



Beginning Teachers And Their Expectations Of The School Practice

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Abstract

The last decade saw a significant increase in the complexity of needs and challenges in the teaching practice. Beginning teachers and the process of their induction in the first years of their school practice get currently into the foreground too. The international project INNOTE (the whole title being the Induction for Novice Teachers) has been realised in the European Union focusing on the induction of beginning teachers into the school community. The article characterises the aims of the international project and its individual partners. The authors of the article define the term of 'beginning teacher' from the aspect of this international project. The applied research methods involve semi-structured interview with beginning teachers realised by project participants in their respective countries. The core part of the article focuses on comparing the interviews from the aspect of expectations on the part of beginning teachers when it comes to school practice. In the article, the authors propose a list of improvements including proven educational strategies that could be applied in a universal and complex process of induction of beginning teachers.

1 Theoretical rationale

A university graduate starting to work encounters a number of problems caused mainly by the fact that university studies focus mainly on theoretical knowledge [1]. The link to practice is usually insufficient. In case of student teachers, the start of their professional career is difficult. From the first day in school, they face high expectations. From the very first day, they take up responsibility for the results achieved by their students. The period when a beginning teacher turns into an independent teacher is perceived by various authors in various ways. According to [2], it is not possible to determine the exact time needed for a beginning teacher to develop into a teacher expert.

The essence of inducing a beginning teacher is perceived as a learning partnership of two (or more) persons aim of which is to enrich each other and to facilitate the transition process of the beginning teacher as well as his or her incorporation into the school environment. In fact, it is the first stage of teacher's professional growth. Effectively organised induction helps the beginning teacher become a part of a community where everyone learns or wants to learn. Induction of beginning teachers has a number of benefits that can be more or less formal. Several educational activities for beginning teachers are being prepared in Europe. In the context of working with beginning teachers, the role of the so-called inducing teacher – tutor, mentor – is therefore considered as important.

2 About the INNOTE project

All mentioned postulates have led to the development of an international project that was named as INNOTE, with the full title being the Induction for Novice Teachers. In is a project focusing on incorporating beginning teachers into practice. 12 partner institutions from seven European countries were involved in the project: University of Groningen (Netherlands), Dr. Nassau College (Netherlands), Charles University Prague (Czech Republic), Gymnázium Jiřího Gutha – Jarkovského (Czech Republic), University of Joensuu (Finland), Joensuun lyseon peruskoulu (Finland), Comenius University Bratislava (Slovakia), School Dr. Milana Hodžu (Slovakia), University of Regensburg (Germany), St. Mariengymnasium Regensburg (Germany), University of Edinburgh (Great Britain), Eszterházy Károly Főiskola (Hungary). Adequate steps are currently taken so that Estonia (the town of Tartu) could be the next participating country.



The aim of the project is to acquire knowledge about beginning teachers in the partner countries through analysis of governmental documents as well as from the beginning or inducing teachers (mentors, tutors) themselves directly from the practice. The involved countries enrich each other, develop and create a complex induction and training program emphasising data and information based on research. They cooperate on developing the best verified procedures, activities helping to induce newly qualified teachers into the school community with the aim to support the start of their teaching career. Working materials as well as further tasks for the project team are published on the internet on the working website designed only for project members, which enables mutual exchange of knowledge and ideas within the community.

The starting point of the project is the realisation of a comparative analysis of the current status of induction (incorporation) of beginning teachers into the teaching practice in the partner countries. Project participants also carry out interviews with beginning teachers. A newly qualified teacher (hereinafter referred to as the (NQT) is for the purposes of the INNOTE project perceived as a teacher with less than 1.5 years of practice, that is of experience after finishing teacher preparation programs. At the same time, another condition is that beginning teachers entering the project do not participate in any post-training program.

NQT are in the initial phase of their professionalization and they still have things to learn. Apart from teacher trainings, determining educational needs of beginning teachers is also an important part of the project. For these purposes, semi-structured interviews have been realised for the needs of the project in which the questions were grouped into four areas (parts).

It involved the following areas:

- 1) Knowledge of school as an organisation and its functioning
- 2) Teaching competence, e.g. focusing on student learning being the initial point of instruction, deepening and enhancing of contents of the knowledge base, developing practice, knowledge of educational counselling and tutoring, development of education, establishment of a good classroom atmosphere, for example creating a safe educational climate, working with information about individual differences between students.
- 3) Continuing / on-going professionalization. Development and strengthening of predispositions to study and improving one's own functioning in the position of a teacher.
- 4) The quality of work as a teacher, e.g. reducing the workload/content, learning the potential of everyday work.

Acquired information that can be offered to readers does not provide a representative sample that would be needed in order to perform any analysis in a quantitative research. However, in the INNOTE project, this information was necessary in order to determine the situation in the participating countries and schools where the project started to be realised. The submitted findings are based on the opinions of 35 teachers (Czech Republic, Finland, Netherlands and Slovakia). Other countries participating in the project are still processing their questionnaires.

2.1 Area No. 1: Knowledge of school as an organisation and its functioning

In the first area, responses of the interviewed beginning teachers focused on several areas. We wanted to know if teachers had been trained after coming to their primary school, if they had received assistance from an older colleague, what was the organisation of school work like, what regulations did the teachers study. We also wanted to know how the beginning teachers perceive the school culture and administrative activities taking place in it.

We can offer the following findings from the realised interviews:

- 1) Teachers agreed that they received basic information about the school and its organisation from the school principal or vice-principal.
- 2) Beginning teachers were introduced to other colleagues during meetings – at a working meeting led by the school principal. Colleagues from Finland said they did not have a feeling of being trained too much about school regulations, but more like having studied the provided material.
- 3) Teachers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia indicated that one of their first trainings dealt with working with information technologies, mainly working with the electronic classroom book, electronic blackboard etc.



