Let the Right One Out
- on the assessment of teachers' suitability
during their induction programme

Per Gerrevall1

Introduction

Certification of teachers and preschool teachers was introduced in Sweden from 1st of July 2011. The purpose of the reform was to improve the quality of teachers by regulating the standards needed for entrance to the teaching profession (Prop 2010/11:20; for an analysis of the reform – see Dyrdal Solbørkk & Englund, 2014). In the long run the intention is to raise the quality of educational practice in school leading to improved results. Another purpose with these reforms is to increase the status of teaching professions in order to attract more qualified students to teacher education. The verdict from the latest PISA assessments has been used as a rational for a long series of political decisions affecting the Swedish school system. A new teacher education and the certification of teachers and preschool teachers are two recent reforms in this direction.

With the certification of teachers and preschool teachers, the requirements for obtaining a certificate became a diploma of education (lärarexamen), a successfully completed induction programme (probation year), and a positive assessment from a school principal or a head of a preschool concerning the suitability for teaching (Skolverket 2011a). Assessments should be carried out on at least three occasions. The assessment should be made towards a competency profile, which has been developed by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket 2011b). The profile comprises five areas: communication with the student or the child, leadership, collaboration, responsibility for learning and development, and some special regulations for certain school forms. The final decision on the certificate was to be – and is still taken by the Swedish National Agency for Education.

When introduced, the picture emerged that there were severe problems with the implementation of the induction programme. There were problems with providing relevant introductory employments and personal mentors for the newly educated teachers, which in its turn provided obstacles for newly educated teachers to obtain their certificate (e.g. Lindgren & Sirén, 2012). These problems resulted in a memorandum from the government (U2013/7686/S), where new changes were suggested in order to deal with the problems.

So three years later – from 1st of July 2014 – the requirements were changed, and the certificate is now based solely on the diploma of education from the university. The induction programme remains but with the purpose to facilitate the transition from teacher education to professional practice. The assessment of the suitability for teaching is brought back to teacher education. Instead there will be a trial with

---

1 Per Gerrevall, professor of education, Linnéuniversitetet, per.gerrevall@lnu.se
2 I will use “induction programme” as a concept for the employment during a probationary year including its regulated components; a mentor, documentation, and suitability assessment (Skolverket, 2011a).
suitability assessments at the admission to teacher education, and a demand on greater emphasis on assessments of teaching skills in teaching practice.

Educational reforms earlier were based on research or systematic evaluations. Now changes are introduced long before there is a systematic foundation that can guide the decision makers. The political conditions with demands on rapid action tend to lead to decisions based on intuition rather than on scientific rigour.

In my paper I will shed light on the actual problems with the induction programme with the help of results from a web-based survey, which involves a little more than a hundred school principals and preschool heads. The questionnaire deals with their general experiences of the induction programme and specifically of the assessments carried out of the newly educated teachers’ suitability. This will spread knowledge about what can be seen as a “parenthesis” in Swedish school history; when suitability assessment was carried out in schools.

*The project "Let the Right One Out"

In a project funded by the Swedish Research Council titled *LET THE RIGHT ONE OUT!,* teacher education and induction programme as gatekeepers to the teaching profession is studied. In the project, we examine teacher quality as it is expressed in "failure practice", i.e. where there are uncertainties concerning a prospective teacher’s suitability and competence. The focus is on the procedures that occur and the indicators that are used when assessing teacher quality at the two institutions, teacher education and probationary year. (We have due to national changes described above regarding the induction programme, extended the project and also included practicing teachers, whose suitability has been questioned.)

Admission to teacher education has until the 1960:s been a “needle's eye” to teaching professions. Applicants had to undergo specific admission assessments, including essay writing, various tests, presenting short lessons, and interviews. On the basis of these assessments decisions concerning the approval to enter teacher education were based. The praxis with specific admission tests was formally abandoned, when teacher education was incorporated in the Swedish Higher Education system in 1977. Since then and until the 1st of July 2011, the transition from teacher education to teaching profession has been guarded by the examination system in teacher education (Franke, 2012).

