



Induction and mentoring in early childhood educational organizations: Embracing the complexity of teacher learning in contexts

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The LIMS-EC was found to be reliable and valid.
- Views of leaders/mentors differed quantitatively and qualitatively from others.
- Conceptions of mentoring differed for leaders/mentors versus mentees.
- There was a gap between national expectations and available resources.

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study looked at perceptions of induction and mentoring among New Zealand early childhood educators. Specifically, 213 respondents drawn from five regions representing urban, rural and differing socioeconomic levels, school organizations, and professional roles completed a 19-item psychometrically sound survey. There were significant differences in responses for leaders/mentors in contrast to mentees or teaching staff. Based on quantitative outcomes, two focus groups of school leaders/mentors and mentees were convened. Qualitative analysis of the transcripts revealed several important themes that served to amplify or extended the survey results. Implications of the quantitative and qualitative results are overviewed.

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“Induction and mentoring” has been the focus of empirical research within teacher education for well over a quarter of a century (Wang, Odell, & Schwillie, 2008), and is generally understood to be the process whereby novice or beginning teachers are brought into the community of practice and afforded the knowledge and skills required to succeed in the profession. To date, the extant research has established the positive association between induction and mentoring programs and the retention, success, and wellbeing of novice teachers (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Richter

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et al., 2011). Moreover, this association has been found to be particularly strong when new teachers are situated in organizations with multi-year, comprehensive induction programs (Britton, Paine, & Raizen, 2003; Glazerman et al., 2010). In essence, comprehensive programs entail supportive leaders (Youngs, 2007), the provision of critical resources, and conducive environments (Moir, Barlin, Gless, & Miles, 2009), and they address the professional relationship between mentor and mentee and their co-construction of the knowledge (Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, & Aspors, 2014).

Despite the plethora of studies, understanding the nature and outcomes of induction and mentoring programs has come largely from investigations focused on particular program elements (e.g., administrative support) or particular segments of the school community (e.g., mentor teachers). Few studies have attempted to explore the comprehensive nature of such programs from the

vantage point of all involved in the process. Further, the majority of such research has examined the perceptions of novice teachers at the elementary and secondary levels. Consequently, relatively little is known about induction and mentoring of early childhood teachers. The current investigation represents an attempt to address those salient gaps in the literature by reporting a mixed methods study of perceptions of induction and mentoring among educators working in early childhood education and care (ECEC) organizations within New Zealand.

1. Study rationale

Beyond the simple paucity of research with a comprehensive, early childhood focus, there are several important justifications for the present study. For one, it would appear that ECEC organizations globally deal with even more complexity than is characteristic of elementary or secondary education (Moss, 2010; Penn, 2007). That complexity reflects (a) a diverse range of private and public organizational systems; (b) their non-compulsory nature; (c) their widely different educational goals or care missions; and (d) questions regarding the need for and nature of qualifications for those working within ECEC organizations (Mitchell, 2015).

Given this complexity and the relatively low level or absence of qualifications in the ECEC sector, when compared with the compulsory school sector (Moss, 2010), it is not surprising that the induction and mentoring of new teachers is a much less familiar concept than in other educational sectors. Where induction does exist, the majority of regions and countries (e.g., Europe, the US, and the UK) link the process with regulatory compliance. Where it is not required for licensing and becomes a cost to the center rather than the state, induction is less likely to occur (Whitebook, Gombay, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis, 2009). The extant literature suggests that internationally the situation with regard to the induction and mentoring of qualified ECEC teachers is in flux (Organization for Economic Co-operation & Development, 2006; Penn, 2007). In effect, while the systematic induction and mentoring support of novice teachers to meet competencies at national levels is erratic, there is professional recognition of its importance (Whitebook et al., 2009). For these reasons, it is critical to examine how well induction and mentoring programs function within such complex educational environments through the eyes of those directly involved in this process.

Further, there is good reason to undertake this exploration of induction and mentoring within New Zealand. For one, ECEC organizations within NZ manifest many of the same complexities just discussed (e.g., non-compulsory nature, organizational diversity), making it possible to generalize outcomes to the international community of practice. For another, there is an exponential increase in children attending ECEC organizations in NZ, adding to the importance of research at this level. Specifically, from 2000 to 2014, enrollments in licensed ECEC services increased steadily from 54% to 63% of the total eligible zero- to four-year-olds in the country (Education Counts, 2015). Thus, by 2014, 126,804 children were enrolled in pre-K facilities and another 31,877 in kindergartens across NZ.

Moreover, NZ early childhood education is highly regarded internationally due to its relatively high percentage of qualified teachers and the existence of a national curriculum, Te Whāriki (Nuttall, 2003; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2006). Specifically, 50% of children attending ECEC centers are currently in centers where over 80% of staff are nationally registered (Mitchell, 2002). Also, while program funding is limited, the expectation that early childhood teachers will be provided with a two-year induction and mentoring program that conforms to national guidelines remains (New Zealand Teachers

Council [NZTC], 2011). Finally, and more pragmatically, NZ is a small country, and one that actively supports national studies. For that reason, it would be possible to secure a nationally representative sample of ECEC professionals. In fact, a prior investigation of induction and mentoring in NZ at elementary and secondary levels, which entailed a nationally representative sample, demonstrated the feasibility of such an undertaking and was a model for the present study (Langdon, Alexander, Ryde, & Baggetta, 2014).

2. Research questions

In light of aforementioned issues, the current study addressed four key questions via a mixed-methods design. Specifically, within the quantitative portion of the study, we first asked: What differences in early childhood educators' perceptions of induction and mentoring can be reliably and validly established using a survey instrument (RQ1)? Based on initial outcomes, we then queried: **In what way, do perceptions** of induction and mentoring differ in accordance with grouping variables (e.g., organization role or socioeconomic status, RQ2)? Based on a prior study of elementary and secondary schools (Langdon et al., 2014) it was found that the overall perceptions of all stakeholders indicated the multidimensional features of induction and mentoring were evident in schools across the nation. However the results of this study also revealed that school leaders held higher perceptions of how well induction and mentoring was implemented in their schools than mentors, mentees and teachers. Thus we hypothesized that differences in perceptions would reliably and validly exist and those perceptions would manifest differently based on grouping variable. Based on a prior study at the elementary and secondary levels (Langdon et al., 2014), we hypothesized that differences in perceptions would reliably and validly exist and those perceptions would manifest differently based on grouping variable.

The design of the current study also allowed us to explore the following question: Do perceptions of induction and mentoring among select respondents remain fairly stable over time (RQ3)? Our expectation was that perceptions should remain relatively constant over the course of a year barring any significant educational event (e.g., academic or organizational restructuring).

Given that research questions in the quantitative portion afforded only a general picture of induction and mentoring within ECEC organizations, we wanted to delve deeper into any response patterns that might emerge using qualitative techniques. Our question for this qualitative portion was: What themes regarding induction and mentoring in ECEC organizations would emerge in the conversations of ECEC leaders/mentors and mentees (RQ4)? To address this question, we conducted focus groups with early childhood educators and framed those conversations around guiding questions suggested by the general survey results. By linking the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study, we hoped to produce both a broad and rich portrait of the induction and mentoring process within the context of early childhood education in NZ—a portrait that could generalize to other ECEC organizations internationally.

3. Quantitative study: a survey of induction and mentoring

3.1. Survey procedures

To secure a representative sample, a stratified random sampling plan was devised. Initially, a database of all New Zealand ECEC centers was secured from the Ministry of Education "Education Counts" website (www.educationcounts.govt.nz). Playcenters, playgroups and home-based care organizations were excluded as they are not teacher-led services. The database was stratified into

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