INDUCTION SEMINARS FOR NEWLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS IN ESTONIA: WHAT NQT-S EXPECT AND APPRECIATE?

Liina Lepp, Ingrid Koni, Marge Kimmel, Anne Raam
University of Tartu (ESTONIA)

Abstract

The recruitment and retention of teachers in Estonia have reached crisis point. It is caused by, on the one hand, modest interest in teacher education, and situation, where less than a half of teacher education graduates head to work as a teacher. On the other hand, teachers’ average age is quite high. Therefore, it is important to support Estonian teachers in every possible way. For years, Estonia has been implementing the induction year system in order to support the professional development of newly qualified teachers (NQTs). In addition to the inner school support system, NQTs can participate in induction seminars at the universities. The aim of this study was to analyse the expectations of NQTs to induction seminars and the value of the seminars for NQTs.

This case study involves one induction year seminar group (N=12) from the one teacher training university from Estonia. The discussions from the first induction seminar meeting were audiotaped and NQTs expectations mapped during group work, recorded. In the last meeting, the feedback about the value of the seminars for teachers was gathered in the same manner. In addition, the participants filled the feedback survey. The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The results indicate that novice teacher had the expectation to share their experience and reflect on it, and to have an opportunity to learn from other teachers’ experiences. Participants also had expectations for getting new knowledge, to repeat teacher education studies, assessment, and social interaction. They were keen on new teaching methods and technological opportunities. The value of seminars for newly qualified teachers lies in the opportunity to talk about the issues that are not comfortable, safe, appropriate etc. to speak about with colleagues at the workplace. The possibility of linking theory and practice (scientific reasoning to the questions arose, consulting). Also, participants valued the seminars as an evaluation-free and supportive environment, where they could share their personal problems, and conduct deep and systematic self-analysis.

Keywords: Newly qualified teachers, induction seminars, induction year, case study.

1 INTRODUCTION

The recruitment and retention of teachers in Estonia have reached crisis point. It is caused by, on the one hand, modest interest in teacher education, and situation, where less than 50% of teacher education graduates head to work as a teacher. On the other hand, teachers’ average age is quite high (i.e. 48 years, most teachers belong to the age group between 51–60 years). In addition, only 68% of today teachers see themselves as teachers also in three years [1]. Therefore, behalf of the sustainability of qualitative Estonian educational system, it is important to support teachers in every possible way and especially novice teachers’ professional development.

To support novice teachers, induction year programmes with varying support activities have been developed and launched in many countries, including Estonia. Several previous studies show that induction activities support novice teachers’ adaptation in their first years of teaching (e.g. [2], [3], [4]). On the other hand, researchers have questioned the effectiveness of support systems designed for novice teachers in schools with unsupported professional cultures and have revealed that few schools are prepared to offer novice teachers a comprehensive array of induction support [4], [5]. Therefore, the topic of induction activities and support for novice teachers requires further research.

Since 2004, Estonia has been implementing the induction year system in order to support the professional development of newly qualified teachers (NQTs). As the earlier studies about Estonian induction year have mostly concentrated on monitoring and developing the internal support systems of schools [2], [3], then this small-scale case study and article focuses on developing the opportunities of
support for the NQTs in the context of induction year seminars carried out at universities. The aim of the study was to analyse the expectations of NQTs to induction seminars and the value of the seminars for NQTs. By having an understanding of NQTs’ expectations to seminars and values of the experience, we get ideas about the development of the support systems for newly qualified teachers.

1.1 Theoretical background

The first working years of a newly qualified teacher are known to play a crucial role in the professional development of teachers - first experiences with school and teaching may determine whether the teacher continues as a teacher or quits. Earlier studies have shown that about half of the newly qualified teachers quit teaching during the first five years. The main reasons brought out for deciding to quit include the great workload of teachers and discontent with working conditions (including inadequate resources and support), inadequate preparation for the teacher job, handling the work stress and family-related reasons [4], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10].

Same factors have also been brought out as the influencers of adapting to teaching at the teacher’s post. For example, studies have shown that the professional background and the knowledge gained during the teacher’s studies, also influence the way the teacher adapts to the teaching position [11], [12]. In addition, Rainbird, Fuller, and Munro [13] believe that other important factors for adaption include the earlier social experiences of the novice teachers, cultural background, attitude towards teaching, career and studying. Yet, one of the most important factors for adapting to teaching is believed to be the social work environment surrounding the novice teacher, including relationships with the school leader and other colleagues, organisational culture and the support of the mentor [12].

