

Supporting the Beginning Teacher in Singapore Schools – The Structured Mentoring Programme (SMP)

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Abstract: Research indicates that professional preparation and development of teachers occurs in stages that extend beyond their initial teacher preparation programme. The practice of mentoring beginning teachers emerged in mid-1980s as a professional development strategy. Since then a broad base of studies agrees that beginning teachers need support and mentoring during their transition into professional practice. Literature also suggests that a well-developed mentoring programme can contribute to the quality of teaching profession as well as retaining beginning teachers in the service.

One of the key recommendations of Singapore's Ministry of Education Work Plan Seminar 2005 is to develop our teachers and to provide them more time and space to build their capabilities through development opportunities. For the beginning teachers this recommendation led to the introduction of a systemic framework for school-based mentoring, known as the Structured Mentoring Programme (SMP). The SMP aims to level up the standard of induction and mentoring practices which currently varies across schools. The Structured Mentoring Programme was launched 27 Jan 2006.

This paper will be in two parts. The first part will discuss and focus on mentoring as a strategy for effectively inducting beginning teachers in Singapore schools. The second part will present the Structured Mentoring Programme (SMP) framework, and the mentoring recommendations and practices designed to provide support for the beginning teacher.

Concerns of a Beginning Teacher

Beginning teachers have many concerns when they first enter the profession, regardless of how well prepared they are upon graduation. This professional phase is known as induction and is a transitional period in teacher education, between pre-service preparation and continuing professional development (Huling-Austin et al, 1989). This induction period spans the first three to five years of a teacher's career. During this period beginning teachers are unsure of their skills in classroom management, planning, finding classroom resources, time management, working with coworkers, and dealing with parents (Eisenman & Thornton, 1999).

Teachers go through three stages of concerns during their induction period (Gilles et al, 2001). The first stage - the survival stage - beginning teachers struggle with personal and professional competence. Their apprehensions include ineffective classroom management, student and peer acceptance and doubt of their teaching capabilities. In the next stage (mastery) beginning teachers' concerns are more situational and include skill mastery, teaching methods and classroom resources. The final stage (impact), the concerns shift fully to how they are affecting their students. Gilles et al (2001) in their longitudinal study divided the categories. In

the survival stage, beginning teachers reported concerns with personal and professional survival (33%), discipline and management (30%), school demands and organization (19%) dealing with parents (16%) and other miscellaneous concerns (1.3%). In the mastery category, 24% of teachers were concerned with time management, 21% were concerned with helping the students, 20% were concerned with various aspects of implementing the curriculum, and 10% were concerned with testing procedures, parental involvement, working with other teachers. In the impact category, 73% of teachers were concerned with meeting their students' needs and 8 % were concerned with motivating and connecting with students.

Many beginning teachers are often given the same responsibility as veteran teachers with many years of experience. Moreover, beginning teachers are often assigned the most challenging students with little or no support. It is also quite common for beginning teachers to be assigned to a subject area that they were not prepared in. In these cases the teachers "lack of pedagogical content knowledge that is, the ability to conceptualize the subject matter as a series of learning events or classroom activities for which a firm grasp of subject matter is a prerequisite" (Shulman, 1988). Many studies of beginning teachers assert that the first few years of teaching are stressful and difficult and fail to provide reflective and thoughtful teacher expertise (Darling-Hammond, 1988; Huling-Austin, 1990)

Jonson (2002) states that first year teachers share the following characteristics:

- A beginning teacher's job description is essentially the same as the teacher down the hall who has five, ten or fifteen years of experience.
- Because teachers often get the most difficult to teach students and other "hand-me-downs" of the system: textbooks, desks, and schedules.
- Teaching is something that has to be experienced in order to be clearly understood. Sitting in a student's desk for 16 years does not give one a true picture of what teaching is really like.
- Student teaching experiences, in general, are not extensive enough to provide teachers with the full breadth of experiences necessary to be a master teacher. (p32).

