

On-Boarding Experienced Teachers in a New School

Emma Mecham, Joseph Kozlowski, Felicia Messervy,
Cami Player, Joel Lopez, Laura Reina and Nathan Justis

Utah State University - Utah USA

Abstract: *Each year school administrators find themselves in the position of hiring new teachers and onboarding them to the unique expectations and context of the school. Such work most often happens while these new teachers are actively doing the work of teaching, with few contracted hours of training available. Limited research has focused on the experience of onboarding for teachers who are experienced in the field, but new to a particular school. Recognizing this challenge, this team of researchers and participants set out to examine the flow of information in one school for four teachers in their first year of teaching at a public charter school. Findings point to the complexities of onboarding in a school environment, including mentoring, expectations, the value of support and logistical needs.*

Keywords: Onboarding, leadership, professional development, school cultural, mentor teachers

INTRODUCTION

The volume of information exchanged within a school to ensure the functioning and success of the school across its many domains – the lunchroom, the staff room, the custodial closet, the individual classrooms, the carpool line – is overwhelming. When a teacher, even an experienced teacher, joins the faculty of a school they may feel like they are swimming upstream in that flow of information, looking for the bit they need to carry on the day’s work.

Onboarding has been considered by researchers in multiple fields from a variety of perspectives and revealed a host of benefits from the process. This research suggests that successful onboarding from an organization to a new employee reduces the anxiety of new hires (Solinger et al., 2013; Abrams, 2018), limits the start up time to effective work (Klein et al., 2015), increases retention (Richter et al., 2022; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Johnson, 2011; Banville & Rickard, 2012), and understanding of the professional culture at work (Wiseman & Amerson, 2016), and enables relationship building that allows for a positive experience and continued access to learning (Franklin, 2019). The organization can also benefit from onboarding through learning about employee strengths (Keisling & Laning, 2016) and clarifying organizational goals (Harwood & Koyama, 2022).

Within the field of education, there is significant research focused on teacher onboarding. Wills (2022) defines teacher onboarding as “a process that conveys a school district’s professional

culture, expectations, and community awareness, and provides essential resources for teachers who are new to a district.” The quality of personal relationships that teachers experience in a school setting can have real impacts on their efficacy and satisfaction (Asporfs & Bondas, 2013; Darling-Hammond & McClaughlin, 2011); such relationships can be impacted by onboarding programs (Billot & King, 2017; Kardos et al., 2001; Gaikhorst, et al., 2014). As new teachers enter onboarding spaces, they are creating new relationships which set the tone of their professional experience in that context.

There is both some contradiction and much nuance in the teacher onboarding literature. Breaden, 2007 found that successful onboarding can improve student learning, while Glazerman et al. (2010), did not find positive impacts on student achievement in the case of their study. Other research highlights that each of the potential benefits – efficacy, satisfaction, and student learning – are affected by the quality and duration of supports (Ingersoll, 2012; Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2009; Feiman-Nemser, 2001) and the background of teachers (Achinstein et al., 2004; Mitchell, et. al., 2017). In a review of the induction literature, Ingersoll and Strong (2011) identified three major positive outcomes from successful induction for beginning teachers: “teacher commitment and retention, teacher classroom instructional practices, and student achievement” (p. 201).

While these patterns may have implications for experienced teachers being onboarded to a new school, who are not being inducted into the profession for the first time, very little research is focused on them. An Education Source search of teach* and onboard* in academic journals written in English for the past ten years yields 42 results; six referenced K-12 education. Only one considered experienced educators, in this case being onboarded to a particular instructional method. Using the same search parameters, but replacing onboard* with induction, 1,034 results are generated. While not all results are relevant to the topic, the vast majority of results considered novice teachers. Three results led to studies which considered induction to a specific instructional tool or model for teachers, not exclusive of experienced educators. However, the authors were able to find no published peer-reviewed research articles exploring more general school onboarding for this population published in the last ten years, despite the fact that this is a situation that teachers and administrators face routinely. While the beginning teacher induction literature is valuable and important research with obvious implications for onboarding teachers no matter their level of experience, without research specifically focused on experienced teachers, it is difficult to identify how and where the issues this body of literature point to are different for teachers who have already experienced professional induction. This study aims to respond to that gap.

As Korte et al. (2015) suggest, the field of onboarding needs “more nuanced and empirical studies” (p. 186). What follows is a case study approach to meeting that need. Interrogating the particularities of onboarding for specific teachers at a specific time and place over a full academic year allows for depth and texture as it relies not on the retrospective view at the end of the year, but examines the experience of onboarding throughout the school year. We seek to answer the following questions: what information do experienced onboarding teachers need? In what order do they need that information? What are the best ways for teachers to access that information? What barriers are there for experienced onboarding teachers to understand and make use of that information? How do teachers feel as they go through the process of being onboarded at a new school? What is unique to the experience of being an experienced teacher being onboarded as opposed to the experiences of being onboarded as part of induction into the profession as a beginning teacher? This examination can point to better questions and practices for onboarding teachers as a full process and not simply an end result.