Although numerous studies show that the social work environment of a newly qualified teacher is an important factor which influences the adaption and successful subsistence (good cooperation between different groups – teachers, trainers, school community, newly qualified teachers) (see e.g. [2], [4]), there can still be found studies which have concluded that instead of supporting newly qualified teachers, the “sink or swim” type of mentality can still be witnessed in schools, which for a teacher might mean that they can only rely on themselves during their first years of teaching [4], [14]. Therefore, it is known that an internal mentoring system in the school is important and supports the novice teacher. Though, it is necessary (considering the diversity of the school environments surrounding newly qualified teachers) that there was a way, in addition to internal mentoring systems, for the teachers to get support outside of the work environment. Stokking and colleagues [15] and Remmik et al. [4] have also pointed out that for the process of supporting novice teachers as well as competent teachers, it is best when universities dealing with teacher training and schools cooperate. It should be tighter and more meaningful during the teacher training process but also from the perspective of the lifelong learning context. Therefore, the support for the newly qualified teacher should be multi-level during the first years – the teacher should be supported systematically and in collaboration with different people and organisations.

1.2 Induction year and induction year seminars in Estonia

To support newly qualified teachers in their professional development, many countries, including Estonia, have created different support systems – programs and practices which, according to Ingersoll and Strong [16] aim “to “bridge” from student of teaching to teacher of students”.

Earlier studies have shown the positive influence of induction programs in terms of subsistence and satisfaction, self-efficacy in general but also employee retention of the NQT [2], [4], [17]. One of the support systems of newly qualified teachers is the induction year. Next, we will briefly introduce the Estonian induction year system and then we will focus on the induction year seminars which were the focus of this study.

Since 2004, Estonia has been implementing the induction year system in order to support the professional development of newly qualified teachers and it aims to support the adjustment of novice teachers to the school as an organization, develop basic competencies in new teachers, and provide support in solving problems. In addition to the inner school support system, NQTs can participate in induction seminars at the universities. Therefore, the success of induction year relies on 1) heads of schools, whose task is to help create a social work environment which supports the professional development of NQTs and assign them mentors; 2) mentors who work together with NQTs, supporting their professional development and socializing at school; 3) induction year centers, created for the universities dealing with teacher training, where the training of mentors and the induction year
seminars of the support systems for NQTs take place and 4) NQTs who ultimately are responsible for their professional development [18].

This article focuses on induction year seminars which are connected to universities that train teachers. Induction year seminars give NQTs an opportunity to discuss the most important questions and problems dealing with the professional development of the teacher, to effectively analyse their teaching practice and the experiences gained during studies. In addition, the participation in the seminars gives NQTs the possibility to get support outside of the school. The induction year programme has been designed in a way that each group has two seminar leaders and the meetings take place five times a year, three of these meetings are scheduled for two days. Each meeting is framed with a general topic, but participants are welcomed to bring their own topics into the discussions (on the board). The size of the groups varies from year to year but usually, there are about 10-20 NQTs. The teachers participating in the induction year seminars are mainly first-year teachers. Yet, teachers who started working as a teacher the previous year (e.g. in the middle of the year) can also participate. The support groups of induction year are not formed according to the subjects being taught (there are mixed groups of teachers of different subjects; separate groups for school and kindergarten teachers). The parties, meeting schedule and the main topics of the meetings of the induction year are shown on Fig. 1.

![Diagram of the induction year program](image_url)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module</th>
<th>Schedule</th>
<th>General topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening seminar</td>
<td>1 day (6 hours), end of September</td>
<td>An introduction to the induction year. Joys and concerns as a teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module I</td>
<td>2 days (12 hours), in October</td>
<td>Forming cooperation skills in an institution. Joys and concerns as a teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module II</td>
<td>2 days (12 hours), in December</td>
<td>Managing a group; relations in a group. Joys and concerns as a teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Module III</td>
<td>2 days (12 hours), in February</td>
<td>Teacher as the designer of the learning environment and the supporter of students development. Joys and concerns as a teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing seminar</td>
<td>1 day (6 hours), end of May</td>
<td>Joys and concerns as a teacher. Summing up the induction year. Self-analysis and self-help for the teacher.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Caption for the figure.*

The aim of this study was to analyse the expectations of newly qualified teachers to induction seminars and the value of the seminars for NQTs. To achieve the aim, following research questions were stated:

1) What are the expectations of newly qualified teachers to induction seminars?
2) What is the value of the seminars for newly qualified teachers?
2 METHODOLOGY

The method employed for finding the answers to the research questions was case study. This case study involves one induction year seminar group (N=12) from one of the Estonian universities involved with teacher training in 2017. Among the participants in this study, there were 11 women and 1 man. The youngest of the NQTs was 23 years old and the oldest was 45. The average age of the teachers was 26 All the teachers worked in different schools. The participants were teachers of science, foreign languages, mathematics, mother tongue and literacy, technology, physical education and elementary. For ten teachers, it was their first working year, two teachers had worked part-time since the year before. The two seminar leaders (moderators) were experienced university lectures, having also working experience from general education.

