



# Beyond SOLO Teaching

*Teacher induction needs to do more than just ease new teachers' entry into their role; it needs to welcome them into a collaborative professional learning community.*

**Sharon Feiman-Nemser**

**T**he challenges of beginning teaching have been documented for decades. From Bel Kaufman's *Up the Down Staircase* (Harper-Collins, 1966) to Esmé Raji Codell's *Educating Esmé* (Algonquin, 1999), autobiographical accounts of idealistic beginners battling bureaucratic requirements, struggling to build relationships with students and families, and gaining self-understanding and pedagogical know-how have been a staple of the education literature.

Formal studies, too, have examined beginning teachers' concerns, aspirations, and learning needs. Almost 50 years ago, Lortie (1966) likened the new teacher to Robinson Crusoe, marooned on a desert island and facing the challenges of survival alone. In a more recent study, Johnson (2004) found that new teachers often feel lost at sea, with little or no guidance from colleagues or curriculum. Despite changes in the backgrounds of teachers and the contexts of teaching, two themes persist: The early years of teaching are undeniably a time of intense learning, and they are often a time of intense loneliness.

Ideas about how to ameliorate the situation have also been around for some time. In the early 1960s, James Conant, former president of Harvard University, made several recommendations regarding the

treatment of new teachers. Conant (1963) urged school boards to give new teachers the following supports:

(a) limited teaching responsibility; (b) aid in gathering instructional materials; (c) advice of experienced teachers whose own load is reduced so that they can work with the new teacher in his classroom; (d) shifting to more experienced teachers those pupils who create problems beyond the ability of the novice to handle effectively; (e) specialized instruction concerning the characteristics of the community, the neighborhood, and the students he is likely to encounter. (p. 212)

Around the same time, Robert Schaeffer (1967), dean of Columbia University's Teachers College, made this prescient observation:

It is trivial to argue about the degree of knowledge necessary to begin teaching, while we ignore the crucial question of how teachers can continue to learn throughout their careers. The real problem about the substantive knowledge possessed by new teachers is not its initial quantity but the fact that the school environment makes so few provisions for its steady expansion. (p. 14)

Conant recognized that beginning teachers need support to ease their transition into full-time teaching, but his recommendations did not challenge



the basic paradigm of one teacher working alone in a self-contained classroom. This paradigm assumes that once new teachers learn the ropes and gain some confidence, they can function on their own.

Schaeffer recognized that beginning teachers are not finished products and still have much to learn. He also understood that experience alone—especially private, unreflective experience—does not automatically produce growth. All teachers need to learn throughout their careers; the problem is that schools are not organized to support teacher learning.

Conant foreshadows the idea of comprehensive induction as a bundle of components, not a brief orientation or a stand-alone mentoring program (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004). Schaeffer foreshadows the idea of induction as a lever for transforming the culture of teaching (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005). In recent years, both ideas, supported by a growing body of research, have gained the attention of education leaders and policymakers.

Since the mid-1980s, induction and mentoring programs have become familiar features on the education landscape. In the early 1990s, 40 percent of new teachers reported participating in a formal induction program. By 2007–08, the number of new public school teachers receiving either mentoring or induction support had more than doubled, to 89.4 percent (personal communication from Thomas Smith on February 16, 2012, based on an analysis of 2007–08 data from the Schools and Staffing Survey).

Despite this dramatic increase in interest and activity, however, the quality and frequency of induction varies considerably. Although there is compelling evidence that high-quality, intensive induction increases teacher retention, and some evidence that it



contributes to improved teaching, only a small percentage of new teachers experience such intensive programs (Kapadia, Coca, & Easton, 2007; Smith & Finch, 2010). Like the farmer who said to the agricultural extension agent, “I don’t farm half as good as I know how,” we do not implement the best that we know about high-quality induction.

### Induction’s Evolving Role

The literature on induction and mentoring over the past 50 years reveals distinct shifts in thinking about what induction is and what it should do (see fig. 1, p. 15). Early advocates endorsed a view of induction as a temporary bridge designed to ease the new teacher’s entry into teaching. A second view—prompted by standards-based reforms, calls for greater professionalism, and a growing understanding of teacher learning—saw induction as individualized professional development.

And in recent years, education leaders have advocated a view of induction as a process of incorporating new teachers into collaborative professional learning communities.

### Induction as Temporary Support

Providing support to beginning teachers seems like a humane response to the stresses of the first year of teaching. Why should new teachers struggle alone behind the closed doors of their classroom when they could get help from more experienced colleagues? Why expect new teachers to know everything and be able to handle it themselves? (Breux & Wong, 2003).

Sensible recommendations like those of James Conant were intended to ease the transition from student of teaching to teacher of students. But such protections and supports (giving new teachers manageable assignments, providing access to experienced teachers with time and advice to share, and so on) are

hard to come by in an egalitarian school culture where all teachers do the same basic job.

