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A pracademic's exploration of mentoring, coaching and induction in the Western Québec School Board

Abstract:

Mentoring, and coaching have been gaining traction across Canadian school districts as powerful approaches to support teacher professional learning, especially for early career teachers. The powerful potential of professional collaboration has been well documented in the international research literature (Campbell et al, 2017; Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2017; Knight, 2007; Kutsyuruba et al, 2017; Moir & Bloom, 2003; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012). However, when it comes to mentoring and coaching, not only do jurisdictions vary in terms of programs, practices and policies, but the research literature has raised concerns regarding voluntary rather than mandated mentoring and coaching, ‘contrived collegiality’ (Hargreaves, 1994), ‘judgementoring’ (Hobson, 2013), ‘performativity’ (Ball, 2003; Day & Gu, 2010; Lofthouse, 2016) and the challenges of ‘scaling up’ effective innovations. The aim of this paper is to share the experience of one English school board in Western Québec, Canada (WQSB) that introduced a Mentoring and Coaching Fellowship as part of their mandatory Teacher Induction Program (TIP) in 2009. After nearly a decade, the TIP continues to evolve, but important lessons have been learned in the district. By highlighting the WQSB’s successes and tensions, this paper aims to contribute to the international CollectivEd discussion on teachers learning together through mentoring, coaching and professional dialogue in an effort to continue to learn with and from each other.

A pracademic's exploration of mentoring, coaching and induction in the Western Québec School Board

Induction, mentoring, and coaching have been gaining traction across Canadian school districts as powerful approaches to support teacher professional learning, especially for early career teachers. As highlighted in Learning Forward's recent publication on *the state of educators' professional learning in Canada* (Campbell et al, 2017), induction and mentoring for new teachers are an important form of "practical and relevant professional learning with positive reciprocal benefits for mentors and mentees, including practical, professional, and emotional support" (p.70). The potential positive impact of induction, mentoring, and coaching has been well documented in the international research literature (Campbell & van Nieuwerburgh, 2018; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Fletcher & Mullen, 2012; Knight, 2007; Moir & Bloom, 2003; van Nieuwerburgh, 2012) as well as in the pages of previous CollectivEd issues. In many ways, it feels as if Canada is a little late in joining the conversation. Certainly, mentoring and induction programs for early career teachers have long been in place informally in many Canadian districts; however, because education is a provincial/territorial responsibility, significant variations exist between jurisdictions when it comes to programs and policies (Kutsyuruba et al, 2017). The aim of this paper is to share the experience of one English school board in Western Québec engaged in systemic induction, mentoring, and coaching. With few opportunities to exchange key learning and best practices on a national let alone an international level, I hope to contribute to the CollectivED discussion by sharing my district's lived experience and highlighting some of the tensions surfacing from my doctoral research.

The Canadian Context

As noted above, provisions to support new and beginning teachers look very different across Canada; they can be formal or informal and can include mentoring support, induction support or a combination of both. Evidence from a recent multi-year pan-Canadian research project (Kutsyuruba et al, 2016; Kutsyuruba et al, 2017) showed that the composition of programs vary even within each provision type and are generally found at four different levels: 1) provincially mandated/ministry level support; 2) provincial teacher association/federation/union level support; 3) hybrid programs (e.g. universities and teacher associations working collaboratively); and, 4) decentralized programming (school district level support). The Western Québec School Board (WQSB)'s Teacher Induction Program (TIP) falls under this fourth category and not only looks very different to programs in other provinces/territories, but also differs from the approaches used in school districts across Québec. The diversity of provisions was particularly evident at the 2016 Teacher Induction and Mentoring Forum. A first of its kind, the Forum was hosted by Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario and provided an engaging and meaningful space for Canadian professionals and academics deeply engaged in the work of supporting early career teachers to come together to share their best thinking and successful practice. Seventy representatives from eight provinces attended the Forum and many contributed chapters to Benjamin Kutsyuruba and Keith Walker's (2017) edited volume "The Bliss and Blisters of Early Career Teaching: A Pan-Canadian Perspective." As a participant and presenter, I found it particularly interesting that in both the Forum and the resulting edited volume the term 'coaching' is rarely referenced in relation to early career teacher support in Canada, except as an approach to be used within a mentoring framework. Of note, coaching is also only referred to as *peer coaching* around the observation of teaching in *the state*

of educators' professional learning in Canada (Campbell et al, 2017). In the Western Québec School Board (WQSB), however, both mentoring and coaching are viewed as distinct yet interconnected components critical for an effective teacher induction program. The following visual is used across the district to help clarify how the two terms are understood (for more information, see my short SSHRC storytelling [video](#)). Unpacking the terminology for the district context has been an important part of the WQSB's TIP journey.