The data was collected from induction seminar participants in 2017/2018. The discussions from the first meeting (in September) were audiotaped and expectations mapped during group work, recorded. The length of the discussion for mapping the expectations of NQTs was 1.5 hours. During the last meeting (in May), the feedback about the value of the seminars for teachers was gathered in the same manner. Concluding discussion was 45 minutes long. In addition, the participants filled an anonymous electronic feedback survey, in which the NQTs could point out/evaluate-comment in the form of answering open-ended questions about the fulfillment of the proposed expectations of the induction year and the value of the seminars in the context of their own professional development.

The data was analysed using qualitative content analysis. To increase credibility, two of the first authors of the article conducted a co-coding in the amplitude of the whole data. After coding, differences were discussed, and a consent decision was reached. All the participants participated in this study voluntarily.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Newly qualified teachers’ expectations to induction seminars

The results for research question one “What are the expectations of newly qualified teachers to induction seminars?” indicate that novice teachers had the expectation to share their experience and reflect on it, and to have an opportunity to learn from other teachers’ experiences.

*I just want to share my joys and sorrows (Mari).*

*The expectations are still connected to sharing my own experiences and see whether I am alone with my problems (Anni).*

It was explained that it is rather valued that there are teachers of different subjects together in the induction year seminars because then they can hear what other teachers do and they can use their methods for their own work too.

It was also pointed out that although there were many opportunities for reflection during the studies, the self-analysis and reflecting on what others have said in the induction year seminars could also develop the skill of deep reflection. It was also found that since self-analyses are written while working as a teacher, then the discussions conducted in the support groups of the induction year could also support writing those. For example, it was pointed out that it would be good to analyse oneself in the subject fields of professional standards for teachers.

Novice teachers indicated that they like it that the teachers participating in the induction year have more or less the same body of experience (little work experience). It was explained that while teaching in school (especially in smaller countryside schools, where NQTs are not that common), they feel that all the other teachers have so much more experience than they do, thus, talking about their problems is sometimes difficult and it is also embarrassing to do it. Therefore, the participants expressed satisfaction that they could talk in a group where the participants are also teachers who have just started working at the school.

Participants also had expectations for gaining new knowledge, to repeat teacher education studies (e.g. classroom management, including bullying and intervention), assessment, and social interaction.
It would be good if we analysed different situations together, which would help to solve own problems (Kadri).

I would just like to learn new and fascinating methods for teaching (Leena).

It was said that although some aspects, for example, classroom management and evaluation, were discussed during the teacher training years, yet, now several questions have arisen in the real practice and it would be good to now discuss those things again with the help of others and seminar leaders. It was also found that as technology develops fast then new mates and lecturers could introduce technological tools which could be used for teaching. Therefore, they were keen on new teaching methods and technological opportunities.

It can be concluded that the expectations of the teachers who participated in the induction year program are in accordance with what has been stated in earlier studies. For example, Remmik et al. [4] have also found that in addition to the internal support from the school, external support is also necessary – the NQTs who participated in this study found this support from their group members who had similar work experience and comparable problems. Notwithstanding the earlier preparation, NQTs still experience a certain type of didactic uncertainty. Participating in seminars gives NQTs new methodical and technological skills and gives them an opportunity to revise what they learned during teacher training but in the light of their own practice.

3.2 The value of induction seminars for newly qualified teachers

At the end of the induction year (in the final seminar), there was a discussion about what is of value for the NQTs in those seminars. In addition, the participating NQTs also filled an anonymous survey in which they could comment and give their evaluation about the fulfillment of the proposed expectations of the induction year and the value of the seminars in the context of their own professional development.

All the NQTs, without exception, who participated in the induction seminars found that the seminars met all the expectations.

I gained more from the training than I had expected (Anni).

The answer to research question two “What is the value of seminars for newly qualified teachers?” lies in the opportunity to talk about issues that are not comfortable, safe, appropriate etc. to speak about with colleagues at the workplace. Therefore, the value of induction year seminars is in good collaboration with what the newly qualified teachers who participated in the study pointed out as their expectations at the beginning of the induction year. It was also concluded that there were enough opportunities in the induction year seminars to linking theory and practice (scientific reasoning to the questions arose, consulting).