Teacher Mentoring

In recent years, educators have come to recognize the vital role played by "mentoring" in ensuring that beginning teachers embark on a successful teaching career (David, 2000; Danielson, 1999; Breeding & Whitworth, 1999). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) recommends that the initial one to two years of teaching be designed like a medical residency programme, with a new teacher supported by a veteran teacher. According to Lawson (1992), "The provision of experienced teachers as mentors for new teachers in some programs has stemmed from recognition of the need for personal and social support in the school "(p.166). Huling-Austin et al (1989) suggest, "on-the-job nurture and support can accelerate success and effectiveness as well as prevent some beginners from giving up and dropping out" (p.5).

The term mentor has its origin in Homer's poem "The Odyssey". Before Odysseus goes to war, he entrusts an old and wise man named "Mentor" to educate and nurture his son. Thus the term "mentoring", which is defined as an emotional relationship between a more experienced person and less experienced in which the experienced helps the less experienced in his/her

growth and development (Sikula, 2002). Kay (1990) helps define the meaning of mentor and suggests, 'Mentoring is comprehensive effort directed toward helping a protégé develop the attitudes and behaviors (skills) of self reliance and accountability within a defined environment' (p.27). Huling-Austin (1991) defines a mentor as a facilitator of change, a manager and initiator.

New teachers need support. They need ongoing professional development. They need a sense of belonging, of common cause, and the knowledge that over time they will make a difference not only in the lives of individual children they teach, but in their profession. (Eisenman & Thornton, 1999. p. 2)

As a primary instrument of teacher induction, mentoring programmes provide ongoing assistance to beginning teachers. Mentoring programmes designed to assist beginning teachers are usually designed with the objectives of improving both the professional as well as personal development of beginning teachers.

There are five general objectives of mentoring programmes (Mills, Moore & Keane, 2001; Odell, 1990). They are:

1. To provide continuing assistance to reduce the identified common problems of beginning teachers.
2. To support the development of the knowledge and skills needed by beginners to be successful in their initial teaching position
3. To integrate beginning teachers into the social system of the school, the school district, and community.
4. To increase the positive attitudes of beginning teachers about teaching
5. To increase the retention of good beginning teachers in the profession.

Danielson (1999) describes the elements of a well-conceived mentoring programme:

- The program should be more than a buddy system, in which the mentor is available as a sounding board and a sympathetic ear.
- The program needs to provide more than practical guidance on school policies and procedures.
- The program must include more than generalized support.
- The program should engage beginning teachers in self-assessment, reflection on practice, and formative assessment.

Huling-Austin et al. (1989) believe that mentoring programmes are based on three underlying hypotheses. First, beginning teachers have a lot to learn about putting their content knowledge and theory into practice within the classroom. Second, providing the beginning teachers with support will enhance their effectiveness as teachers. Last, providing the support will help the beginning teacher to improve at a quicker pace and will decrease the number of teachers leaving the profession as a result of the many problems faced during induction. Huling-Austin (1990) defines mentoring programmes as structured programmes intended to provide some systematic and sustained assistance to beginning teachers for at least one year. This sustained assistance of beginning teachers should allow them to become comfortably acclimated and develop their teaching skills.

Mentoring also allows new and experienced teachers to put their collective knowledge base into action in a collaborative setting. Links between theory and practice are formed in a

reciprocal learning relationship between mentor and protégé (Weiss, 1999) and strong evidence suggests that mentoring improves the practice of both as a long term outcome. While mentoring is by no means a substitute for a teacher lacking in content knowledge, it is “best suited to helping new teachers translate their academic knowledge into meaningful instruction” (NEA Foundation for the Improvement of Education, 1999.) Teacher Mentoring programs are now perceived as an effective staff development approach for beginning teachers (Koki, 1997).