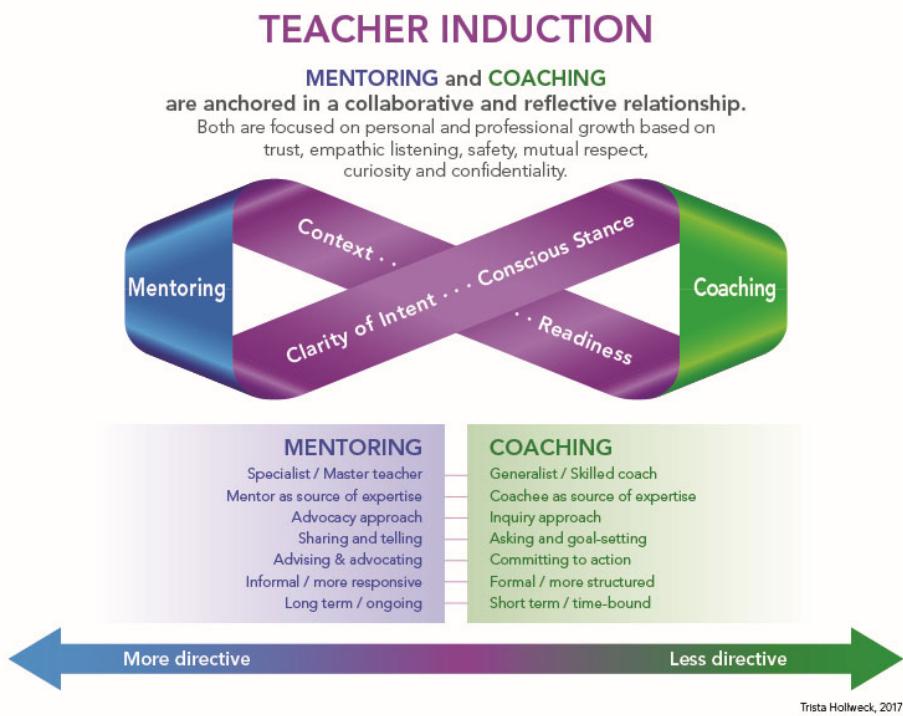


Figure 1: Defining mentoring and coaching within teacher induction (Hollweck, 2017)

Positionality

Before I outline the Teacher Induction Program (TIP) in more detail, it is important to situate myself in this story. I have been a WQSB co-developer and consultant for the TIP since 2009, until I embarked on my PhD journey. Naturally, my doctoral research project is a qualitative case study examining induction, coaching and mentoring in the WQSB. As someone who straddles the world of academia as a scholar and the pragmatic world of practice as a district consultant, I consider myself a 'dual citizen' (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007), both an outsider *and* an insider in terms of positionality- the notion that personal values, views, and location in time and space influence how one understands the world (Warf, 2010). Seeing these positions along a continuum rather than as dichotomous, I agree with Dwyer & Buckle (2009) that in qualitative research "the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience" (p.59). Thanks to the CollectivED community (@debsnet & @stringer_andrea, specifically) I also consider myself a 'pracademic,' which has helped me better understand my research process and methodological choices. As defined by Walker (2010), pracademics are "boundary spanners who live in the **thinking** world of observing, reflection, questioning, criticism and seeking clarity while also living in the **action**

world of pragmatic practice, doing, experiencing, and coping” (p.2). I have found Susskind’s (2013) “the circle of Engagement’ model useful (see Figure 2) to help me link the worlds of academia and practice and am developing this idea further in my dissertation.

