

A new way to help teachers

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*Too often, we look at the mechanics of teaching in trying to improve teaching skills. Instead, we should have a nearly singular focus on improving learning, including professional learning, writes **Ben Jensen***

What makes effective induction and mentoring programs for new teachers? Look to high-performing systems in East Asia, and you'll find the same factors that determine effective programs in other places around the world. Having induction and mentoring programs is not sufficient; they also must be driven by a focus on improving learning (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In too many countries, induction and mentoring programs are driven by administrative or regulatory requirements instead of being closely guided by the need to improve learning, which must be the focus.

This is not just semantics. The best professional learning improves the learning of a teacher's students. Professional learning that shows and helps teachers improve the learning of their students improves their own teaching practices.

This differs from professional development in many countries in the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), particularly the courses and workshops that try to improve either the qualifications of teachers or their specific skills and abilities. In far too many professional development courses and workshops, the focus is teachers – their qualifications, skills and abilities. This takes the focus away from the student and increases the likelihood that the professional development will be of little use to teachers once they return to the classroom.

This happens too regularly. According to the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (2009), professional development is rarely targeted to teacher needs and too often has little effect on how they teach in the classroom.

Mentoring in high-performing systems

So, what do effective mentoring programs look like in high-performing systems in East Asia? They are intensive programs that focus on improving learning in the classroom, but not all of them are high quality. So, let's focus on what we can learn from mentoring in Shanghai – a high-performing system that sits on top of the OECD PISA rankings with intensive professional learning throughout a teacher's career.

In Shanghai, new teachers enter schools after an initial teacher education that prioritizes strong content knowledge. Deep content knowledge has been shown to have a positive effect on teacher effectiveness at all levels of education. When teaching graduates have strong content knowledge when they enter schools, inservice mentoring programs can then focus on pedagogy that builds on existing high levels of content knowledge.

Shanghai's intensive mentoring programs give all teachers mentors. Learning doesn't stop after a few years in the profession; effective mentoring is considered important for the entirety of a teacher's career. But new teachers have two mentors to help them make important jumps in their effectiveness and to help them through the steep learning curve during their first few years of teaching.

The two mentors have slightly different areas of specialization. One is a subject-specific mentor; the other is more focused on general pedagogy. Both play an active role in a new teacher's development, but one will be assigned as the primary mentor for each teacher.

Mentors help new teachers prepare lessons, analyse student learning, and focus on new ways to improve learning in their classrooms. Classroom observation is frequent. While the frequency will vary between schools, weekly classroom observations are common. Mentors observe not only the new teacher and the pedagogies they employ, but also how students learn in the classroom – their learning behaviours, learning styles, and how the new teacher responds to them. Mentors examine levels of student progress, and work with new teachers to improve the learning of all students – those falling behind and those pushing ahead, who are often prone to boredom and disengagement with the pace of learning.

As soon as the class ends, the mentor has a discussion with the teacher, focusing on how to improve student learning in the next class. The pair will meet again the following week. The new teacher will be required to come to this meeting prepared to share ideas about how to address the issues discussed after the observation. These invariably focus on how to improve aspects of their pedagogy to improve student learning and how to improve the learning of particular students in each class.

Mentoring & research

Mentors and new teachers also work in the same research group, which normally consists of about a half dozen teachers who spend a year focusing on a particular issue intended to improve learning in their school. The topic may be the introduction of a new pedagogy, teaching practice, curriculum, or new ways to help specific students. Research groups are important components of teacher's professional learning in Shanghai and an example of how teachers are considered professional researchers.

After the school principal approves the research topic, the research group spends the first third of the year reviewing evidence in the area, the second third of the year testing different methods in their classrooms (with other members of the group observing and evaluating the new methods), and the final third of the year writing up the results of the effect on student learning. Throughout this process, the mentor works with the new teacher on developing his or her research skills. They will also work on how the new teacher introduces techniques into the classroom, assesses them, and then responds to difference levels of student learning.

The evidence is very clear – not just in East Asian systems but across the world – that feedback to teachers on how to improve their teaching based on a meaningful observation of their classroom teaching is the most effective form of professional learning because it has the greatest effect on student learning.

But observation is not always of the new teacher. The research groups will observe each other's lessons. New teachers observe a number of lessons of more senior teachers in addition to observing their mentor's lessons, all the while learning from their expertise and becoming increasingly familiar with effective teaching behaviours.

The intensity of mentoring programs differs between schools; some schools have more intensive programs, devoting large resources to induction and mentoring programs. Teachers must take their role as a mentor seriously if they are to progress in their careers. A teacher in Shanghai won't be promoted to more senior positions without good feedback from teachers they have mentored. An

important component of teacher appraisal is feedback from new teachers about how much or how little their mentors helped them. This feeds into decisions about teacher promotion and is the basis for feedback to each teacher about how to improve their mentoring. The result is a mentoring system that is continually improving in school and taken seriously by all teachers.

Running effective mentoring programs costs money, and the more intensive they are, the more they cost. But the main expense doesn't come from a budget line devoted to paying consultants and experts to run courses in schools. The main cost comes in teacher's working time. Mentors must devote a considerable portion of their weekly working hours to effective mentoring activities. In turn, new teachers need time to learn from mentors and observe their classroom teaching. Shanghai pays for this by reducing teacher's instructional time and, in turn, increasing their class sizes. As an example, teachers in Shanghai teach an average of 10-12 hours per week. In contrast, teachers in the United States teach, on average, for about 30 hours per week. Shanghai has examined the trade-offs and opted to spend more money on mentoring and other forms of professional learning. Not surprisingly, the evidence shows that this has the greatest effect on student learning. And student learning should always be the focus.

References:

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Ben Jensen is the School Education Program Director at Grattan Institute

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