During a short period – three years – the gate to the teaching profession consisted of the diploma of education, a successfully completed induction programme, and a positive assessment concerning the suitability for teaching from a school principal or a head of a preschool. And this is the context in focus for the present study.

Suitability is a complex concept. It can refer to qualities that show that you are most suitable for becoming a teacher. The admission tests in Finland, for instance, have the purpose to identify those among a huge number of applicants, who seem to be best qualified – or most suitable – for being admitted to teacher education and thus becoming a teacher. Suitable can also refer to a minimum requirement, that you are considered not unsuitable. It is the latter meaning that pervades the documents and guidelines that have been produced by the Swedish authorities. The purpose with the assessments is to identify those who are considered unsuitable for teaching.
The research context

Induction programmes

A teacher’s carrier can be divided into different phases. The first one consists of teacher education, which ends up with a diploma in education. The second stage consists of the first years in the reality of being a teacher in school. This stage normally is called the induction phase. After passing the induction phase, the teacher undergoes continuing professional development as a teacher. Some research relevant for the first two phases will be presented here.

Goodwin & Oyler (2008) writes, that the problem concerning failing during teacher education is a largely unstudied area. Their studies show that teacher educators mean that deficiencies in students' academic and practical knowledge are relatively easy to spot, but that they are troublesome to handle. Laws introduced in order to promote equal rights and to combat discrimination (eg. SFS 2001: 1286) make failing practice a dilemma for the actors involved to handle. For instance teachers’ language proficiency has become a complex area to assess in our multicultural society (Zaremba, 2012).

Decisions on possible separation become protracted processes that are perceived to take a lot of time and effort. "For one student with a problem, it could take 50-100 hours to resolve" (Goodwin & Oyler, 2008, p. 478). The assessment of student performance and feedback on teaching skills has a summative function that rests on the claim of quality control of becoming teachers. But it has also a formative function based on the fact that students are under training, and that assessments therefore should support their development. Raths & Lyman (2003) as well as our own studies (Hegender 2010) show that the feedback during teacher education usually is formative. The summative function is rarely used as a tool to disallow or discourage students. A recent survey study of all Swedish higher education institutions providing teacher education confirms the impression that relatively few students are reported to fail during teaching practice. There is however a huge number of hidden cases, consisting of students that fail during teaching practice, but who leave the programme before the results are fixed and reported (Hegender & Gardesten, 2012).

An overview on research concerning the transition from basic educational training into professional life is provided by Moriarty et al (2011). The transition from teacher education to professional practice is an area where there is substantial research. The first years in professional life have been identified as particularly critical (Wanzare, 2007). “Reality chock” has been a concept used to describe the problems that newly educated teachers’ face, when they leave education and start their professional carrier (Ryan, 1986). The problems experienced during the first years also result in a relatively larger proportion of teachers leaving the profession, than what is the case later in their carrier (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Induction programmes have therefore been introduced in order to facilitate the transition from basic training to professional life. These programmes tend to be formative and supportive in nature, helping the newly educated teacher to manage in professional life. The programmes may contain a mentor, or supporting dialogues with experienced teachers.

The experiences from these programmes are promising, and they are shown to strengthen both the newly educated teachers’ competence in teaching, and the retention probability (Ingersoll & Bates, 2011). Especially valuable, mentors and regular
supportive communication seem to be (Ingersoll, 2012). However a recent overview shows, that only a few European countries have introduced formal induction programmes (European Commission, 2010).

Assessment of suitability

Research focusing the assessment of newly educated teachers’ competence or suitability for the profession is sparse. The problem of reconciling the formative and summative function of assessment has been studied (Fransson, 2010; Colbert, 1994), and there are a few studies focusing the forms of assessment (e.g. Struyf et al 2011).