The Circle of Engagement

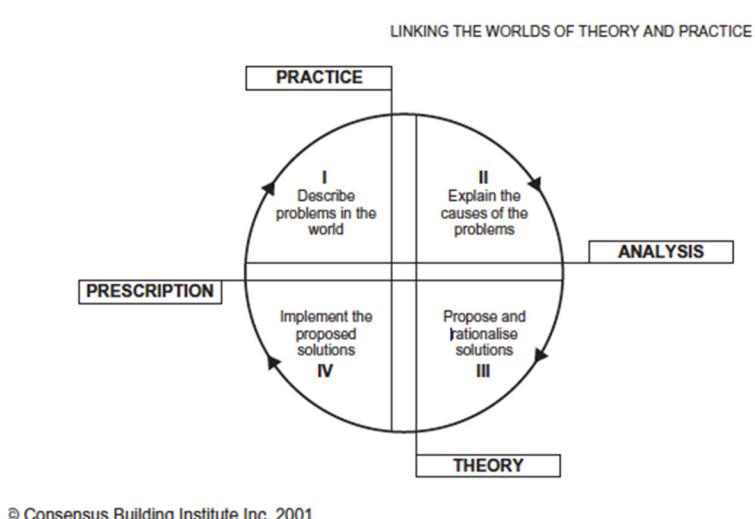


Figure 2: Susskind (2013)'s Circle of Engagement

Like many educators, I am curious about what underpins my professional practice and my research questions emerge directly from problems of practice. I am motivated by examining theoretical frameworks that will help me better understand problematic situations and to propose solutions that I can then implement in my work context and reflect upon. Essentially, I want my research project to be useful and to make a difference in the lives of students and educators I learn with and support.

WQSB's Teacher Induction Program

Since 2009, the Western Québec School Board has been engaged in the design and implementation of a mandatory Teacher Induction Program (TIP) for all teachers new to the district, regardless of teaching experience. Induction in this context is conceived as a ‘helping mechanism’ (Weva, 1999, p.194), and has three clear aims to: 1) retain effective teachers new to the district; 2) provide leadership and professional growth opportunities for veteran staff; and 3) improve teaching and learning across the district. With no clear provincial directions to guide its design, the TIP was developed at a grassroots level by a volunteer committee of teachers, administrators and district personnel. In my dissertation I have conceptualized TIP as a patchwork quilt. Whereas the TIP’s quilt back is framed by the district’s context and provincial guidelines, its quilt top stitches together the numerous influences, initiatives, commitments, district partners and key stakeholders that form the many fabric blocks. Each year, the TIP pattern evolves and changes in response to key stakeholder feedback (in particular, administrators, participants, and the local union) and the current quilt design looks very different from the 2009 version.

The local Context

With no ‘one-size fits all’ model to teacher professional learning, teacher induction, mentoring, coaching and evaluation must be understood and interpreted within the cultural, social, educational, philosophical and political conditions in which they occur (Fransson, 2010; Wang et al., 2008). The WQSB is a small English School Board and is a member of Québec’s English School Network, which has a much smaller student population (around 11%) than its French-language counterpart (ABEE, 2009). Although the WQSB is small in numbers (25 schools, 7200 students, 520 teachers, 30 administrators), it has the largest geographic catchment in Québec, roughly the size of Ireland. The WQSB is comprised of both urban and rural schools and has a unique composition of student population in terms of language and culture, especially in its northern schools. The distance between the schools and the school board is significant (up to a seven-hour drive) which makes professional development and inter-school collaborative work challenging. Historically, the district has struggled to attract, hire and retain teachers, especially French teachers and teachers willing to work in its rural and northern schools. Although the WQSB draws many Ontario trained teachers, its lower pay-scale, distinct curriculum documents and unique political and cultural context are significant factors influencing teacher retention.

In order to support its *Teaching Fellows* (all teachers new to the district regardless of experience) as well as to help retain *highly effective* teachers in all of its schools, the WQSB developed a comprehensive and high-stakes (job vs. no job) two-year induction program. There are three key pillars in the TIP: Professional Learning (PL), a Mentoring and Coaching Fellowship (MCF), and Teacher Evaluation. Under the PL pillar, the district offers up to 6 days of optional district-led professional development sessions each induction year. In the MCF, every Teaching Fellow is paired in their first year with an administrator-selected non-evaluative Mentor-Coach to collaborate, practice and reflect on new learning in their own environment as a fellowship (Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Mentor-Coaches are ideally a veteran ‘master’ teacher from the same school, same grade and same subject area. However, with a fifth of the WQSB’s teachers currently in the TIP, distance Mentor-Coaches are often engaged and teaching expertise varies. Each Fellowship is provided with two ‘Fellowship Days’ that can be used at their discretion, often to observe teachers in different classes and/or schools. Finally, the most controversial pillar of the TIP remains its high-stakes evaluation component. In order to gain a position on the district’s ‘priority of employment’ list which leads to a tenured position, a Teaching Fellow must successfully complete two yearly summative evaluations. These evaluations are based on the Ministry of Québec’s (MEQ, 2001) *12 Professional Competencies for Teachers*. Each year, the administrator makes a final professional judgement each year based on data from at least two formal classroom observations, as well as, the Teaching Fellow’s *Reflective Record*. One aspect that remains hotly debated in the district is the TIP team members’ participation in one of these formal observations in the second year. The *Reflective Record* (previously called a Professional Growth Portfolio) includes termly goal-setting, evidence of professional growth and documented reflection. In their first year, the Teaching Fellow works collaboratively with their Mentor-Coach and administrator to develop a meaningful Reflective Record.

