their agency in a developmental way. For sub-question (iv), the data indicated that ECT induction programmes are definitely needed in South Africa. The data, however, pointed to two important considerations to carefully contemplate on: What should the induction focus on? And, how should the induction be organised (i.e. who is best positioned to facilitate the induction and where should it be done)? The study concluded that, at this point in time in South Africa, there is pressure to improve teacher and teaching quality hence the induction ought to focus on developing ECTs' professional skills needed for them to effectively perform their core teaching responsibilities. Although school-based induction that is done in the context of practice seemed more viable, the study ended up settling for an approach that acknowledges the important role played by both the school and the district in the proposed School-District-based ECT induction model.

My work contributes to the literatures on how ECT induction is conceptualised at the school and district levels in the South African context by reporting on how ECT induction was understood, enacted and the nature of social relationships that underpin it in these different sites. These findings could be of interest to policy makers who can use these insights to begin to think about how prefigured contextual conditions across the different school and district contexts in South Africa will influence the manner in which nationwide ECT induction practices will most likely play out. The findings could also benefit schools and districts in as far as determining how best they can work together following the four steps of the School-District-based ECT induction model proposed in this study. As a result of my study, further research might well be conducted on the induction of ECTs in the South African public schooling context in order to understand the prefigured contextual conditions that are at play in the primary schooling context. This study has been a building block that has certainly opened up a new research agenda on early career teacher professional development through induction.

Keywords: Early career teachers, teacher induction, teacher professional development, mentoring, South African public schools, education district