Reduced workloads for new teachers are basically nonexistent (Shields et al., 2003). In fact, new teachers are *more* likely to get larger classes, more students with special needs or behavioral problems, extracurricular duties, and classrooms with fewer textbooks and equipment. These practices, which Patterson (2005) calls “the hazing of new teachers,” mistreat our newest recruits, ignore their status as beginners, and help explain why so many leave teaching.

The most popular strategy for helping new teachers get off to a good start is an informal buddy system, in which mentors offer technical advice and emotional support. As one mentor explains,

the mentor is supposed to just be there when you need her for whatever. . . . I establish that with my mentees at the beginning of the year, that I’m here to help you in any capacity. I make suggestions, but I tell them, “If you don’t follow them, it’s all right. Maybe what I suggest is something you feel you can’t use.” (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1993, p. 699)

Mentors who see themselves as buddies expect to decrease their involvement as the new teacher gains confidence and control. New teachers may also consider their relationship with mentors as temporary. In the words of one beginning teacher, “If things are going fine, she pretty much leaves me alone” (Feiman-Nemser & Parker, 1992, p. 18).

When mentoring means little more than occasional check-ins or informal chats, it is not likely to influence instruction, let alone student learning. Some argue that a narrow view of induction as temporary support is better than nothing. But is it good enough? Growing evidence suggests that simply assigning mentors does not guarantee

that new teachers will get the help they need. Poorly designed mentoring may even produce negative results: When mentors have no training, lack clear goals and expectations, and have little or no time to do the work, they may add to new teachers’ feelings of discouragement, isolation, and even cynicism (Breux & Wong, 2003; Johnson, 2004).

### ***Induction as Individualized Professional Development***

The second model of induction addresses some of these limitations by

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combining new teacher support with ongoing professional development tailored to beginning teachers’ needs. This model recognizes that new teachers are still learning to teach and are not likely to develop effective practice on their own. Individualized professional development, crucial for all new teachers, is essential for those with limited preparation, especially those working in high-poverty schools.

Under this model, mentoring is still the dominant induction strategy, but it has been transformed into a professional role. Advocates use different terms (*educative, standards-based, reform-minded, instructionally intensive, high-quality*) to distinguish this kind of mentoring from more informal feel-good support. Research indicates that the conditions that support effective mentoring include physical proximity, grade-level and/or subject-matter matches, personal compatibility, and allocated time (Public Education Network, 2003), as well as careful selection, advance training, and ongoing professional development

of mentors (Achinstejn & Athanases, 2006; Moir, Barlin, Gless, & Miles, 2009).

Case studies of thoughtful mentors at work show that they act as cothinkers and coplanners, helping new teachers reframe challenges, design and modify instruction and assessments, and analyze and promote student learning. Mentors also deliver difficult feedback and strive for a balance between supporting new teachers and challenging them to grow (Wang, Strong, & Odell, 2004; Yusko & Feiman-Nemser, 2008).

Large-scale surveys suggest that

strong mentoring can increase teacher commitment and retention (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Kapadia and colleagues (2007) found that novice elementary teachers who received strong mentoring were more likely to report that they intended to continue teaching. Researchers have also begun to document the effects of mentoring on student test scores (Fletcher, Strong, & Villar, 2008), although this connection is difficult to establish.

These promising indications make the findings of a large experimental study of comprehensive induction particularly surprising. Following the Department of Education’s gold standard for research, Mathematica researchers (Glazerman et al., 2008; Isenberg et al., 2009) randomly assigned schools in 17 high-poverty districts to receive a comprehensive induction program or their district’s regular induction support. For schools receiving comprehensive induction, the districts chose whether to get it from the New Teacher Center or Educational Testing Service, both

of which offered intensive programs featuring weekly meetings with full-time, trained mentors; formative assessments that included observations and standards-based feedback; and other professional development opportunities.

Data from one year showed no statistically significant differences between the treatment and control group on teachers' classroom performance, retention, or student achievement test scores. Three years later, however, teachers who had received two years of intensive induction did produce significantly higher gains in student achievement than did teachers in the control group.

These bad news/good news findings generated considerable attention among induction researchers and leaders, who raised questions about the research design (Are randomized controlled studies appropriate for the messy world of education?) and program implementation. Observers noted, for example, that first-year mentors were trained as the program was being implemented and evaluated, and the amount of time that new teachers in the treatment and control groups spent with their mentors differed by only 21 minutes a week (Moir et al., 2009; Smith & Finch, 2010). In focus-group discussions, teachers said that needy students and noninstructional duties sometimes kept them from meeting with their mentors (Isenberg et al., 2010).

These observations reinforce the value of placing induction in a developmental framework (1–3 years). One-year programs can help new teachers survive, but they rarely give them enough time and help to establish an effective practice. The challenge of providing timely, substantive assistance also prompts the question of whether the support and development of new teachers can or should be the sole responsibility of a single mentor.

Although serious mentoring clearly plays a central role in the induction process, even the most sophisticated mentoring cannot make up for an unhealthy school climate or an inappropriate teaching assignment.