CONTEXT

Mary Bethune Elementary School (pseudonym) is a small K-6 charter school in the Intermountain West. The school operates in partnership with a mid-size research university with a nationally recognized college of education. The school serves a unique purpose as a laboratory school, enabling consistent collaboration in teacher training and research on best practices in education. As outlined in the charter, the school is also committed to constructivist practices, outdoor experiential education, and arts integration. As a matter of policy, teachers within the school develop curriculum, rather than relying on purchased curriculum programs to scope and sequence their instruction. The school consistently measures among the top performing elementary schools in the state on standardized tests and has high levels of parent participation. The work of teachers at this school is not unlike that of teachers at most schools, but taken together, these factors mean that teachers at this school have an unusually demanding constellation of responsibilities. Such pressures make it a particularly interesting place to consider the flow of information required for onboarding.

PARTICIPANTS

First author is a faculty member at the partner university, whose teaching and research work focuses on teacher education. When, in the spring of 2021, Mary Bethune Elementary School found itself in the unusual position of having four teaching positions to hire for, she considered it an ideal time and place to examine onboarding of experienced teachers. All four newly hired teachers agreed to join the research study, first as participants and later as Second Author, Third Author, Fourth Author, and Fifth Author. Each of these teachers had taught successfully at other schools in other places before being hired at Mary Bethune; indeed, it was one of the required qualifications for the job. As such, they have all been ‘on-boarded’ before and did not have to navigate the demands of joining the profession as a first-year teacher. This allowed the focus of the study to be narrowly attentive to the experience of onboarding without the additional layer of induction. The teachers range in years of experience prior to hire from three to twelve years. Their previous teaching roles were across elementary grade levels and in schools with different philosophies, geographies, and structures. At Mary Bethune, teachers report to an assistant principal (Sixth Author) and a principal (Seventh Author). Participant demographics are reported in Table 1.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Participants	Terminal Degree	Years of Experience
Teacher 1	Ph.D.	7 years as a classroom teacher
Teacher 2	Bachelors	3 years as a classroom teacher
Teacher 3	Bachelors	5 years as a classroom teacher
Teacher 4	Masters	13 years as a classroom teacher
Assistant Principal	Ph.D.	9 years as an administrator
Principal	Masters	8 years as an administrator

METHODS

Following IRB approval and informed consent, this study took place over the course of one academic year, allowing for the capture of the “dynamic and adaptive phenomenon” (Solinger et al., 2013, p. 1640-1641) of onboarding, rather than a retrospective or isolated observation. During that academic year, the first author interviewed the teachers and observed in their classrooms, in total completing five observations and twenty-two interviews with teachers. Observations were primarily used as a way to alert the first author to the kinds of information and concerns that the teachers were managing in their classrooms, allowing the initial interview questions to reference actual happenings in the classroom. For example, on one occasion during observation, the classroom teacher explained to the class that the school counselor would be visiting later in the day to teach some social and emotional skills. At the next interview, first author asked the teacher about how that coordination happened; did the counselor request time in the classroom or did the classroom teacher initiate that plan? Were there continuing expectations for the counselor to teach in the classroom, and, if so, how and by whom were those expectations determined and communicated? The interviews were semi-structured (Adams, 2015), meaning there were a set of questions the researcher was prepared to ask, yet the researcher allowed the interviewee to direct the conversation toward other relevant topics. Each interview began with first author asking about what happened in the classroom during the week, what new information about the school culture, job expectations, and/or collaborative work had come to light. Interviews were done primarily over phone and were audio recorded so they could be coded in various rounds of analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Using constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965; Fram, S. M., 2013), first author coded transcripts from the interviews and notes from observations, using later interviews as opportunities to both gather new information and to do member checks on the emerging themes. Following the work of Brear (2019), teacher participants were involved in a dialogic member checking model, recursively engaging with emerging themes throughout the study. As the study progressed, it became clear that the perspectives of the administrators could prove valuable, and first author interviewed each of them in the last quarter of the academic year. Finally, as drafting of the article commenced, each author read, commented upon, and contributed to the revision of the report, reflecting on both their own contributions and the conclusions of the study. In this way, member checking contributed to the validity of the analysis and undermines the potential transactionality of educational research through recurring dialogue with participants.

