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# A Teacher's First Assignment

**S**OUND initial training in both theory and practice, completed by practice training, will help prepare students for their teaching careers. But the transition between their training institution and classroom practice will not be easy. When faced with the hard facts of the job, all too many become discouraged and simply give up.

For the process of integration to be successful, the entry bridge must be strong and effective. This is why new recruits need firm supervision during their first years of activity. The point is made in one of the recommendations of the 45th session of the International Conference and Education, held in Geneva last October.

Special attention must be paid to teachers at the beginning of their career, since the initial positions that they will hold and the tasks they will perform will have a decisive effect on the remainder of their training and career. Tutorial and supervisory systems in the exercise of the profession should be introduced in the initial phases of their career.

## The most difficult assignments

This is especially true since "first assignments" tend to be the most exacting. Many of the youngest and least experienced teachers end up working in "tough" neighbourhoods or in remote areas, where resources are limited and where students really need the skills of more experienced teachers.

At the same time, while groups of students are becoming increasingly diversified, students undertaking teacher training are all trained in the same way. According to several surveys made in developed countries, for instance, a significant proportion of new teachers consider that they were not prepared for teaching in socially deprived neighbourhoods.

As a result, they generally at best ask to be transferred as soon as possible, and at worst simply quit teaching. As a consequence, students

observe a large turnover among teaching staff. A survey conducted in Australia a few years ago showed that one teacher in six gave up the job after only two years. Similar figures have been reported for the United States, with over 50 per cent of dropouts in the course of the first six years.

It is quite clear, therefore, that placing beginners in a situation for which they are not prepared and do not have the necessary experience is often most unsatisfactory, from the point of view of both for teacher concerned and the children, in other words the whole school system. The only way to improve matters would be to provide better working conditions in that type of neighbourhood, and especially to offer better salaries, in order to encourage the more experienced teachers to make up less attractive assignments.

## Supervision above all

New teachers need to be well supervised throughout the introductory stage of their careers. In the early weeks, they will chiefly need to be shown around the school, to feel accepted by their colleagues and to get used to their daily work schedule. Later on they will need to be taught to stimulate students' motivation (especially in secondary school), to evaluate their work and to manage contacts with parents.

Special introductory programmes have been devised to help them through these early stages. Unfortunately, these have begun to be applied only recently in western countries, while in many regions of the world new teachers still receive little or no support or assistance when they first begin to teach.

And yet there are many ways of providing support to fresh recruits. Generally speaking, these consider their more experienced colleagues to offer the best chance of support. In fact it is probably easier to begin a teaching career in a country like China, which has a tradition of cooperation between teachers in virtually

all aspects of work, than in countries where teaching is chiefly considered to be a solitary activity.

One of the most common methods consists in allocating tutors or mentors to new teachers. Mentors are made responsible for the progress and development of their future colleagues and surprise their work throughout the early stages. They pass on their knowledge and know-how and introduce their "apprentices" to a school's rules, values and ethics. They should also contribute to the trainees' professional development by voicing constructive criticism and by gaining their confidence. New teachers should be also given the chance to observe their colleagues in their classrooms, and mentors should attend classes given by novices. Even though the latter are mostly reluctant to be watched while they are teaching, it can be a great help to them.

## The dangers of imitation

The supervision of new teachers is a delicate business which should ideally provide advice while leaving sufficient room for the professional development of the individual. When they receive their first assignments, new graduates come to school with their briefcases brimming with teaching projects. The conditions they encounter, however, are not always favourable to implementing personal initiatives or to applying new methods.

The broad-ranging study carried out by Professor Angel Perez Gomez of the University of Malaga concerning practical training for teachers in Andalusia draws attention to the potential danger points:

According to Professor Perez, introducing new teachers to a school's culture all too often results in the perpetuation of obsolete attitudes to education. The new teachers, because they want to be accepted by their colleagues, imitate the latter's behaviour. This gives their practical work a conservative slant and there is

a danger that the future teachers will reproduce the mistakes and prejudices of the establishments where they have been trained. It is only when they are encouraged to query what they observe that trainees can undertake more imaginative projects. Perez goes so far as to suggest that practical training can become more of an obstacle than a tool in the education of future teachers.

In order to avoid this perpetuation of the status quo, more encouragement should be given to stimulating an interaction between theory and practice by alternating these. The first years of practical work should in fact be considered a part of initial training, so that contact with real situations makes theory more meaningful.

Mentors, on the other hand, should be well prepared and should be able to count on the assistance of colleagues and of the management. New arrivals will find it easier to adopt if the introductory programme is jointly assessed, with the progress achieved being measured against previously set objectives.

Of course, an introductory programme cannot be expected to fill all the gaps in initial training, or to prepare new teachers to operate satisfactorily in situations which would be difficult even for experienced colleagues. Whenever this type of programme has been properly managed, however, it has been found that new teachers are able to develop despite drawbacks such as inappropriate assignments or a lack of resources.

Of course such programmes do cost money and schools must expect to have to spend on the professional development of beginners. Considering the significant numbers of teachers who leave the profession on account of poor supervision, however, is it not more a case of whether the school system can really afford not to devote the necessary resources to this task? In the longer term, supervision is bound to be more economical. (UNESCO)