### ***Induction as Cultural Transformation***

If the second model of induction extends the first by moving from informal support to intentional development, the third model situates new teachers' development within

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a professional teaching community and school culture that supports the ongoing learning of all teachers (Fulton et al., 2005). This transformational model requires a fundamental shift from teaching as an independent practice to teaching as an interdependent practice.

Decades of research confirm the power of school contexts to shape what teachers do and what they learn (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Rosenholtz, 1989). Across this body of scholarship, collaboration stands out as a key variable. As Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson (2005) explain,

the evidence strongly suggests that students learn more and teachers experience greater satisfaction and commitment when they engage with their colleagues, improving instruction and strengthening schools. (p. 72)

When Ingersoll and Smith (2004) examined the relationship between teacher turnover and different forms of support for beginning teachers, they found that the most salient components were (1) having a mentor from the same field, (2) having common planning time with other teachers in the same subject area or collaboration with other teachers on instruction, and (3) being part of an external network of teachers. Each of these components is a variation on the theme of collaboration.

Collaboration is also a dominant theme in research by the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers (Johnson et al., 2005). Interviewing 50 first- and second-year teachers in Massachusetts, researchers identified three types of professional cultures in schools. Some new teachers found themselves in veteran-oriented cultures, where independent work patterns isolated them from their experienced colleagues. Others found themselves in schools with novice-oriented professional cultures, where their energy and commitment could not compensate for a lack of guidance by more experienced colleagues. The most fortunate found themselves in schools with integrated cultures that promoted professional exchanges across experience levels and ongoing support for all teachers (Kardos & Johnson, 2007).

Integrated professional cultures benefit novices and veterans alike. New teachers get support and guidance, experienced teachers get recognition and renewal, and everyone focuses on student learning and school improvement. In these settings, 20th century solo teaching is replaced by a 21st century model of teaching and learning, in which

teachers maintain a sense of shared responsibility for the success of all students, not just those in their classrooms. No one assumes that new teachers are “fully cooked” when they leave their

**FIGURE 1. Models of Teacher Induction**

	<b>Goals</b>	<b>Components</b>	<b>Outcomes</b>
<b>Induction as Temporary Support</b>	Ease transition into teaching. Reduce stress and address problems of beginning teachers.	Reduced workload. Orientation to school and community. Informal buddy system, offering advice and emotional support.	Teacher survival and retention.
<b>Induction as Individualized Professional Development</b>	Foster new teacher development. Promote more effective teaching and learning for all students.	Orientation to school and community. Reduced workload. Curricular guidance. Serious mentoring for at least two years (sanctioned time, initial training, ongoing development, appropriate matches). Administrative support.	Improved teaching and learning. Teacher satisfaction and retention.
<b>Induction as Cultural Transformation</b>	Reduce teacher isolation. Incorporate new teachers into an integrated school community that supports the continuous learning of all teachers. Promote more effective teaching and learning for all students. Reduce the achievement gap.	Reduced workload or team teaching assignment. Serious mentoring (see details above). Intergenerational learning teams. Administrative involvement.	Continuous learning of all teachers. Collective responsibility for teaching and learning. Quality learning environment for students. Increased student achievement. Rewarding career path for teachers.

teacher preparation program. Novices and experienced teachers share the expectation that new teachers will learn from all the other teachers in a school. (Fulton, Yoon, & Lee, 2005, p. 15)

The gap between this vision and what goes on in most schools is wide, which explains why most teachers still work alone in self-contained classrooms. Still, cases of cutting-edge schools and districts in which teachers across experience levels work together to promote the learning of all students demonstrate

that such transformation is possible (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Johnson et al., 2005; Moir et al., 2009). Inducting new teachers into these integrated professional environments not only reduces the problem of teacher isolation, but also fosters learning with and from colleagues and promotes a sense of collective responsibility.

**A Catalyst for Change**

Given the high rates of attrition among new teachers and the high costs of

teacher turnover, it is understandable that researchers, education leaders, and policymakers want to know whether induction improves teacher retention. But retaining teachers without attending to the quality of their teaching and their students’ learning is shortsighted.

We need to turn our research agenda from the question “Do they stay?” to the questions “Do they learn? and “Do their students learn?” These are more elusive, complex questions to study, but they go to the heart of induction

as an educational process.

We know that new teachers are still learning to teach no matter what their preparation. We also know that the new generation of teachers differs from the retiring generation in ways that we cannot afford to ignore. New teachers today seek more opportunities for collaboration and put less value on privacy and autonomy. They also come with more varied levels of preparation and career aspirations (Johnson et al., 2005).

These realities underscore the need for new staffing patterns and induction practices that accommodate individual differences. The question of what knowledge new teachers bring to the classroom is less salient than the question of how to help them learn what they need to know to teach effectively. As we tailor induction policies and practices to meet the needs of this generation of teachers, induction can be a catalyst for building professional learning communities in which teachers across all levels of experience work together to ensure powerful teaching and learning. ■

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