Tensions

With more than half of its teachers having participated in the TIP since 2009, it is clear that the program plays a significant role in the district. Generally, feedback remains quite positive around the TIP, especially regarding the Mentoring and Coaching Fellowship pillar. However,

as my doctoral research shows, there are many issues that are still being grappled with at the district level. Three of these tensions will be discussed below.

1. Program requirements and terminology

Although the WQSB has made an effort to streamline the TIP requirements, confusion still exists around evaluation expectations for Teaching Fellows, especially around the Reflective Record. In spite of the significant changes to the program over the years, a perception remains in the district that a Teaching Fellow's final summative evaluation is based on a 20-minute formal observation conducted by the TIP team and a 'showcase' portfolio. Always intended to reflect on-going, meaningful and messy professional growth, the Professional Growth Portfolio (PGP) was never able to shake its negative reputation as a "make-work project" or another "hoop to jump through". Whether the re-branded 2018 Reflective Record is able to fare any better still has to be determined.

Another tension in the district is around the institutionalization of terminology. Specifically, many WQSB educators still refer to the TIP as the 'New Teacher Program'. The removal of the word 'new' was deliberately made to respect the variety of experience each Teaching Fellow brings to the district and to emphasize the reciprocal learning that can happen within the Mentoring and Coaching Fellowship. District leaders felt that regardless of years teaching, all teachers new to the district could benefit from working with a colleague to focus on their professional practice and hoped the experience would help develop a coaching culture beyond induction years. As such, participation in the TIP was made mandatory for all Teaching Fellows, with the focus primarily on coaching for more experienced teachers. As my research shows, tensions have surfaced in the district around this managerial approach to professional development and the influence of "contrived congeniality" (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Finally, another significant challenge in the district has been unpacking the terminology and clarifying that a Mentor-Coach toggles between both mentoring and coaching depending on the relationship, context, and fellowship needs. Some findings from my research show that it usually takes around three years for Mentor-Coaches to be comfortable in this fluid role, that some Mentor-Coaches prefer to only work in one approach (i.e. they prefer to be a coach rather than a mentor) and ultimately, most are comfortable with mentoring, but need more training to move into the coach role.

2. Mentor-Coach selection and training

Administrators play a large role in any systemic change initiative (Fullan, 2012), especially teacher induction. In the WQSB, administrator buy-in around the TIP was initially challenging (Kharyati, 2017). As such, the WQSB deliberately chose to include the administrator in the TIP process by having them responsible for selecting Mentor-Coaches and making the Mentoring and Coaching Fellowships. Over the years, although support has notably increased, my research shows discrepancies still exist around the level of administrator involvement in the induction process, especially when it comes to regular meetings focused on the Reflective Record, and providing timely formative feedback on classroom practice. Tensions also remain around Mentor-Coach selection, specifically who is selected (and who isn't), the motivations behind some selections (such as using the process to push forward certain initiatives), and the overall effectiveness of certain Mentor-Coaches.

3. The role of evaluation in teacher induction

As mentioned above, the role of evaluation in the TIP remains contentious. From a system-level perspective, providing a clear standard of what ‘high quality teaching’ looks like in the WQSB has been important for building a common understanding across the district. In fact, administrators report feeling very supported by the TIP process, which has helped them with the evaluation process and making personnel decisions. However, these locally developed standards indubitably also influence and frame the mentoring and coaching process since the ultimate goal of most Teaching Fellows is to gain tenure in the district. As such, my research shows questions have been raised around the role of ‘performativity’ (Ball, 2003; Day & Gu, 2010; Lofthouse, 2016), whether there is a space for educator difference and/or challenge in the WQSB, and how (if any) Mentor-Coaches contribute to the development of a ‘cookie cutter approach’ to teacher development in the district.

Like any systemic change initiative, the TIP has many tensions that still need to be addressed at the district level. My positionality and identity as a pracademic has been useful for the research process and as a means to implement and reflect on ‘proposed solutions’ (Susskind, 2013). By sharing our district’s lived experience around mentoring, coaching, and induction, I hope to bring a Canadian perspective to the CollectivED conversation. I expect our prizes and imperfections will be transferable to other contexts and I look forward to the ongoing discussion of our CollectivED community as we continue to “*support professionals and researchers in a shared endeavour of enabling professional practice and learning which has integrity and the potential to be transformative.*”

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