FINDINGS

The initial research questions that drove this study centered on the logistics of information flow: what do onboarding teachers need to know, from whom, in what order, and how best can that information be communicated? These seemed like straightforward questions that when answered could lead to a blueprint of sorts to guide administrators through onboarding. However, as the study progressed, it became clear that there was not one river of information that could be banked and harnessed for expediency, but multiple streams of information that, while eventually feeding one body of water (the teacher’s body of knowledge), intersected and diverted based on immediate need and varying priority. Onboarding teachers need to know school-wide information (which may be mandated at the state or district level), grade-level information, classroom, family, and individual child-specific information. Additionally, that information is not all of one kind;

some of it is logistical, some cultural or philosophical. The sources of such information are diffuse and sometimes contradictory and the time pressures on that information are variable. When asked about information received, its source and timing, while some coherence emerged, there was far more difference in received knowledge than similarity across the teachers, despite their shared position in the onboarding process. Ultimately, analysis revealed five themes from the data that were important in regard to ways the experienced onboarding teachers used and interacted with information transfer in the school: (a) mentorship and mentorship selection from various sources, (b) perceived and received support from administrators, (c) communication, (d) clarity of expectations, and (e) expediency. Table 2 provides a summary of the findings.

MENTORSHIP

From the beginning, teachers had access to multiple resources for information in the form of both delineated responsibility (e.g., the Director of Experiential Learning assisted the new teachers as they planned field experiences) and collegial support (e.g., offers of information and solidarity from colleagues across the school). In addition, each new teacher was assigned a mentor teacher in the building as part of the onboarding process. This use of mentor teachers as a primary resource of onboarding information for new members of a teaching faculty is widespread with well documented positive outcomes (McNulty & Fox, 2010; Reitman & Karge, 2019; Vierstraete, 2005; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2012). Authors Six and Seven determined to assign each of the new teachers' mentors and thoughtfully deliberated on who should be partnered:

We considered things like do they have an established relationship already with a member of our staff? Some of them do. [One teacher] student taught here. [Another teacher] worked with sixth grade for a year or two. So, there were some pre-established relationships that we wanted to take advantage of. At the same time, we wanted to provide new relationships on top of pre-existing relationships, so we took that into account. With third grade, we assigned [the] previous third grade teacher and [those onboarding teachers] hadn't taught third grade before, so in terms of what is it like to teach third grade? We thought that would be a real advantage to them. We thought about personality matches. Would they be comfortable with this person?

Despite the fact that they were given no additional time or money to carry out the added responsibility, each assigned mentor expressed enthusiasm and willingness to serve in the role and provided useful information to their mentee early on. Such investment is critical to the success of mentoring programs (Cochran & Resse, 2007; Hellsten et al., 2009; Lambeth & Lashley, 2012). Further, each mentor was a well-qualified teacher, with consistent evidence of success; qualities that are also necessary for effective mentorship (Carver, 2004). However, as the year progressed, it became clear that every one of the new teachers had shifted their requests for information from the assigned mentor to other knowledgeable coworkers within the building. In some cases this was the result of having found which source of information was most proximate to a particular topic. For example, the school has a tradition of paralleling the Olympic Games with learning activities and competitions in each classroom. The media specialist of the school coordinates these events and became the contact teachers turned to regarding their students' participation.

Other considerations came into play as well. When considering why each teacher eventually landed on different colleagues as their primary source of information, those decisions were affected by multiple factors, including scheduling, personality fit, educational philosophy fit,

and past experiences with colleagues. For example, one of the onboarding teachers performed a mentor shift because their personal planning time and schedule did not align to their assigned mentor, but mentor but did align to another veteran teacher in the school. That teacher did most of their planning early in the morning, and morning and found that only one other teacher—not their assigned mentor – was also in the building to ask questions to. Over time, these two teachers found much in common in terms of philosophy, energy, and focus, and an unofficial mentor teacher role was assumed. In another case, the onboarding teacher had so much shared need for information with the only other grade-level teacher for their grade and close physical proximity between their classrooms that it just made sense to turn to that teacher for information rather than going to a different floor of the building and seeking out their assigned mentor teacher who didn't always know the grade-specific information. In other cases, onboarding teachers worried about stepping on the toes of mentor teachers who had previously occupied their position or because they had mutual friends with another teacher, the formation of a relationship felt more natural. The value of assigned mentor teachers appears to have been negligible in this study. In addition to the specifics of these issues, this may be the result of the practice of assigning mentor teachers being new and largely undefined at the school. However, whether because this isn't a practice that the majority of the returning teachers to the school experienced themselves, the small size of the school, or the culture of the school, onboarding teachers found ready sources of information beyond their assigned mentors, enabling them to access the information and support they needed with relatively little friction.

Despite this seeming solution, multiple participants recognized that this unofficial mentorship was happening with no substantive compensation to the teachers. A limitation of this study is the absence of the voices of both the official and unofficial mentor teachers in the data. While we each have experienced the benefits of mentoring others on our own practice and hope such benefits accrued to these unofficial mentors, we had shared awareness of the potential for some system of formalizing pay, time, or even recognition accruing value to the work that was happening regardless of appointment.