Of importance is the study of the knowledge base mentors for newly educated teachers use in their guidance and judgment (Jones & Straker, 2006; Haggarty et al, 2011; Langdon, 2011). This knowledge base consists mainly of practical knowledge founded in the mentors’ own teaching experience and in the standards applied in their local culture. Mentors also tend to use their own experience as the norm for the kind of teacher to be developed.

The role of the mentor is otherwise not obvious. Fransson (2010) provides substantial research concerning the mentor's role in the assessments during induction programmes. There are research supporting a totally formative function, but there is also research stating that it is valuable to combine the supportive role with assessments. His conclusion is “that the educational context sets the prerequisites for whether or not it is regarded as appropriate for mentors to be involved in the assessment of their mentees.” (p 387

The relationship between teacher training and the introduction to the profession is being promoted as a very important area in the research-based policy manual regarding the introduction to teaching that the European Commission has issued (European Commission, 2010). Research in this field, however, shines by its absence. In summary, the assessment of teacher competence is a fairly unstudied phenomenon in educational research, a judgement that is even more valid for the relationship between teacher education and professional introduction in these respects.

The empirical study

The respondents

A questionnaire was distributed to a little more than 300 preschool heads and principals, who had undergone their School Leadership Training Programme at Linnaeus University in the south of Sweden. The questionnaire deals with their general experiences of the induction programme and specifically of the assessments carried out of the newly educated teachers’ suitability.

A total of 106 heads responded to the survey, giving a response rate of 31%. The response rate is quite low; due to the fact that the change of the induction programme was launched in conjunction with the questionnaire was sent out. This has of

---

course had an impact on the study group’s propensity to respond. The assessment during the induction programme would from their perspective soon become a non-issue.

About a third of the respondents are preschool heads, while two thirds are principals of compulsory schools or upper secondary schools. Most of the latter are principals of compulsory schools. Three quarters are heads in municipality run preschools and schools, while one quarter are heads in independent preschools and schools.

The attitude towards the certificate reform

The majority of the respondents are generally positive to the introduction of certification of teachers and preschool teachers. Among the positive comments is the introduction of a gateway to the teaching profession, which contributes to quality and school improvement, and which will also improve the standards of teachers.

Most comments, however, are related to the problems that have emerged during the implementation of the reform. Some see it as a reform without a real value since the requirements of the certificate will not be possible to maintain due to the shortage of teachers. Some also perceive the requirements for the certificate in some subjects are too low, while others believe that many good teachers will not be authorized based on the specifications demanded. Since the universities earlier have not provided a uniform teacher education programme, the breadth and depth when it comes to subject knowledge may vary significantly. And integrated subject courses are difficult to interpret in relation to the new disciplinary demands.

All this means that there are a variety of uncertainties concerning the requirements and whether teachers match these standards that create confusion. Furthermore, many say that the reform was implemented too quickly, which means that a lot of these ambiguities still exist. The introduction of the induction programme, and the assessment of suitability have also created additional work for mentors and heads, without the government providing any extra financial resources for the new tasks. Finally, there are several who believe that the certificate should be issued together with the teacher diploma, and that suitability assessment thus should take place during teacher training.

The vast majority (77%) agrees with the proposals that at the time had been launched (and which now has been decided), to use the induction programme only to support the newly educated teacher, and instead bring back the assessment of suitability to teacher training – only 9% are negative.

The reasons provided are that it must be valuable for the students to get their suitability assessed earlier. It is too late to wait until after they have passed their teacher education. They also feel that the quality of the assessments becomes higher and more reliable if teacher educators are responsible. Teacher educators should (and must) have the competence and time required. This of course requires that the universities really take on this responsibility. One important factor is also that the prevailing conditions during the introductory period, which may be very crucial for the assessment results.
Experiences with the induction programme

50 % of the respondents have reported experience from induction programmes. The number of teachers varies from a single newly examined teacher up to eight. Altogether 82 newly educated teachers are included; 37 becoming preschool teachers, 33 becoming teachers in compulsory schools, and 12 becoming teachers in upper secondary schools.

