

EXTENDING SUPPORT TO BEGINNING TEACHERS WITH ZOOM

by Mary C. Clement and Jill Cochran



Abstract

Extending support to recent graduates, two teacher educators offered monthly discussions via Zoom to first-year teachers. The professors reflect on what can be added to preservice teacher education to better prepare graduates for their first jobs.

Key words: new teachers, online induction

In the 1990s, I (Mary Clement) was traveling around east central Illinois delivering programs for beginning teachers in relatively small school districts, meeting monthly with new hires in one district and providing in-service or back-to-school programs in others. The topics that seemed most appropriate for these induction workshops were obvious: how to start a school year, classroom management, communication with parents, student diversity,

teaching strategies, and stress management. The issues that the teachers brought to their discussions were similar to ones I had encountered as a new teacher myself—individual student behavior issues, time management, and implementation of teaching strategies.

Then, 25 years later, I found myself again providing induction support to a group of new teachers. This time, the teachers were STEMTeach graduates, but no traveling was involved. Though these teachers work in different school

districts in the southeastern United States, we used Zoom for monthly discussions. The new teachers were all part of our college's STEMTeach program, and the induction aspect of the program fulfills, in part, a requirement of the National Science Foundation Noyce Grant that was received to increase enrollment and to support undergraduates in STEM teaching fields. The questions that guided our eight online discussions are presented in this article along with participant feedback. The authors also suggest what teacher educators can

learn from providing induction support to recent graduates.

Beginning Teacher Induction

For school systems to provide induction of new hires is a long-standing expectation, with high-quality mentoring and induction considered a necessary support for new teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Induction generally has included new employee orientation, assignment of mentors, and some ongoing support workshops exclusively for new teachers. Principals, mentors, and teacher leaders are often key players in assisting new hires. McIlheran (2018) wrote that veteran teachers have the responsibility to support new hires and not to wait for administrators to start induction activities. Research points to the need for induction for multiple reasons, including increasing the retention of teachers in the fields of teacher shortages, such as math and science (Ingersoll, 2012).

While beginning teachers' colleges or universities may need to follow up on the placement of graduates, few institutions have been actively involved in supporting their graduates during the initial years of teaching. Luft (2020) advocated for teacher educators and local schools or districts to share the responsibility for induction, calling for more research on

successful induction programs. Some university and school induction partnerships exist and have been successful. Bastian and Marks (2017) documented a program developed by the North Carolina public university system through which new teachers received coaching. Similarly, the College of Education at the University of Florida developed a web-based support system (Jones et al., 2016).

Zoom Induction Program

The principal investigator of the grant (Jill Cochran) and I decided to offer support seminars four times during the fall semester and again four times in the spring. Each Zoom session was scheduled for 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of the month. Because our college's teacher education program is small, the number of students in STEMTeach has been relatively low. For the 2020–2021 school year, we invited a total of seven recent graduates (one in her second year, five in their first year, and one who completed student teaching in December 2020) to participate in the Zoom support discussions.

The fall of 2020 was a unique year to begin a teaching career! With COVID-19 issues abounding, these new teachers experienced constant switching from online to in-person classes, as well as classes where they taught in-person while simultaneously teaching a percentage of their students online. In the first two discussion sessions, the teachers wanted to talk about what their schools were doing and how the classes might go as the year progressed. As moderators, we, their former professors, listened and asked questions regarding their schedules, their colleagues in the buildings, and the technologies available to them (see the Online Supplemental Material for the guiding questions).

Clement had worked with six of the teachers as their professor for the secondary curriculum and methods course and the instructional management course. Cochran had worked with the students in math and math/STEM methods courses, as well as with one student in the introduction to education course for STEM. Five of the graduates were fully certificated; one would soon earn certification; and one began full-time teaching without certification in a private school but was simultaneously starting coursework.

Teachers' Growth

The August discussion centered on where the teachers were located and what their assignments were. Few prompts were needed because the teachers just wanted to share how unique they perceived their individual situations to be. We often heard "me too" comments about students not wanting to mask, the technology challenges of hybrid teaching, and just the exhaustion the teachers already felt due to long hours of planning.