- 4) In Finland and in the Netherlands, teachers indicated that information technology was not as important as learning about the system of working in the school, knowing rules of the school. All should take place naturally and not according to an artificially created system.
- 5) Beginning teachers in all interviewed countries stated that they lacked introduction of the overall concept of school, since they would have felt safer when presenting the mission of the school.
- 6) Beginning teachers should not become headmasters right away according to the interviewed teachers.
- 7) Beginning teachers should for example visit a classroom of their inducing teacher and watch his/her communication with parents.

2.2 Area No. 2: Teaching competence

Questions in the second area focused on didactic competences of the interviewed. We were interested if the acquired information on pedagogical strategies that teachers got at university were sufficient. Here too we can see interesting points:

- 1) Teachers from Slovakia and the Czech Republic stated that they would need much more methodological examples and methodological guidebooks. Teachers from Finland and the Netherlands stated on the contrary that it would be enough for them to get a couple of tips and that teachers should then be able to handle things on their own – that is what they studied for and that is why they are teachers.
- 2) Teachers are offered various trainings and seminars, but they don't always have the possibility to participate in them. In most cases, the school leadership decides about which trainings they will attend.
- 3) Teachers do not communicate with each other about various pedagogical strategies. They rather prepare individually and search for information they need on their own. Teachers would however welcome consultations of professional nature mainly with colleagues – mentors that means with inducing teachers. They would welcome help through coaching that is an activity when an older colleague helps directly in a practical situation.
- 4) Teachers would also welcome a different system of classroom observations. They would want them to be perceived more like a help in the first years and not as a proof of what the beginning teacher does not know.
- 5) The beginning teachers would welcome education in the area of working with parents. They would want to deal more with communication and conversational skills, as well as conflict resolution.
- 6) Beginning teachers would need more opportunities to learn about specific learning disabilities, mainly in the area of dysgraphia and dyslexia.
- 7) Teachers would welcome various meetings with beginning teachers during which they could exchange their experience.

2.3 Part No. 3: Continuing professionalization

In the third part we were mainly interested to know what the beginning teachers wanted to deal with most during their first year of professional career. We wanted to see what they valued most in their practice, what they thought about their potential failures and what were they most afraid of. This area also provided several hints that can serve as a basis for further considerations and consequently newly prepared projects:

- 1) The interviewed teachers perceive shortcomings mainly in terms of linking theory and practice. If they do not understand the school concept, it is difficult for them to combine what they learned during their studies with the actual practice. This is where they would appreciate help from an inducing teacher.
- 2) Teachers would appreciate a possibility to participate in outcomes of their older colleagues directly during their classes.
- 3) Teachers would also appreciate systemic and professional feedback on their work. Mainly in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia, the beginning teachers are worried about feedback from school inspectors.



- 4) The beginning teachers stated that they lacked ideas based on research that they could benefit from in the practice. After university graduation it is more difficult to acquire new knowledge.
- 5) Teachers are afraid of communication with parents as well as inspectors. Teachers would like to communicate with professionals in the individual areas more.

2.4 Part No. 4: The quality of the working situation

The fourth part of questions was aimed at learning about what the individual primary schools did in order to create a positive working atmosphere for the beginning teacher. Teachers interviewed by us expressed the following opinions:

- 1) Teachers from Slovakia and the Czech Republic expressed dissatisfaction because when they joined the school they also became headmasters right away and were assigned too many tasks from the very beginning. Teachers from Finland and the Netherlands stated that the teachers themselves should decide if and when they wanted to become headmasters. Teachers themselves should be able to assess their capacities and skills and know when was the right time to become a headmaster.
- 2) Teachers stated that they faced the same demands than the other teachers.
- 3) Teachers would welcome help in terms of time management, i.e. with time distribution of individual tasks so that they managed them all well.
- 4) Teachers would need help in administrative tasks as well. They often get more administrative tasks because they are "young".
- 5) Beginning teachers think that they should teach fewer hours than other teachers and they should instead spend the time in the classroom of their inducing teacher.

As seen from the individual responses, beginning teachers expect help from their older colleagues. They want to discuss about their work and they want to educate themselves. However, they consider the adequate working conditions as very important. The INNOTE project originated because its participants wanted to develop recommendations for the work of beginning teachers and inducing teachers in primary schools. We can consider as the most important aspect that it is one of few projects connecting efforts to develop theoretical postulates and recommendations from processing and analysing the opinions of teachers in the practice. Apart from conceptually interesting methodological materials that originate during each meeting, it is necessary to stress also the effort to perform a thorough analysis of available documents in the area of life-long education of teachers in the respective participating countries. It is this processing of materials that can lead to interesting comparison. What may also not be neglected is the fact that project intervenes also with research apart from its innovating effort by monitoring and continuously processing also the opinions of beginning and inducing teachers using various research instruments.

That's why the article presents one of these efforts - interpretation of interview with beginning teachers.

3 Conclusion

The INNOTE project will be completed in 2012. By then its participants will participate in several meetings and trainings. We can say already now however that working with beginning teachers directly in the conditions of the selected primary schools contributes new ideas in the area of work between beginning and inducing teachers. Even though it seems that the topic of "beginning teachers" is not new to pedagogy, we can state nevertheless that some topics deserve a renaissance and our renewed attention. Let's hope there will not be fewer projects like this in the future. It would be for sure beneficial if suggestions from teachers in the practice were reflected also in scientific educational research.

References

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