The thing I value the most is that all the members of the group were novice teachers, so we were all like in one boat (in terms of our accumulated experience). We could share our first-time experiences and find solutions to different situations in a free environment (Mary).

It was valued that these were seminars where the seminar leaders guided them to use different active learning methods but also technological tools. Therefore, they felt that by participating in different activities, they got new ideas on how to use methodological means/learning methods in their own studies.

I liked that seminars were carried out in a playful manner and not in this type of dull lecture format (Kathy).

Also, participants valued the seminars as an evaluation-free and supportive environment, where they could share their personal problems, and conduct deep and systematic self-analysis. All the participants pointed out that the most important value of the seminars was the relationship of trust that was between the group members, which enabled them to be honest and not be afraid of critique. It was described that you could sense that everybody wanted to support each other in the seminars.
I felt sense of community. I felt that I had a place where I could freely share my thoughts and experiences. I knew that all the teachers are on the same level. This is not so at school because everybody has different accumulated experience (Mart).

What I valued the most was that I could freely talk about my joys and sorrows and listen whether others have problems (Mary).

It was also pointed out as a value that participating in the induction year seminars helped the participants to see and compare their attitudes in handling different situations and at the same time see how different the working conditions and cases for the teachers might be in different schools. On the one hand, the participants said that this broadened their horizon in the field of education, on the other hand, it clearly showed that there are challenges and situations which are difficult or cause insecurity in the working life of others as well. They described that this knowledge (especially when they heard during meetings that some problems have been solved) gives strength to deal with the problems and that there is hope that there are solutions to those problems. They also gave examples when listening to the problems of other teachers helped NQTs to understand their own experience and set their perspectives in place better (understanding that my situation is actually not too complicated).

What I consider the most valuable is that when I feel that I do bad at work, in reality, there are other teachers with similar problems as well. It is a worthy knowledge because then I feel that I am not alone in it and I can turn to others for help in the search of a suitable solution (Leena).

The participants of the seminars valued the sense of community — they found that it would be good to communicate with the same NQTs in future work life as well and they expressed their willingness to participate in follow-up activities/seminars organized by the university.

I felt like that I would be nice to always have this type of team with whom you meet after every two months and discuss how everyone has been doing (Kadri).

This training could continue next year as well. I got so much support from just spending time together with people like me (Mary).

In conclusion, it can be said that induction seminars were valuable for NQTs and similarly to earlier studies (e.g. [2], [4]), supported their professional development in different aspects. From an individual perspective, NQTs had an opportunity to enrich their methodological toolbox, had a chance to link theory and practice, and, also, elaborate their deep self-analysis skills. From a social perspective, emphasized in a great manner, they had a great experience to talk about their joys and concerns about teaching with other teachers and to belong in a supportive, critique free community. Sub-subsection: Guidelines for Figures and Tables

4 CONCLUSIONS

Supporting newly qualified teachers is a key issue in terms of a quality education system in Estonia and its continuity. Therefore, it is important to support every novice teacher. For years, Estonia has conducted induction year seminars in cooperation with universities as one part of the induction year support system. Yet, the information about what the NQTs themselves expect from the seminars and what they value was incomplete. Because of this, the aim was to analyse the expectations of NQTs to induction seminars and the value of the of the seminars for NQTs.

The results of the small-scale case study showed that the main thing that was expected from the induction year seminars was the opportunity to share their experiences and reflect on situations that come up in their work and reflect on their attitudes. Also, they expected to learn from experiences of other teachers and wanted to refresh the theoretical knowledge they gained from the university (an opportunity to link theory to their own practice).

The participants valued that it was safe to talk about all the different situations that might arise in school environment for a NQT in a small group of novice teachers. It was also valued that all of them are beginners, in the same way, therefore, they felt encouraged to talk about things which they would
not discuss with the experienced colleagues in their own schools. In addition, they valued meeting new novice teachers and they felt that they have created their own supporting community.

The authors of the article are of the opinion that induction year seminars or similar type of regular teacher meetings in a safe environment could continue to be a part of the NQTs support system. It would be necessary to discuss how the university could support the novice teachers in the same seminar groups (in the created safe community) in the future. For the NQTs, it is not only the first year that is crucial, and therefore, the topic is in need of further discussion. In further studies, it would be important to analyse the expectations of all the Estonian NQTs to induction year seminars as well as seminars arranged by the university. In addition to that, there could be a longitudinal study about teachers who have participated in the induction year seminars and those who have not, and compare their satisfaction with work, work stress and the aspect of work retention.