Structured Mentoring Programme

One of the key recommendations of Singapore’s Ministry of Education Work Plan Seminar 2005 is to develop our teachers and to provide them more time and space to build their capabilities through development opportunities. For the beginning teachers this recommendation led to the introduction of a systemic framework for school-based mentoring, known as the Structured Mentoring Programme (SMP). The SMP aims to level up the standard of induction and mentoring practices which currently varies across schools. The Structured Mentoring Programme was launched 27 Jan 2006.

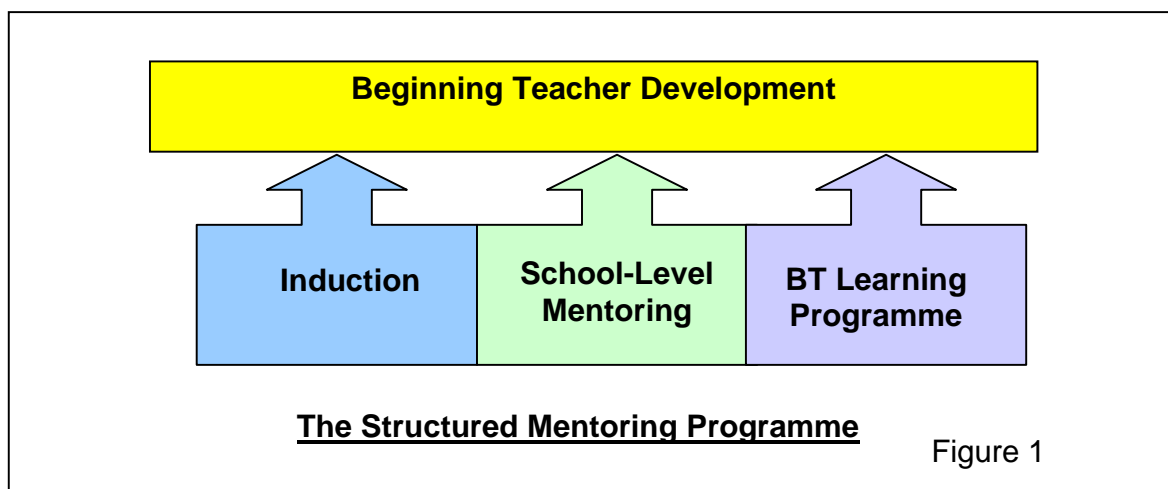
The initial teacher preparation programmes in National Institute of Education (NIE) provide foundational knowledge of subject matter as well as an understanding of the key concepts and principles of teaching and learning. Situated learning occurs during SMP where beginning teachers as “learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.29). Beginning teachers gain knowledge within a community of practice with the support of a more experienced peer.

The first few years are also the all-too-familiar traumatic period for BTs as they are plunged into a myriad of struggles, from learning to do lesson planning, coping with administrative duties, to dealing with parents and working well with colleagues. Statistics show that 20-30 percent of new teachers quit within the first three years as a result of the initial shock of entering the profession (Brewster & Railsback, 2001). In Singapore, before SMP, organized and structured induction and mentoring programmes for BTs are exceptions rather than the rule. Mentoring, when available, is often ad hoc and informal. Few schools have well thought out, systematic mentoring programmes that reveal an appreciation of sound principles in terms of mentor selection, training and supporting of mentors, mentor-BT matching and programme evaluation (Ganser, 2002).

To ensure that every BT is given the consistent support during the tough initial years, the SMP sought to establish mentoring of BTs in *all* schools as the *norm*. To support the implementation of SMP in schools, a start-up package with practical and theoretical tips, administrative resources and consultancy is given to schools by Ministry of Education Headquarters (MOE HQ).

The SMP Framework

The SMP conceptual framework (figure 1) consists of three main dimensions: Induction, School-level Mentoring and BT Core Learning Programmes.



Induction

Although all schools in Singapore already have some existing form of Induction programme for BTs, the SMP aimed to expand it by defining different levels where Induction could take place. In addition to *Induction at School*, *Induction at MOE-HQ* and *Induction at Cluster* are now included as part of general induction for BTs.