In the vast majority of cases the introductory period has been a continuum. Only in a few cases, various temporary employments together have led to the certificate. However, the employment may have been placed at various school units both within and outside the head’s responsibility. There is a correlation between the design of the induction programme, and its quality. Those who have reported that the newly educated teachers have had no coherent introductory period also indicate (eta = 0.20) that this has resulted in lower quality.

Most beginning teachers have received a mentor with relevant competence for support. In five of the reported cases, there have been no formally appointed mentors. According to the heads, it has not been possible to procure a competent mentor.

The heads in general believe that the introductory period has worked well in relation to the prevailing conditions. In 13 cases (16%), however the induction programme is considered to have worked less well. The problems encountered are for instance a lack of connection to the institute where the teacher training was undertaken, no opportunities to prepare for the new mission, and lack of time for mentors and heads to carry out the tasks. The mentor’s lack of ability to fulfil the mission is also a source of problems. Furthermore, organizational changes of various kinds as well as mentor changes have posed problems.

The contextual conditions for the introductory period have varied. In just over a third of the cases (36%), the heads believe that the newly educated teachers received an employment more demanding than an average equivalent position. 60% of the teachers have met demands which corresponds to an average teacher employment in the area.

This also corresponds to what extent the newly educated teachers have been given fair opportunities to show their skills. Most of them (80%), have according to the heads received an induction programme providing them with fair opportunities to show their skills. But there are a significant number of teachers (20%), who have not experienced entirely fair conditions to show their ability.

The assessment of suitability

The preschool heads or the principals have been responsible for both the actual and the formal part of the assessment. In most cases, the mentor has also been involved. In 87% of the cases, the preschool head or the principal made the final assessment together with the mentor, while the former subsequently was responsible for the formal assessment. In some cases (7%) the mentor delivered the documentation, whereupon the preschool head or the principal made the final assessment. In as many cases, the preschool head or the principal alone was responsible for the total assessment.

There have been reported no significant differences between the mentor’s and the preschool head’s or the principal’s outcome of the suitability assessment. In a few cases they have not initially agreed, but after a discussion come to an agreement on the outcome. There are no cases reported, where there are disagreements concerning whether a newly educated teacher should be assessed as suitable or not.
Teacher colleagues may have had an influence on the assessment. In 25% of the cases their opinions have been systematically gathered, but it is more common (42%) that colleagues have been given the opportunities to comment. Children or students have had less impact on the assessment. Some (8%) have obtained children’s or students’ views, while in general (73%) children and students have not been given the opportunity to comment.

When assessing the suitability, the Swedish National Agency for Education’s competency profile has been used as standards. The profile comprises five areas; meeting with the student or the child, leadership, collaboration, responsibility for learning and development, and special regulations for certain school forms. Almost half of the respondents (48%) have assessed the suitability solely by virtue of the competence profile, and the rest have in addition added their own opinions about what is essential.

96% of the newly educated teachers, who have finished their induction programme, were assessed as suitable for the teaching profession. Only one newly educated teacher has been reviewed as not suitable, while three, whose suitability was questioned, have left their introductory employment before the final assessments were carried out.

Suitable is however just a minimum requirement for becoming a teacher. A relatively large proportion of managers are less satisfied with how well prepared the newly educated teachers in general tend to be for their work. Just over a third of the respondents believe that they are less prepared, and a few even that they are not at all prepared for their profession. The majority (57%) believe that the newly trained teachers are pretty well prepared for their profession. So there seems to exist a tolerant awareness of that a newly educated teacher is not "ready for the job", and needs support and development in order to become a professional teacher.