SUPPORT

The impact of administrator support on teacher satisfaction and continuation is well documented (Redding, et al., 2019; Boyd et al., 2011). There is also evidence of a link between perceived support and teacher efficacy (Ensign et al., 2019). Without exception, each onboarding teacher reported feeling supported as they acclimated to this new school and their role within it. Each teacher described this support from the point of their hire throughout the academic year as clear and consistent. There were various ways support was felt across all four onboarding teachers. Each teacher expressed the feeling of being trusted as a professional capable of making autonomous decisions for their classroom as evidence of that support (see Ferguson & Johnson, 2010 for the relationship between such inclusion and retention). Teachers identified the communication of that support through written messages – with one teacher identifying text messages and written notes from administrators and other teachers – and another teacher identifying the value of face-to-face interactions:

I think they did quite a great job of making me feel very supported. Like, ‘anything you need, we’re here for you.’ [The principal] has come and met with me and [another onboarding teacher] a few times to just say, ‘Where are you at? What do you need? Talk to me about what’s going on.’ So I felt that support and he also did

such a great job of making us feel like he has confidence in us and that he's not there to judge us, just to support.

They also cited ready access to resources they needed for their students.

I met with [another faculty member] right after I got hired and she had a huge list of supplies that we could choose from and then we just kind of said how much of each thing we wanted, which was like completely foreign to me because where the school I came from we would be given a really tight budget and then we had to go to Walmart and buy all the supplies ourselves and hope that we were within that budget and then when that budget was gone buying supplies for the kids at the beginning of the year, then that was it for the rest of the year. I spent so much of my own personal money on stuff, so this was super new to me that we could like just fill out a paper of how many notebooks and pencils and pencil boxes and all that kind of thing that we wanted and then later on in the summer there were boxes of all of those supplies on my back table. It was magical!

Interestingly, both administrators reported providing support and a desire for the onboarding teachers to feel supported, however, the ways in which they identified providing support were different both from the ways the teachers reported receiving it and from one another's reports. The Assistant Principal identified providing support through monthly scheduled check in meetings with teachers as well as informal discussions:

I just think we try to be present and be at their PLC meetings when we can, so we can support them that way. I know with third grade it's convenient that they're across the hall, so I'll hear them talking, and be like, 'oh, I wish we had,' and then I'll be like, 'Hey! Look what I found!' 'Oh, how did you know?' 'Well, I can hear you.'

This kind of presence and ready willingness to engage was central to support in this reflection. While the Principal cited pay structures as a form of support:

I wanted to show them support in the salaries we offered them – convey to them that we acknowledge everything you can bring to this team, we want to be competitive with local districts, etc. [. . .] Just so they feel they are stepping into a place that will respect them and what they will bring to the table.

Undoubtedly, compensation packages formed the basis of support on which all the other instances of support rested, but perhaps because the work of the principal in securing competitive compensation was outside the view of teachers, they didn't articulate it as evidence of support.

The amalgamation of these types of supports appears to have created a habitat for thriving for onboarding teachers, despite the pressures of onboarding and the complications of COVID in their first year at the school. Importantly, teachers expressed more willingness to reach out for support as the school year progressed. In the beginning, some teachers expressed concern about projecting competence and held back in requesting support.

I just wasn't sure. I don't know. It was kind of a hard balance to find. I don't know. I didn't want to seem like an incompetent teacher and be like, 'I have three kids that I feel like should be referred to more intensive interventions, but I don't, where I'm trying, I feel like I have to prove myself, I guess. And it took me some time and some humility and also other people coming in and observing and saying like, 'Yes. This is a major issue that should be addressed,' you know?

The difficulty of accessing needed support while establishing ethos was enabled by the consistency of offers of both support and validation of the good work teachers were already doing.

COMMUNICATION

Sometimes onboarding teachers sought out information because they anticipated a need for it. At other times they became aware they needed information only after a situation in which the information was pertinent had passed. This was the case with events from mid-year testing to school celebrations:

Sometimes I feel with some of the traditions here it kind of happens that way where they'll tell the students and it's like, 'oh!' And my students will mention it to me and it's like wait, what?! And I'm like 'oh, okay.'" And then I'll go ask someone and they'll fill me in on the details of it.

Finally, there were many times when other faculty members or administrators anticipated that onboarding teachers would need specific pieces of information and offered it.

While this seems the preferable model of communication, and indeed, was the impetus for this study, it became clear as the year progressed that such anticipation required proximity to be manageable. Because the volume of information flow these teachers were managing was so high, they were able to hold on to and recall information they had been given best when it was received either in response to a specific event or need or just before such an event or need arose. Teachers repeatedly recalled 'maybe hearing something about that' during the initial faculty training of the year or in an email, but unless that information was presented again when the teacher was prepared to act on it, it was simply drowned out by the information that was presently actionable or that resonated with past experience.