Induction at MOE-HQ

An induction programme is organised by MOE for each intake of graduating BTs before they are posted to schools. During this session, experienced educators are invited to speak to BTs about the purpose of teaching, contextualising it to education in the Singapore. BTs are also informed about MOE vision, policies and personnel issues.

Induction at Cluster

Schools in Singapore are clustered in groups of 12-13 depending on their physical proximity and school type. Headed by Superintendents, some clusters, conduct their own induction programmes. The benefits of cluster-based Induction include greater scope of activities, sharing of resources, improve administrative efficiency, and breaking of isolation (Hurworth).

BT Learning Programme

For the dimension on '*BT Learning Programme*', the existing professional development for all BTs is enhanced under the SMP to include core components. There are 5 core modules for BTs to complete during their first two years. These modules are '*Basic Counselling*', '*Relating Well with Parents*', '*Reflective Practice*', '*Classroom Management*' and '*Assessment and Question Setting*'.

School Level Mentoring

The crux of the SMP, however, lies in the centre dimension on '*School-Level Mentoring*'. Effective mentoring is about establishing a learning conversation, building trusting relationships that is based on learning agreement, and strives towards growing self-direction (National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching, UK, 2004-05). To achieve these, school leaders, mentors and BTs must understand the rationale for mentoring. There are three rationales and purposes for mentoring as stated in the SMP:

(i) *Mentoring for Induction*: This is the relationship building part of the mentoring journey. Mentors bond with BTs through active participation and taking ownership of his BT's induction to the school community.

(ii) *Mentoring for Development*: This is a form of specialist coaching in a structured, sustained manner to develop a specific area of the BT's professional practice. Mentors support BTs by clarifying learning goals and modelling expertise in practice. They facilitate access to research, use open-ended questioning to prompt active reflection, and promote BT independence through confidence building.

(iii) *Mentoring for Growth*: This aspect focuses on enabling BTs in their pursuit of personal aspirations, vision and professional growth. Mentors provide guidance, feedback, and when necessary, direction to help BTs chart their action plan for professional development and career progression. Mentors are also information-givers who help BTs analyze issues and situations from multiple perspectives so that thoughtful choices could be made. (National Framework for Mentoring and Coaching, UK, 2004-05)

Mentoring, though at the outset serves to support BTs, also promotes the recognition and development of experienced teachers selected to be mentors. "Formalising the mentor role for experienced teachers creates another niche in the career ladder for teachers and contributes to the professionalism of education." (Koki, 1997) There are three formalised mentor roles defined in the SMP:

(i) *Mentor Coordinator*: This is the leader and driver of the school's mentoring programme, usually assumed by a Head of Department or a Senior Teacher. They prepare mentors for their role by giving physical, social and emotional support, acting like *mentors* for mentors. Mentor Coordinators perform the strategic role of staff developers responsible for the careful planning of a mentoring programme that aims towards the attainment of institutional goals (Janas, 1996).