Throughout the discussions of the fall semester, COVID dominated the conversations. One teacher worked in a school district that did not require teachers or students to wear masks; she frequently lamented the challenge of going completely online several times during the semester due to high numbers of quarantines. The teachers wanted desperately to meet the needs of all students but continued to ask how that was possible in a regular year, but especially in a pandemic year. The failing rates of students (50–75%) that fall semester made the teachers question their own teaching abilities.

In January, the teachers reported being in a funk. One teacher asked

Mary C. Clement is a Professor of teacher education at Berry College in north Georgia and a Past President of Kappa Delta Pi. Email: mclement@berry.edu

Jill Cochran is an Associate Professor of Mathematics at Berry College and the principal investigator of an NSF Noyce Grant to recruit and prepare STEM teachers. Email: jcochran@berry.edu

the group whether she should be job searching: “Would it be better in another high school?” Another teacher told us that she was in graduate school and had already decided on pursuing her advanced degrees so that she could teach biology in higher education instead of high school. The spikes in COVID after the holiday season of late 2020 further depressed the attendees. Much discussion also centered on the complete lack of support from special education co-teachers. One teacher shared, “I would do much better without him.”

The second semester discussions included many negative reports. One teacher revealed that her coworkers had made fun of her age and called her “baby” throughout the year. The teachers had great difficulty engaging online students, and the district software crashed “all the time.” In March, the tide began to turn. As the teachers received reassurance from administrators about reemployment and renewed contracts, they had a revitalized sense of accomplishment and determination to continue as teachers.

Two of the first-year teachers already had been called on to be leaders in their schools. Experienced teachers asked them for technology assistance. One first-year teacher explained that because of her skills, she was asked to teach her class in-person, along with her online students and an absent teacher’s class online for 2 weeks. While a testament to her capabilities, this made a tough teaching assignment even tougher.

Lessons Learned

As the author of multiple articles and a couple of books about new teachers and their needs, I (Mary Clement) left one Zoom meeting and quipped to

my husband, “These teachers are struggling, and I don’t know how to help them!” While leading discussions can be tremendously helpful as a support, many of the issues brought up by the teachers had to do with lack of administrative support, limited technology, and minimal training for the hybrid and online means of delivering instruction. As professors of these former students, we couldn’t fix issues that were district and school specific, such as providing better computer software.

Through the Zoom discussions, we did learn the true ups and downs faced by recent graduates in their new positions. In a year when teacher educators were limited in how to work with student teachers and new teachers, the Zoom meetings provided an effective solution for reaching out to the recent graduates.

While no one ever forgets their first year of teaching, for some teacher educators that first year was decades ago. The challenges of first-year teaching changed in 2020, and the discussions revealed some specific issues that can be addressed in teacher preparation classes back on campus. Perhaps more stress management, mindfulness, and self-care can be added to courses for future teachers. While our graduates have entire courses in special education, classroom management, and curriculum and instruction, could we do a better job of teaching collaboration and team-teaching?

Closing Thoughts

The Zoom technology, already paid for by the college, makes online induction discussion groups easy to implement. Geographic distance is no longer a hindrance for the university to provide support to its graduates. The new teachers, especially those who made a point

to attend every session, were grateful for the opportunities to talk with their former professors. Getting more of the new teachers to attend regularly remains an issue.

Listening was a welcome support for the teachers, knowing that we were not their evaluators. What happened in the discussions stayed in the discussions, without repercussions from the administrators. Like the induction seminars I used to deliver in Illinois, these seminars provided a venue for new teachers to share experiences with concerned listeners. “Above all, any support seminars for new teachers must allow time to share the experiences, joys, and problems that they encounter” (Clement, 1996, p. 90). ■

Online Supplemental Material

To access the guiding discussion questions referenced in this article, please visit <https://10.1080/00228958.2022.2110824>.

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