Onboarding teachers identified multiple sources from which they received information about the school: emails, trainings, faculty meetings, conversations with colleagues, school assemblies, messaging from the Parent Teacher Association and from families of students. At times, these sources pointed to consistent understandings. At other times, the messages were conflictual.

CLARITY OF EXPECTATIONS

When teachers received conflicting messages about expectations for successfully carrying out their role at the school, they most often assumed there wasn't an expectation – that these decisions were up to the purview of individual teachers. Sometimes this resulted in frustration because a teacher believed that a consistent expectation across the school on a particular issue would be for the good of the school and their own satisfaction (see Caprara, et al., 2003). This was the case on diverse issues – from homework expectations to student behavior in hallways to teacher responsibility on the playground. At other times, teachers expressed appreciation for the trust to

make professional decisions in their classroom without direct oversight on particular issues. In both cases, teachers were left to do interpretation work when the ideas communicated were inconsistent with one another.

Table 2
Summary of Findings

Theme	Description	Example
Mentorship	Onboarding teachers were assigned mentor teachers, yet gradually transitioned to other mentors around the school that matched their teacher needs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An onboarding teacher mentor shifted to a colleague who worked across the hall due to proximity. ● Onboarding teachers sought out the domain specific expertise of many different faculty and were met with willing support across the school.
Support	Onboarding teachers received direct and indirect support from administrators. However, the administrator's delivery of support did not always match the receptivity of the onboarding teacher.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An onboarding teacher is not aware that salary was a hard-won battle of support by administrator. ● An onboarding teacher identifies autonomy to make decisions as support.
-Dialogue	Onboarding teachers had many lines of communication. They tended to use direct communication that related to immediate issues and situations that arose in the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An onboarding teacher may be able to find detailed communication in a school handbook, yet directly ask the principal or colleague to get the answers. ● Information provided to onboarding teachers was not always timely.
Clarity of Expectation	Onboarding teachers navigated the balance between teacher autonomy and top-down delivery of expectations. Uncertainty between these two led to some teacher insecurity whether or not they were performing their duties correctly.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An onboarding teacher is unsure of the responsibility of themselves, as well as other teachers, when they monitor children on the playground. ● When faced with conflicting messages about school culture and expectations, onboarding teachers chose to adhere to the messages that aligned with their past experiences at other schools.
Expediency	Immediate needs took precedence over deeper and broader needs for shared culture and understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● An onboarding teacher unsure of what the school administration expects with regard to constructivist methods of assessment focuses instead on meeting the daily needs of the students.

Onboarding teachers brought with them past experiences with school culture and teacher expectations. The understandings that these teachers had established in previous teaching positions influenced not only their perspective on un-stated expectations, but their interpretation of expectations that were articulated. For example, all the teachers identified that using constructivist methods of instruction was an expectation of which they were aware. However, the teacher who heard that message the most forcefully was a teacher who had a deep history of both study and practice in constructivism.

I very much feel grateful as a teacher here that there is no pressure – there's no pressure – from any administrator at this school (from what I've seen) to sit kids down behind a book, have them working through lessons in some basal series or whatever and say that that's good education. More so, every time I do something that's rich in a constructivist philosophy where students are really engaging with topics with more open-ended questions and inquiry and then coming away with – if you want to say – more constructed knowledge, those are the types of things that I do that I get a lot of positive feedback from, both anecdotally and even just interest. You know, popping in like, 'What?! This is the coolest thing you are doing. What is that? We should tell people about that.' So, it's clear what that space of work got. And why I feel like that theory is embedded throughout the school with their expectations.

This teacher had previously taught in a school with a similar emphasis and done graduate work which explored the theoretical framework of those practices. This teacher interpreted the verbal commendation which administrators offered for constructivist lessons they taught as clear messaging of expectations. According to administrators, that was an accurate interpretation; the primary way the expectation for constructivism was communicated was through validation of its use. However, for some of the other onboarding teachers who had far less experience with constructivism in practice or theory, compliments about a particular lesson were appreciated, but not clear messaging about constructivism. They didn't have the background to identify the pattern of validation's relationship to the use of constructivism in their classroom.

The same sort of phenomenon played out regarding school expectations for homework. One onboarding teacher couldn't identify any clear messaging about the type or amount of homework expected:

I don't feel like anything [about homework] was really communicated to me explicitly. I've just always had the philosophy from going through the [teacher training program at the university associated with the school] since that's where I got my degree and just assuming that [the school] followed suit, that homework isn't, it's not recommended, but it's not *not* recommended. I know the fifth-grade teachers send homework home with the kids. But I'm just always of the opinion where, I don't know, I feel like sending homework home is just kind of a catch 22, where it's like well, they're either going to be able to do it at home or, if they can't, then their parents are going to help them, which is great, but then I don't want parents to be frustrated if they don't understand the way we're solving the math problem or whatever, so I just don't want it to be an extra battle or a 'did the child

do this or did the parent do this? I can't really tell.' So I'm more of the opinion just read for 20 to 30 minutes at night and we'll call that good.