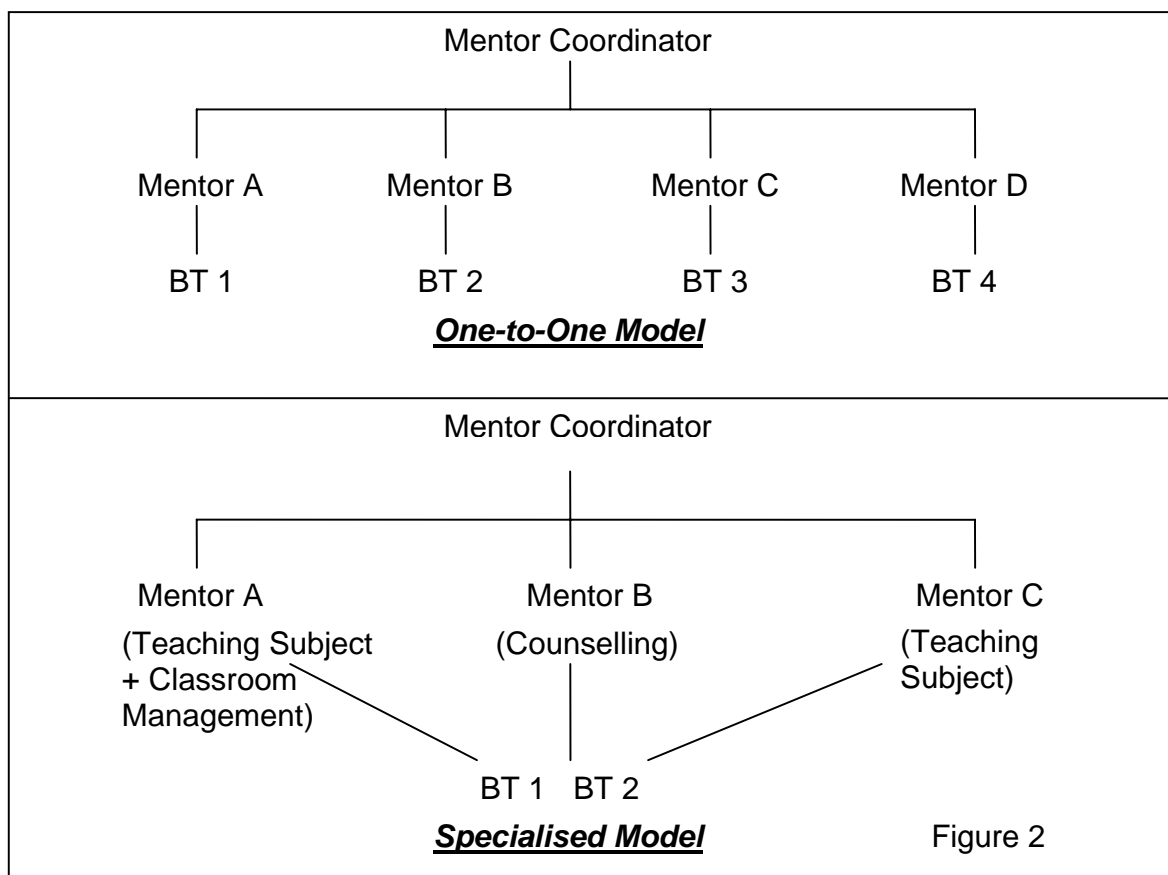
(ii) *Mentor*: Experienced or Senior Teacher assigned to look after the well being, skills development and professional growth of a BT. The good mentor is one who is committed to mentoring, skilled at providing instructional support, possesses good interpersonal skills, communicates hope and optimism, and is a model of continuous learning (Rowley, 1999).

(iii) *Mentor (Specialised)*: This role is like that of a specialist coach to a BT in specific areas of skills development. The Mentor (specialised) is a fellow professional with the knowledge and expertise relevant to the learning goal of the BT. For example, a BT needing help in skills to run CCAs may be attached to a CCA HOD for specialised coaching.

The roles described above can function together in various permutations, resulting in different mentoring structures in school. In general, these structures in schools may be summarised into two main models (figure 2):

(i) *One-to-one Model*: This is a straightforward and commonly used model where a BT is paired to a mentor based on his teaching subject, level or department. This model fosters deeper BT-mentor relationship as time is given for the friendship and trust to be built. This is a relationship driven model.

(ii) *Specialised Model*: In this model, mentors work in *teams* so that their diverse strengths are tapped to mentor a *group* of BTs, each taking care of a different aspect of the BTs' learning needs. This is an efficiency driven model.



Conclusion

The development and growth of beginning teachers through mentoring practices that promote transactional and transformational learning provides an important foundation for the enhancement of professionalism in teaching. Successful mentoring programs require careful planning and management, commitment from multiple levels, and sufficient financial and non-financial resources. An evaluation of the SMP will be conducted later this year to look for improvement trends. This evaluative process will be conducted regularly to provide a feedback loop to “fine tune” and enhance the effectiveness of the SMP.

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