Scottish Teachers for a New Era (STNE) was a collaborative six-year pilot project which sought to prepare ‘teachers for a new era’, able to face up to the challenges of knowledge and learning in the twenty-first century. The programme’s aims included the creation of an extended professional culture and the broadening of learning experiences and opportunities to develop new and personal approaches to teaching.

Understanding how new teachers learn in the workplace
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Introduction

This research was focused on how new teachers in Scotland learn about teaching and being a teacher during their induction year. The study investigated both formal and informal learning with a particular focus on workplace learning. While at work new teachers were learning from doing the job, in particular their classroom experience, they were learning from colleagues and from the pupils in their classes. Induction year teachers in Scotland are given less class contact time so that they can spend more time on their continuing professional development. They are also provided with a mentor who is either based in their school or works with a group of new teachers from the same education authority. By listening to teachers describing how they learnt rather than focusing on the improvement of continuing professional development (CPD) programmes, primacy was given to the experiences and perspectives of the new teachers’ themselves. By understanding new teachers' experiences their learning and development can be supported and sustained in a more comprehensive way.

Two research questions were addressed:

1) How do new teachers learn in the workplace?
2) What factors affect their learning?
**How new teachers learn in the workplace**

**Method**

A two-phase, sequential mixed methods approach was adopted, incorporating a large scale questionnaire followed by a smaller number of interviews to probe and explore issues in greater depth. Emerging themes from the questionnaire data informed the construction of the interview schedules.

There were ten interview participants drawn from the University of Aberdeen B.Ed. and PGDE programmes. The interview respondents had the opportunity to reflect on their professional learning in the first year of their teaching career, and so it could be seen as a professional development opportunity for them. Several participants expressly acknowledged this, either verbally or in their CPD documentation.

**Key findings**

The key findings were that new teachers learnt informally from colleagues, peers and pupils. An important element in their learning was the level of support they received from the head teacher and their colleagues. The school could be seen as a workplace learning environment with various factors impacting on how expansive or restrictive it was to learn in. The teachers’ individual learning disposition also influenced their approach to their own learning.

These findings assist in the recontextualisation of continuing professional development which should include all professional learning, including informal learning, and not just attendance at courses and other formal activities. A mechanism for recognition or a change in thinking needs to take place so that informal learning of new teachers is encouraged and seen as part of the teacher's CPD. Informal learning plays a vital role in the induction year with new teachers observing colleagues, discussing work, listening to advice and receiving feedback on their own practice.
**Discussion**

Education authorities, the GTCS and Education Scotland need to recognise the importance of informal learning and how to facilitate this. These bodies also need to recognise the importance of induction year teachers developing micro political literacy. CPD needs to be understood as being much more than attendance at an event but also covering professional learning such as discussing teaching and learning with colleagues and research or reading done by the individual themselves.

The teachers’ situation or context in a particular school workplace highlights the importance of the learning environment that an induction year teacher must work and learn in. Learning environments may include expansive and restrictive elements or characteristics, for example, a school that has organised working groups or lunch-and-learn sessions (expansive elements) may have no history of mutual observation or organised mentor support (restrictive elements). Learning environments with more expansive features provide induction year teachers with support and encouragement. The support given to the new teacher by their designated mentor, their other colleagues, their peers, their immediate line manager and/or their head teacher are all important.

The new teacher should also be considered as an individual as new teachers are not all the same. There is no longer a “one-size-fits-all” mentality in relation to pupil learning and so it is anachronistic that new teachers are all treated identically. To consider new teachers at an individual level it is necessary to examine new teachers’ attitudes towards learning, their personal learning, their work biographies and their motivation to learn. These personal aspects can be encapsulated in the term “individual learning disposition”. In a similar way to learning environments having expansive and restrictive characteristics, people may exhibit expansive and restrictive indicators in terms of their individual learning disposition.

*Figure: Expansive and restrictive learning environments and individual learning dispositions*
How new teachers learn in the workplace

Conclusion

Individual teachers need to understand how their own learning disposition affects their attitude to learning. Induction Year Teachers need help from their mentor to understand how they regard themselves, the job of teaching and the pupils - their level of concern for themselves, their teaching and/or the pupils will determine how they teach and interact with pupils. Donaldson has called for the separation of induction mentors and supports so that the assessment and support functions are more clearly defined.

Induction year teachers need time to observe other teachers and to visit other schools. They need time to be with and talk to other induction year teachers as well as subject or stage colleagues. Induction year teachers need the opportunity to develop micro-political literacy with their peers. It is vital that head teachers and colleagues welcome induction year teachers into their schools and support them through the induction year as part of an expansive learning environment. An expansive learning environment would appear to be more important than any particular formal course of other CPD provision.

Rather than being in a lottery in terms of which school an induction year teacher is placed and who is their mentor, there needs to be mentor training and awareness raised of the importance of providing an expansive learning environment for all teachers.

Further reading