Another onboarding teacher came to very different conclusions about homework at the school, citing what they had done at their previous school and the example of another grade level team at Mary Bethune, and their own philosophy of "I've always believed in homework and I've always thought that was something that helps kids prepare for being able to transfer school, not just in a classroom, but in the outside world as well." Using their own past experiences and preferences as a guide to interpreting conflicting messages or silences about expectations meant that teachers came to different conclusions.

The impact of past experiences appears to also have affected the conclusions of administrators. While the assistant principal had a long tenure at the school, serving in this role in collaboration with a previous principal, the current principal was relatively new to the school. When asked about expectations across a variety of domains, the assistant principal was far more likely, drawing on this reservoir of experience, to have clear policy answers than the principal, who leaned much further in the direction of leaving decisions up to teacher discretion. This means that the answer to the question, 'what is the expectation about . . .' was dependent not only on the background and preferences of the onboarding teacher, but also the background and preferences of their source of information.

EXPEDIENCY

One clear similarity of experience between the onboarding teachers was the ways in which time pressures (whether in the form of state testing deadlines or the arrival of student teachers) brought logistical concerns to the forefront. As one teacher said, "If I brought all these questions to the right person at the right time, I could probably get answers." The trouble this teacher identified was not only knowing what they needed to know and from whom at what time, but that there were so many other things happening, they didn't have the bandwidth to seek information beyond the need of that moment. Teachers make countless decisions every day, responding to long term and immediate needs for many people simultaneously. While each of the onboarding teachers expressed that the unique culture of the school was a prominent draw for them in accepting a position at the school, time spent musing on and absorbing that culture was most often at the mercy of getting through each day.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is both enhanced by its particularities and limited by them. Further investigation of onboarding of experienced teachers at new schools would help to identify the generalizable findings of this study. However, this study does effectively point to which spaces of inquiry further investigations might fruitfully explore.

While assigned mentor teachers in this study had very little impact, that doesn't suggest they couldn't have or that the practice should be eliminated. However, it does raise some questions about how best to create value from that role. Assigning mentor teachers has limitations (Colognesi et al., 2020). As Author Six suggested, "You can't really choose who people connect with." Based on the outcomes represented in this study, even with thoughtful deliberation, identifying best matches is very hard. There is complexity in allowing for mentor teachers to be found rather than assigned. Such a system can leave a gap between the hiring and the opportunity to form

relationships when onboarding teachers have no ready source of information. There is potential for onboarding teachers to choose mentors who administrators don't want spreading ideas, practices, or attitudes that are at odds with administrator expectations. There are also possibilities for an uneven spread of the work of mentoring; some teachers will be unwilling or unskilled mentors, while others may be sought out by everyone because of their skill and willingness. While there are no easy solutions to these concerns, it is apparent that assigning mentors has its own gaps, which will persist in the absence of innovation.

The different foci of responses about support likely reflect both role and personality differences, but it may be instructive for teachers and administrators to be aware of the ways in which one another perceive evidence of support. Administrators who have worked hard behind the scenes to secure competitive salaries for onboarding teachers may not be aware that such work was invisible to newly on-boarded teachers, who may be looking for support through classroom budget allowances to build a classroom library or the autonomy to determine their own pacing of instruction.

School administrators had begun work on a handbook to centralize information about school policies and expectations previous to the Covid pandemic. That work was interrupted, but is still a planned document. Clearly this would be a valuable resource for onboarding teachers. However, it became clear throughout the year that information is best received when it is repeated across multiple sources. The handbook could be one site, but for best effect, the information should also be communicated in trainings, faculty meetings, emails, and conversations with colleagues. Such saturation would be more likely to result in clarity and more likely to reach teachers when they are in a position to act on that information.

A central tension of the findings is the difficult balance between clearly articulated and uniformly shared expectations.

I love being able to do what I feel is best for kids, which I understand is different than other teachers. But at the same time, I do feel like there does need to be some things that are aligned because I think that is what's best for kids – that they could know their [next] grade teacher will use similar language with them about various topics.