But that does not mean that teacher education cannot become better. Areas, among others, that the heads think need to be strengthened, are communication with children or students who are challenging or provocative. The special education knowledge area and specific skills to handle children in need of support is also stressed, as well as the ability to individualize teaching. Leadership and the ability to create a good working environment is something that several stresses is lacking. Closely related is solidness and skills in terms of subject knowledge and ability in teaching the subject. Documentation, assessment and grading are also areas, which show deficiencies. Finally, also mentioned is the ability to communicate with parents.

When the suitability has been questioned

In four cases the heads have been seriously doubtful to the suitability of the newly examined teachers. They have expressed problems with certain qualities listed in the competency profile, such as communication with children or students, or the ability to take initiatives. Where doubts have arisen, these generally have come early during the introductory period.

One of the newly examined teachers has received the final judgement "not suitable". In this particular case, there has according to the head been no doubt about the outcome. The mentor and the principal have been unanimous. Doubts about the suitability arose early in the process, and the principal has reported having observed the actual teacher several times. They also arranged opportunities for the questioned teacher to work in class for a longer time and thus extend the induction programme.
The principal states, that the teacher has received fair conditions to make her- or himself justice, even if the employment has been considerably more demanding than the average teacher’s. This circumstance instead provided more valid information about the lack of suitability. The newly examined teacher has otherwise enjoyed support from a mentor who is certified in the same area. The mentor and the principal have made the final assessment jointly on data that had been generated through several assessment occasions. The assessment has been exclusively based on the Agency’s competency profile, which was considered to be most applicable.

**Conclusion**

During a fairly short period, assessments during the induction programme constituted a gate to the teacher certificate and the teaching profession. The present study is carried out within a project titled *LET THE RIGHT ONE OUT!* teacher education and probationary year as gatekeepers to the teaching profession. In the project, we examine teacher quality as it is expressed in "failure practice", i.e. where there are uncertainties concerning a prospective teacher’s suitability and competence.

Since the project started the conditions have changed. The induction programme has now the purpose only to facilitate the transition from teacher education to professional life. The assessment of the suitability for teaching is performed in teacher education. The rational behind the change were implementation problems, which occurred when the induction programme was introduced. The new system had only been in use two years, and there were no evaluations that had been carried out. With results from the present study, we may provide an answer to the critical question: was the rapid change motivated?

A total of 106 heads from preschools, compulsory schools, and upper secondary schools have responded to a survey, and presented their picture of the induction programme, and the assessments performed. The response rate is low, 31 %, probably due to the fact that the assessments were withdrawn from the induction programme, and therefore not considered relevant for the heads anymore. So the pictures presented perhaps should be seen as an indication on the actual situation at preschools and schools and not as the total one.

There is a substantial support for the recent change, i.e. letting teacher education take care of the suitability assessment. The heads are in favour for this change. There are also circumstances occurring during the induction programme, which calls for a change. In order to give every newly educated teacher a fair chance to show her or his ability and suitability for the teaching profession, the employment conditions provided must be relevant and manageable. And the requirements should be designed according to what can be expected from a newly educated teacher. Every newly educated teacher must receive fair and equal opportunities to show their suitability. This is not the case.

Although the induction programme in the majority of cases seems to have worked rather well, the exceptions are too many. In 13 of the 82 reported cases the introductory period is not considered to have worked well. In five of the reported cases, there have been no formally appointed mentors. It has not been possible to contract a competent mentor. In over a third of the cases (31) the heads state that the newly educated teachers have received an employment more or much more demanding than what characterize the average equivalent position.

There are only a few newly educated teachers, whose suitability has been seriously questioned. Only one teacher finally received a negative assessment, and was
considered to be not suitable for the teaching profession. This fact, together with the statement from the heads, that they have not had time to prepare for the new tasks, and that they do not have the time or the resources to carry out the assessments needed, indicates that the change of the assessment of suitability back to teacher education has substantial support.

