

Bliss and Blisters of First Years of Teaching: Panel and Conversation Session Catherine Tang

The focus of the panel is on the early career teachers' experiences with teacher induction and mentoring programs, especially around what practices worked/helped with socialization into the culture of the schools and what challenges you experienced and overcame in your early career teaching.

Introduction

- Catherine from Kingston, currently with LDSB teaching Grade 7 at Calvin Park PS in the LEAP program (integrated arts)
- Graduated 2011 from Faculty of Ed at Queen's, and after about two years as an occasional teacher, became a contract teacher in January 2014

1. What experiences have you, as a new teacher, had with the induction and mentoring in your first years of teaching?

FORMAL NTIP PROGRAM

- annotation that new teachers receive after participating in a number of in-services (orientation and professional development) as well as participation in a mentoring relationship
- Began the formal NTIP program while I was still an occasional teacher, in a long-term position
- sessions at the board office, looking at everything from literacy and numeracy, to differentiation, classroom management and reporting
- Wonderful to get so many free resources, but remember feeling extremely overwhelmed with the discrepancy between what I thought I should be doing, and what it seemed I was doing in the classroom
- Onus was on me to seek out my mentor, but there was very little direction laid out as to how I was to spend my time with her and what we were to accomplish together. My mentor and I were at different schools, teaching completely different things, didn't end up meeting in first year
- Returned from mat in Feb 2016 to a new school and a new grade - Kindergarten. During this time, with the help of my administrator, built a wonderful mentoring relationship with a fellow Kindergarten teacher at another school.
- Invaluable mentoring experience for me, including observing my mentor in her classroom, lots of questions and scenarios, and her visiting my classroom with her ECE
- almost all of what we discussed was at the classroom or curricular level, and we didn't spend much time considering my long-term vision for teaching or further professional growth.

INFORMAL MENTORS

- both online and in-person
- instrumental in keeping me afloat these last few years

2. What were some of the challenges that you had to overcome as a new teacher?

- Though I had quite a lot of practice teaching and grew up being exposed to the teaching profession, there were still a number of realities about the teaching profession that I wasn't prepared for

LACK OF EXPERIENCE

- Struggling with classroom management, often the source of a lot of anxiety
- Protocols and small school culture things that aren't explicitly addressed; often no one explains those things to you, so you're left to figure them out on your own (e.g. field trip forms; bathroom protocol at recess; school resources)
- first parent-teacher meeting nerves

- having to build up your classroom and resources
- Lots of books to read, lots of head knowledge, but there really is no substitute for the responsibility of being the teacher your own classroom
- Spent a *long* time on lesson plans and unit plans and long range plans, but I held onto them so much more tightly than I should have, which led to me missing many of those teachable moments and potential heart connections with my students

MENTAL STRENGTH

- On paper I had the qualifications I needed, but I didn't have the mental hardiness and realism that's necessary to survive and thrive as a new teacher
- Having come through the ConEd program, I think I had had a lot of time to think about what my classroom might be like, and when I held those two different realities side by side, it was really difficult to realize the discrepancies
- Struggled with mental health and anxiety during my very first LTO
- When I arrived at my current school, I had already built relationships with the staff as I had supply taught there often, and I was immediately embraced by the staff. I also had a really strong and encouraging program team. This went a really long way to keeping me mentally fit

REDUNDANCY AND UNCERTAINTY

- It's very exciting when you get a sliver of contract. However, these feelings of excitement are dampened by the unknown of possibly being declared redundant or surplus.
- Discourages you from "setting up shop" or investing in resources and manipulatives because you know you likely won't be teaching the same grade or subject next year.
- daily supply teacher > LTO list > LTO > piece of contract > more contract > retaining contract
- It's not an environment that's conducive to strategic thinking and to continued development, because you don't feel settled or rooted
- New teachers often suffer from a lack of forward thinking and planning, because with the way our career trajectories generally go, you are only ever looking at the next step rather than thinking long term about where you hope to be

WORK/LIFE BALANCE

- Prior to motherhood, no problem staying until 5:30 or 6:00
- very easy for teaching to become your life, but looking back, it was so important for me to have interests and hobbies that I explored outside of work, because that made me a teacher with richer experiences that I could then share with my students.

3. Based on your experiences, what supports do you think are instrumental for early career teachers for a successful socialization in schools?

AUTHENTIC, ONGOING PEER SUPPORT

- at all points in a person's career, one of the most important supports is having fellow teachers who can encourage you, assist you, and also challenge you to become a better teacher
- When possible, it is extremely helpful to have a supportive grade partner - someone whose teaching area is similar to yours, who you can bounce ideas off of, and who can help keep you grounded
- online connections - whenever I'm looking for a resource or if I'm stuck, I don't hesitate to send a tweet out or to reach out specifically to individuals around the world that I know have expertise in a particular area. Having people beyond my own school board and geographic region helps me to broaden my scope and it reminds me that there are people all over the world doing this same thing that I'm doing.
- Support shouldn't be something that is provided just in the first few weeks of someone starting at a new school - there needs to be ongoing conversation to make sure that the new teacher feels comfortable and empowered to contribute to the school community

PROPER ORIENTATION AT BOTH THE SCHOOL AND BOARD LEVEL

- Orientations are often conducted by people whose job it is to orient. Sometimes those individuals are so familiar with the process and with the culture, that it can either be alienating or very dry for the person participating in the orientation
- I'm someone who learns by doing (often by doing something multiple times), so I am always thankful for those who have the patience to walk with me at my own pace, to answer my many questions, and to point me in the right direction.

AGENCY AND OPPORTUNITY TO GROW

- Ties in with what was said last night at the keynote about self-efficacy
- The teaching experiences that I've had in the past 5 years that have been most successful are the ones in which I feel like I am contributing positively to my school community or board, that my voice is heard.
- It is crucial to have opportunities to get involved - I am very interested in technology and innovative teaching and learning > I am thankful that I was given many chances to exercise and develop these interests within the school board and beyond, by going to conferences, organizing conferences, sitting on steering committees, being part of pilots
- Also important to have administrators who trust you enough to give you agency within the school - who empower you to exercise your professional judgment and to do what you see as best for your students without the red tape

CAREER PLANNING

- importance of goal setting and of working towards a vision
- new teachers need some mechanism to get us thinking about the long view, about where we hope to be next year, in 5 years, in 10 years. This should be something that gets us excited, and that helps us to persevere through what might be a very challenging early career
- Opportunities to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses, areas for opportunities
- We have annual learning plans, but I find these often get lost in the shuffle when it's just a document that we need to submit. I think this is where a mentor can really play an important role

Keep in mind that this is simply what I've experienced, and that there are countless others who may need or desire different things for them to have a successful, thriving career as a teacher. Coming to this forum has ignited a curiosity in me for the nuts and bolts of teacher induction and mentoring, and I really hope to continue in the conversation even after this forum is over.