The choices teachers get to make are decidedly differently across schools. Some administrators communicate firm school-wide expectations about each element of the school structure and teacher responsibilities, while other administrators leave the bulk of decision making to individual teachers in their spaces. Each approach has its advantages. Clarity of expectation provides continuity across the school, buffering the potential for resentment arising from differences of expectation and granting a feeling of security for teachers – especially onboarding teachers – that they know how success is defined in their space. It reduces the cognitive load of decision making and generates shared culture. However, it can also be felt as stifling, limiting the creative and professional work and identity of teachers, and making rigid what could be flexible in light of individual need and changing context. Further, when the school-wide expectations are rooted in a philosophical framework that is not shared by all members of the school community, those expectations can be the source of ongoing friction. As the data in this study point to, it behooves school communities and administrators to critically consider what the shared expectations of a school are, to map those as they change across personnel and context changes,

and to communicate those expectations – whether they are many or few – consistently and in multiple ways to all members of the school community.

Finally, school leaders must be alert to the tendency for communication about school culture to take a back seat to the logistical demands of any given school week. Because the pressures of immediate need in a school are constant and intense, they can become the focus of communication. Leaders who are committed to establishing a unified school culture must be intentional about communicating the shared cultural norms (or the hoped for shared cultural norms) to all staff, but especially to those who are onboarding.

Because experienced teachers bring skills and knowledge domains with them to new school settings, it may seem that they need onboarding only for the most basic of school specific information. However, while these teachers don't need the kind of information that onboarding efforts for teachers new to the field may need (classroom management strategies, how to make differentiation decisions, etc.), they do need purposeful, clear, and consistent information. Without it, they will rely on their previous experiences in different settings and other school cultures. This can create uncertainty and inconsistency.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, J. (2018). What matters to millennial teachers? A guide to inspiring, supporting, and retaining the newest generation of educators. *Educational Leadership* 75(8), 75-78.
- Achinstein, B., Ogawa, R. T., & Speiglman, A. (2004). Are we creating separate and unequal tracks of teachers? The effects of state policy, local conditions, and teacher characteristics on new teacher socialization. *American Educational Research Journal* 41(3), 557-603. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041003557>
- Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey (Eds.), *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation* (4th ed.), 492-505. Jossey-Bass. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119171386.ch19>
- Aspfors, J., & Bondas, T. (2013). Caring about caring: Newly qualified teachers' experiences of their relationships within the school community. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 19(3), 243-259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2012.754158>
- Banville, D., & Rikard, G. L. (2012). Teacher induction – implications for physical education teacher development and retention. *Quest* 61(2), 237-256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2009.10483613>
- Billot, J., & King, V. (2017). The missing measure? Academic identity and the induction process. *Higher Education Research and Development* 36(3), 612-624. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429428593-13>
- Braer, M. (2019). Process and outcomes of a recursive, dialogic member checking approach: A project ethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 29(7), 944-957. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732318812448>
- Breaden, M.C. (2007). Assistance for New Teachers. *Education Week*, 27(10), 5.
- Boyd, D., Grossman, P., Ing, M., Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2011). The influence of school administrators on teacher retention decisions. *American Educational Research Journal*, 48(2), 303-333. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831210380788>
- Caprara, G. V., Barbarenli, C., Borgogni, L., Petitta, L., & Ruinacci, A. (2003). Teachers', school staff's and parents' efficacy beliefs are determinants of attitudes toward school. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 18(1), 15-32. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03173601>

- Carver, C. L. (2004). Teaching at the boundary of acceptable practice: What is a new teacher mentor to do? *Journal of teacher education* 55(5), 449-462. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487104269524>
- Carver, C. L., & Feiman-Nemser, S. (2009). Using policy to improve teacher induction: Critical elements and missing pieces. *Educational Policy*, 23(2), 295-328. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904807310036>
- Cochran, S., & Resse, L. (2007). A successful induction into the teaching profession: For the new career and technical education teacher, a teacher induction program and mentoring can make the first year a much more positive experience. *Techniques*, 82(6), 25-27.
- Colognesi, S., Van Nieuwenhoven, C., Beusaert, S. (2020). Supporting newly qualified teachers' professional development and perseverance in secondary education: On the role of informal learning. *European Journal of Teacher Education* 43(2), 258-276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2019.1681963>
- Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin, M. W. (2011). Policies that support professional development in an era of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 92(6), 81-92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172171109200622>
- Ensign, J., Woods, A. M., & Kulinna, P. H. (2018). My turn to make a difference: Efficacy trends among induction physical educators. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 91(1), 115-126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2019.1650878>
- Feiman-Nemser, S. (2001). From preparation to practice: Designing a continuum to strengthen and sustain teaching. *Teachers College Record*, 103(6), 1013-1055. <https://doi.org/10.58295/2375-3668.1237>
- Ferguson, C. J., & Johnson, L. (2010). Building supportive and friendly school environments: Voices from beginning teachers. *Childhood Education* 86(5), 302-306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2010.10521413>
- Fram, S. M. (2013). The constant comparative analysis method outside of grounded theory. *The Qualitative Report* 18(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1569>
- Franklin, L. (2019). Nine new teacher librarians: An effective onboarding model. *Teacher Librarian*, 46(4), 22-25.
- Gaikhorst, L., Beishuizen, J. J., Korstjens, I. M., & Volman, M. L. L. (2014). Induction of beginning teachers in urban environments: An exploration of the support structure and culture for beginning teachers at primary schools needed to improve retention of primary school teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 42, 23-33. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2014.04.006>
- Glaser, B. G. (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems* 12(4), 436-445. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.1965.12.4.03a00070>
- Glazerman, S., Isenberg, E., Dolfen, S., Bleeker, M., Johnson, A., Grider, M., & Jacobus, M. (2010). *Impacts of comprehensive teacher induction: Final results from a randomized controlled study* (Report No. NCEE 2009-4034). Jessup, MD: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance.
- Harwood, C., & Koyama, D. (2022). Employing reflective practice to inform adjunct-faculty onboarding. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching* 16(2), 191-203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2021.1895800>
- Hellsten, L.-A. M., Prytula, M. P., Ebanks, A., & Lai, H. (2009). Teacher induction: exploring beginning teacher mentorship. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 32(4), 703-733.