Discussion

Certification of teachers and preschool teachers has the purpose to improve the quality of teachers by regulating the standards needed for entrance to the teaching profession. Along with the decision of introducing a certificate, came an induction programme consisting of a probationary year, when an experienced mentor with equivalent competence would give the newly educated teacher support. In the Swedish induction programme, there was also an assessment of suitability introduced. The reasons for this were the criticism of Swedish teacher education and the say that too many unsuitable teachers slipped through the teacher education assessment net. This criticism was in many respects anecdotal in nature, or consisted of media reports, and there was in fact no systematic evaluation done since 2008, when a follow-up evaluation was made of the former teacher education programme (UHÅ 2008: R).

However, the recruitment base for teacher education has declined, and in some teacher education programmes or subjects within the programmes, students with very low admission points have been accepted. In some subjects, for instance modern languages and technique, there are far from enough applicants to fill the available places. And if you add the problem that many teachers especially in schools are not qualified enough to get a certificate – the certificate rate of teachers is in compulsory school 67 %, and in upper secondary school 52 % (Swedish National Agency for Education 2014) – the need for new teachers will not match the applicant numbers in the foreseeable future.

The rational for introducing suitability assessment in the induction programme is based on the myth that the quality of students entering teacher education is low, and teacher education is not able to “Because there are such low admission points needed in certain teacher education programmes, which gives room for all applicants, and since teacher education is considered not to be capable to separate the unsuitable prospective teachers from the suitable ones, it is better to let the assessment of suitability be carried out in practice by the preschools and the schools.”

Now we can on the basis of our own studies see that it is only a small number of newly educated teachers who get their suitability questioned after they have received a diploma. And very few actually are judged to be “not suitable”. This is confirmed by representatives of the Swedish National Agency for Education, which is responsible for the final decision on the certificate. We have also seen that it is a myth that no students fail during teacher education. Students actually fail, but it is not always possible to trace them in the formal systems. There are students who leave the programme, when they are experiencing problems in their teaching practice, before they get their grades reported. So unsuitable teacher candidates are identified, and in many cases become the subject of dissuasion (Hegender & Gardesten, 2012).

The conclusion from this study is that it seems difficult and costly to reach an efficient and fair assessment practice during the introductory programme. There are instead reasons to direct the resources on strengthening the evaluation practice in teacher educa-
tion, and to narrow the induction programme to scaffolding the newly educated teachers’ transition from teacher education to teaching practice.

This is well in line with the guidelines from the European Commission (2010), who believe that the newly qualified teachers requires three different types of support; Firstly, personal support from mentors and colleagues. They need a safe and sustainable environment, where one is allowed to express and discuss problems and failures, without jeopardizing their employment. They also need an adjusted employment with proper requirements for a newly qualified teacher. Secondly, social support, which helps the newly trained teachers to advance into the professional community. This means understanding the local organization and culture, and being involved in collegial interaction. Thirdly, professional support is needed in the form of continuous competence development of various kinds, for example participating in systematic school improvement.

A developed induction programme may also contribute to making the teaching profession more attractive. The transition from education to working life is a challenge in every sector. A guaranteed and systematic transition will certainly be attractive for young people choosing between different possible careers. But then schools and preschools will have to provide relevant introductory employments, where the newly educated teachers get time and professional support in order to develop, instead of negative and degrading experiences from teaching practice.

There is also a need for a more professional assessment practice in teacher education. In our own university we have introduced a teaching practice framework, which is based on a continuous progression during the programme (Lindqvist & Nordänder, 2012). Suitability in terms of “not unsuitable” for the teaching profession is assessed early in the framework, but the main part is focused on becoming “very suitable” for the teaching profession. Documents need to be interpreted and communicated between the involved parts – students, teacher educators, and supervisors in schools and preschools. A valid and reliable assessment is dependent on that all parts agree on the quality that will be assessed, and that the students get enough opportunities to practice and to show the actual quality.
References


Zaremba, M. Först kränkt vinner. *Dagens Nyheter*. Publicerad 2008-02-17 07:10