Many schools experience a high turnover of new teachers, whether they be recent graduates entering the profession or mature teachers re-entering the profession after parenthood, or from other schools or other professions. As Brock and Grady identify, the most crucial time for beginning teachers is in the first few months to the first year in a new job. This is the time when solid relationships develop between the individual and the organisation, when the individual and the organisation have to adapt to each other. The beginning teacher has entered the organisation with many expectations. Similarly the organisation has expectations of the beginning teacher. Presumably the goal is a mutually beneficial relationship, but this doesn't necessarily happen automatically.

It’s in a school’s best interest to make an individual’s induction, or socialisation into the school’s culture, as smooth as possible, not only so they adapt to the school, but also because potentially different beliefs, values and customs can disturb the culture of the school. One way to induct or socialise new members of staff is to introduce a mentoring program. Often it’s the unwritten rules of a school that are more important than those written in the school’s handbook. A beginning teacher can find it very difficult to learn or understand an organisational culture if they are not explicitly informed about it.

As Stephen Robbins explains, socialisation can be broken up into three distinct stages: prearrival, encounter and metamorphosis. The prearrival stage is when a new teacher joins a school. The encounter stage is when the teacher begins to see what the organisation is really like and whether their expectations are met. Finally in metamorphosis, the teacher develops and grows as part of the organisation, developing similar values and beliefs. This third stage can go on for years. Successful socialisation leads to a productive and committed employee; failure to socialise results in dissatisfied staff that ultimately leave.

Organisations need to assist in all stages of socialisation, but the encounter stage is the most crucial for two reasons. Firstly, it’s the most challenging for new teachers. Secondly, beliefs and values formed in these first few months can influence a teacher’s ongoing happiness, productivity and enjoyment of their work.

Studies have found that between 30 and 60 per cent of teachers leave the profession in the first five years. Some reasons include:

- reality shock – it takes two to three years to adapt to the new organisation
- a weak knowledge base – teachers fresh from university have little knowledge about the teaching profession
- isolation – most of the day is spent with students, not adults
- classroom dilemmas – classroom discipline is the most common problem faced by beginning teachers
- lack of resources – older teachers may have more resources than beginning teachers
- feeling overwhelmed, and
- being set up for failure – beginning teachers are often given harder classes to teach with difficult students or larger numbers of students.

Adapting

Within any organisation there are many elements, both tangible and intangible, to which a beginning teacher must adapt. Some individuals will adapt quickly; others eventually adapt; while some never do. Although it could be argued that an organisation should change those aspects of itself that are most of a problem for new staff, ultimately many of those are difficult or impossible or simply not desirable to alter.

A mentoring program, however, can be altered with relative ease to assist the adaptation process. Earl Gomersall and Scott Myers found that effective mentoring programs themselves lead to less anxiety for the new employee, better performance and higher retention rates.

Nearly every other profession except teaching has an induction process for new employees. Most have internships that provide new employees with significant help from experienced colleagues, which helps ease the new employee into the organisation. Why should teaching be any different?

Implementing an effective mentoring program

‘Clearly principals want their beginning teachers to succeed,’ Brock and Grady observe. ‘Most principals begin the year with an orientation and intend to provide ongoing support. Unfortunately, as the year’s momentum builds,’ they note, ‘good intentions are overshadowed by the more immediate administrative concerns. The beginning teachers and their students become victims of neglect.’

While there are many types of mentoring programs that can be implemented, the one I’d like to focus on here involves both experienced and inexperienced teachers.

Introducing a mentoring program is likely to generate some opposition, but this can be minimised by pursuing gradual change. As I explain below, this can be done in three phases.

Phase 1: Selecting a mentoring program

Begin by choosing a suitable person to run and implement your school’s mentoring program. This person needs to have a solid understanding of the benefits of such a program for your school, themselves and your beginning teachers. This person will also need to be able to communicate to your existing staff the role of a mentor and the rationale for a mentoring program.

The school leadership together with the coordinator of the program then select suitable mentors (see box inserted) for next year’s intake of staff. Potential mentors are then approached by the mentoring program administrator, who explains why they have been selected as good role models within...
Choosing suitable mentors

The choice of mentor can determine whether a beginning teacher has a positive or negative experience, and hence whether they stay or leave after the first year – as so many unmentored teachers do. There are many characteristics of effective mentors, including:

- possessing a genuine interest in developing a beginning teacher’s career – to ensure the mentor invests the appropriate time and energy
- able to relate to the beginning teacher’s problems
- able to model behaviour – to encourage the beginning teacher to talk about theories of learning
- work in a similar teaching area, although preferably not the head of department – to pass on expertise
- have good communication and interpersonal skills – as most of the mentor’s work will be done by listening to the beginning teacher
- display leadership qualities – to adapt to the different needs of their beginning teacher and put in place a plan of action that can be followed up and evaluated.

A solid mentoring program embedded in a school provides staffing stability, which in turn maximises continuity in the quality of your school’s programs.

Any new member of staff arrives with a wealth of knowledge to be shared, but they also need to adapt to the culture of their new school. That’s why there’s a need for a mentoring program for teachers at any stage of their career.

Caroline Cotton is the principal of Cotton Educational Consulting and an educator, author and lecturer. She has taught chemistry, biology and science for 10 years in secondary schools throughout Victoria and still lectures and tutors students across Victoria.

LINKS:
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REFERENCES

Phase 2: Mentoring beginning teachers
To ensure a successful program, in what is essentially year two of the program, schools need to allocate specific time to mentoring to ensure both the mentor and beginning teacher form and develop their relationship.

Towards the end of the first year, when it’s likely that teachers and school leaders will be aware of the benefits of the program to both the school and the participating individuals, it’s worth devoting more time to train current mentors and additional mentors.

This more specific training should engage mentors is activities that further help them consider the aims, objectives and possible dangers of their role as well as work on the development of interpersonal skills needed for counselling and challenging appropriately.

Phase 3: Adding new mentors to the program
By year three of the program, teachers who have been mentored and are still relatively new to the school can become involved in the program. The benefit here is that they are very aware of the school culture and of problems and barriers faced by new individuals in it.

Given that mentoring has now involved first-year, second-year and third-year teachers, different mentors could run sessions to develop skills with new mentors. Eventually second-year and third-year mentors should be able to mentor new mentors.

In the long-term, such a mentoring program should incorporate everybody, both new recruits and existing staff within the school. It should also be an ongoing process, since teachers continue to develop over many years and their needs will change as their position within the school changes.

the organisation, with excellent teaching methodology who understand and work well within the constraints and boundaries of the organisation. The mentoring program administrator needs to establish whether the selected individuals are willing to become mentors, explaining the time that is required both to become trained professionally as a mentor and mentor their beginning teacher.

The next stage in this first phase is to begin training the selected mentors. In the initial training, mentors should be made aware of their roles and responsibilities as a mentor of a beginning teacher. Discussions should centre around the definition of effective teaching, leading on to how to promote effective teaching in beginning teachers. As much of what occurs in an organisation on a day-to-day basis is determined by the unwritten rules, the mentoring program administrator needs to facilitate a discussion to determine a way in which the mentors can provide this information to beginning teacher.

Finally the mentoring program administrator needs to discuss how and with what frequency the mentors meetings should be set up with their beginning teachers. Meetings could be weekly or on a needs basis, although the mentoring program administrator should be aware that this second option could lead to problems if beginning teachers avoid approaching their mentor. The mentor needs to demonstrate initiative.

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