- Ingersoll, R. M. (2012, May). Beginning teacher induction what the data tell us: induction is an education reform whose time has come. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(8), 47-51.
- Ingersoll, R. M., & Strong, M. (2011). The impact of induction and mentoring programs for beginning teachers: A critical review of the research. *Review of Educational Research*, 81(2), 201-233. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654311403323>
- Johnson, L. S. (2011). Targeted comprehensive induction for urban educators: An exploration of teacher motivation and retention. *The New Educator*, 7, 131-152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688x.2011.574586>
- Kardos, S. M., Johnson, S. M., Peske, H. G., Kauffman, D., & Liu, E. (2001). Counting on colleagues: New teachers encounter the professional cultures of their schools. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 37(2), 250-290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00131610121969316>
- Keisling, B., & Laning, M. (2016). We are happy to be here – the onboarding experience in academic libraries. *Journal of library administration* 56, 381-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2015.1105078>
- Klein, H. J., Polin, B., & Sutton, K. L. (2015). Specific onboarding practices for the socialization of new employees. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 23(3), 263-283. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijasa.12113>
- Korte, R., Brunhaver, S., & Sheppard, S. (2015). Mis interpretations of organizational socialization. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 26(2), 185-208.
- Lambeth, D. T., & Lashley, C. (2012). A reflection of the perceptions in alternatively prepared first-year teachers in an urban high school: The necessity for improvements of mentoring and induction. *Teaching & Learning*, 26(1), 35-52.
- Locasle-Crouch, J., Davis, E., Wiens, P., & Pianta, R. (2012). The role of the mentor in supporting new teachers: Associations with self-efficacy, reflection, and quality. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 20(3), 303-323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2012.701959>
- McNulty, C. P., & Fox, K. R. (2010). Teacher drop-outs? Empowering induction-year teachers to create affable environments to enhance retention. *Childhood Education* 86(5), 312-315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2010.10521415>
- Mitchell, D. E., Howard, B., Meetze-Hall, M., Hendrick, L. S., & Sandlin, R. (2017). The new teacher induction experience: Tension between curricular and programmatic demands and the need for immediate help. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 44(2), 79-104.
- Redding, C., Booker, L. N., Smith, T. M., & Desimone, L. M. (2019). School administrators' direct and indirect influences on middle school math teachers' turnover. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(6), 708-730. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jea-10-2018-0190>
- Reitman, G. C., & Karge, B. D. (2019). Investing in teacher support leads to teacher retention: Six supports administrators should consider for new teachers. *Multicultural Education*, 27(1), 7-18.
- Richter, E., Lucksnat, C., Redding, C., & Richter, D., (2022). Retention intention and job satisfaction of alternatively certified teachers in their first year. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 114, 1-11.
- Ronfeldt, M., & McQueen, K., (2017). Does new teacher induction really improve retention? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 68(4), 394-410. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103704>
- Solinger, O. N., Olffen, W. V., Roe, R. A., & Hofmans, J. (2013). On becoming (un)committed: A taxonomy and test of newcomer onboarding scenarios. *Organization Science*, 24(6), 1640-1661. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1120.0818>

- Vierstraete, S. (2005). Mentorship: Toward success in teacher induction and retention. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, 8(3), 381-392. <https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.0803072013>
- Wills, N. (2022). Invest in onboarding: Go step by step with an effective new-teacher onboarding experience. *Principal*, January/February, 44-46.
- Wiseman, P., & Amerson, G. (2016). Onboarding for school leaders: Cultivating top talent through engagement and connections from the start. *Leadership* 45(3), 8-12.