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

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The support structure and culture of 11 urban primary schools was investigated.
- Schools where teachers evaluated support positively or negatively were contrasted.
- Consistency and conscientiousness of performance of support activities differed.
- Cultural rather than structural characteristics distinguished the schools.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to gain insight into ways to enhance teacher retention. Principals and beginning teachers from 11 Dutch urban primary schools were interviewed about their schools' support structure and culture. Schools where teachers judged about the support they received positively and schools where teachers evaluated this support negatively were contrasted. The study revealed that all schools undertook support activities, such as offering beginning teachers a buddy or coach. However, at schools where teachers judged the support positively, these activities were performed more consistently and conscientiously than at the other schools. Furthermore, cultural rather than structural characteristics distinguished the schools.

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1. Introduction

For a variety of reasons, including a high workload and inadequate guidance and support, a great number of beginning teachers leave the teaching profession after only a few years of teaching (Buchanan, 2010; Jonge & Muijnck, 2002). The high turnover of novice teachers has resulted in a shortage of good qualified teachers in several countries (Ingersoll, 2003; Moon, 2007). Especially in urban areas, the outflow of beginners is relatively high (Berndsen, Gemmeke, Hello, & De Weerd, 2004; Ingersoll, 2003). Teaching in an urban environment appeared to be challenging for teachers because they are confronted with complex issues such as cultural diversity and violence (Groulx, 2001; Smith & Smith, 2006). This situation can lead to an outflow of teachers from these schools or from education in general.

Research has shown that guidance in the workplace itself ('induction') may contribute to the retention of beginning teachers (Gilles, Davis, & MacGlamery, 2009). Both the support structure and the support culture of a school contribute to effective induction practices and thus to the retention of beginning teachers (Assunção Flores, 2004; Davis & Higdon, 2008; Devos, Dupriez, & Paquay, 2012; Howe, 2006; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wang & Odell, 2002; Weiss, 1999). Support structure refers to the support activities

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that schools undertake to assist their beginning teachers, such as guidance from a coach, opportunities to gradually grow into the teaching profession and the provision of an introductory handbook. Support culture refers to the extent to which the culture of a school is supportive of beginning teachers, such as whether novices can easily approach colleagues for advice.

Research indicates that it is important for support practices to focus on the problems that teachers experience in the specific context in which they operate (Siwatu, 2011; Tamir, 2010; Veen, Zwart, & Meirink, 2012). Therefore, it can be expected that urban schools provide specific forms of support. However, little is known about how support practices for novice teachers are actually organised at urban schools and whether this organisation matches the specific problems of beginning urban teachers (Jurasaite-Harbison & Rex, 2010; Wang, Odell, & Schwille, 2008). Therefore, this study investigated the support structure and support culture of 11 urban primary schools. By contrasting schools where teachers judged the support they received positively and schools where teachers evaluated this support negatively, we aimed to identify valuable elements in the support structure and culture of urban schools.

1.1. Teaching in urban environments

1.1.1. The challenges for beginning urban teachers

Research has shown that newly qualified teachers are more likely to leave urban schools compared with non-urban schools (Freedman & Appleman, 2009; Ingersoll, 2003). A major cause of the early outflow of novice teachers from urban schools is that teaching in an urban context is challenging for teachers. Novice teachers in urban contexts must address issues that apply to all beginners, such as classroom discipline and a high workload (Abbott, Moran, & Clarke, 2009; Veenman, 1984). In addition, beginning urban teachers must address the typical challenges of an urban context.

An important challenge is that urban teachers must address cultural diversity (Erskine-Cullen & Sinclair, 1996; Groulx, 2001). Urban teachers are confronted with children and parents from different cultures, backgrounds, and values and who speak languages other than the teacher's native language (Diffily & Perkins, 2002; Zeichner, 2003). According to Zeichner (2003), this increasing gap between the backgrounds of the students and the teachers makes it challenging to teach at urban schools.

Dealing with the school environment appears to be a major challenge for urban teachers. Urban teachers experience difficulties with highly educated parents or parents with non-native backgrounds (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Roosenboom, & Volman, 2014). Additionally, teachers in urban schools may feel anxiety about the students' use of violence at school and fear of the neighbourhoods in which they work (Smith & Smith, 2006).

Furthermore, urban teachers must manage relatively large *differences* between children in terms of character, behaviour, norms and values, and attitudes together with differences in students' cognitive and language development (Kooy, 2006; Swanson Gehrke, 2005). A major challenge appears to be second-language learners, which (is believed to be more common in urban schools because a higher percentage of families from ethnic minorities live in cities (Kooy, 2006)).

1.1.2. The urban educational context in the Netherlands

The largest cities of the Netherlands can be considered as global cities (as many large cities in other countries), in which three types of urban schools can be found: schools that primarily educate children with a high socioeconomic status and a native background, schools that primarily educate children from a lower socioeconomic status and sometimes also from culturally diverse backgrounds, and schools where the student population is a mix of these pupils (Hooge,

2008). Beginning teachers in global cities are thus confronted with different types of student populations. We found that teachers in schools in global cities experience different types of challenges depending on the student population of their school (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Roosenboom, et al., 2014). A major challenge of the teachers from schools with children from high SES was dealing with highly educated parents, whereas teachers from schools with children from low SES and culturally diverse backgrounds primarily perceived challenges related to their diverse student population (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Roosenboom, et al., 2014).

1.1.3. Support needs of beginning urban teachers

Research among newly qualified urban teachers has shown that it is important for novices to receive guidance from an experienced 'buddy'. Furthermore, it appears to be important for the content of support programmes to focus on daily practice. Research by the Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Roosenboom, et al. (2014) has found that the opportunity to exchange experiences and expertise in a network of teachers contributes to the competence and self-efficacy of starting urban teachers. Good support practices are important for every teacher, but because of the specific challenges faced by beginning teachers in urban environments and the pressure on urban teachers, it is important for these teachers to receive good guidance and support.

1.2. Support structure

The support structure of schools refers to all activities that schools undertake to support their beginning teachers. One support activity that is mentioned in various studies on induction is guidance by an experienced teacher who acts as a coach (also referred to as a mentor, tutor or teacher tutor) (Davis & Higdon, 2008; Howe, 2006; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Wang & Odell, 2002). There are significant differences between schools in the purpose, length, structure, intensity, and expectations of guidance and in the selection and training of the coach (Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005). To be effective, the guidance of a coach or mentor should meet several requirements, such as a relationship of trust between the mentor and teacher, sufficient time for coaching, training/education of the coach, and addressing the individual needs of beginning teachers (Gardiner, 2012; Norman & Feiman-Nemser, 2005).

Another support activity that is described in the literature as a promising way to promote teachers' professional development and job motivation is the opportunity to share experiences and expertise in a network of teachers (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Roosenboom, et al., 2014; Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Zijlstra, & Volman, 2014; Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010). Furthermore, opportunities to gradually grow into the teaching practice and to reflect with colleagues on experiences are effective activities that schools can organise to support their novices (Howe, 2006).

1.3. Support culture

A good support structure is not enough; a support culture is necessary for the professional development and job motivation of teachers. Devos et al. (2012) investigated the influence of support culture on teachers' self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as "the teacher's belief in her or his ability to organise and execute the course of actions required to successfully accomplish a specific task in a particular context" (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 233). Research indicates that the role of self-efficacy is not clear: some authors think that teachers with low self-efficacy are less motivated to experiment with pedagogical challenges, whereas other researchers found potential benefits of teacher efficacy doubts for educational reform (Wheatley, 2002).