

SÖDERHAMN MUNICIPALITY – INTRODUCTION PROGRAMME FOR NEWLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

1. Organisations involved

Söderhamn Municipality

University of Gävle

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

Söderhamn Municipality has 26,000 inhabitants and is located on the East Coast of Sweden, in the Gävleborg Region. This region has a low level of education and high unemployment. Therefore, schools are considered to be very important for developing the region.

Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) contribute with new competencies, skills and knowledge, and thus play an important role in developing the school system. At the same time, however, they lack the experience of older teachers, and have very few practical tools. NQTs may also be exposed to mental stress because of large classes, contact with demanding parents, as well as having to deal with pupils with social problems. Furthermore, teachers are at risk for being involved in different conflicts with pupils, parents or colleagues, which may be very stressful, and which therefore may have a negative impact on the mental well-being of the NQTs.

In order to ensure that NQTs do not become overstrained when starting in their new job, Söderhamn Municipality has participated in a research programme at the University of Gävle that focuses on the introduction of NQTs into the labour market. Söderhamn Municipality is also member of the Municipality Induction Network, which is a network between the University of Gävle and municipalities in the region of Gävleborg.

2.2. Aims

The reason for starting up the programme four years ago was that many young teachers became overstrained shortly after starting in their new job. A remarkably high percentage of new teachers were burned out and therefore on sick-leave for several months.

The aim of the programme was to develop a support system for NQTs. The programme is designed to prevent NQTs from feeling stressed and inadequate in their new profession, to help ease the transition from being a student to becoming a teacher, and thus to promote the well-being of this group of employees.

The programme is based on a belief that a good introduction is crucial for ensuring that NQTs stay and contribute to the development of the schools in the municipality, and for ensuring that NQTs do not become burned out and stressed. At the same time, the programme contributes to the professional development of the NQTs.

The programme is part of the more extensive "Induction project" which also aims at:

- Strengthening the learning development;
- Observing the NQTs professional development and learning;
- Increasing collaboration and knowledge sharing between the University of Gävle and the municipalities for follow-up and competence development of new teachers.

2.3. What was done, and how?

Söderhamn Municipality invited all NQTs who had worked as teachers less than two years, to participate in a series of dialogue meetings that were held during a period of one year. It was a group of nine people who themselves set the agenda. The psychological working environment, burnouts, tutoring, their own education and the working team were some of the identified problem areas.

The dialogue meetings became a step in the research on the introduction of NQTs into the labour market, led by the University of Gävle. The result of the collaboration between Söderhamn Municipality and the University of Gävle is the induction programme.

As part of the programme, NQTs get an introduction to their new profession and to their new workplace, and a workplace advisor offers practical advice to the NQTs. This practical part of the induction consists of information- and knowledge sharing regarding the following issues:

- Work routines and information about the pupils;
- Where to find different teaching materials, technical equipment and where classrooms and other important buildings are located;
- Workplace culture;
- The Municipality's information system and necessary computer programmes;
- Trade unions;
- How to involve parents in the education system;
- Different types of cooperation in between different schools, and outside the school;
- The organisational structure: responsibilities, functions and roles;
- Competence and development projects.

The practical introduction described above is a vital part of the programme. However, the main emphasis is on a mentorship, which lasts throughout the NQTs first year. The induction programme includes two hours of counselling per week during working hours. The mentors are experienced teachers, and are recruited internally, based on an assessment of, among others, the following requirements:

- Strong teaching experience both regarding the teaching assignment itself, didactic and leadership experience;
- Confidence in discussing the teaching assignment;
- Ability to contribute to developing the experience, knowledge, professional competence and values of the NQTs;
- Good coaching skills regarding listening and seeing things that are not necessarily outspoken by the NQT;
- Ability to structure, summarize and draw conclusions from the dialogue;
- Strong knowledge about the school system and the schools commission;
- Professional attitude and ability to strengthen the self-confidence of the NQTs.

The mentors were trained to ask "the right questions", rather than provide the answers, and in this way contribute to helping NQTs find their own answers and solutions to the challenges they were facing.

2.4. What was achieved?

The programme has been evaluated through interviews with mentors, school principals and NQTs. Results suggest that the stress level has decreased substantially among the new teachers, and at the same time, principals experience an easier workload, as the mentors take on the majority of the guidance and counselling.

Since the induction programme for NQTs was implemented, the municipality observed:

CASE STUDIES

- A substantial decrease in stress levels among NQTs;
- Zero sick leaves caused by stress-related problems;
- Increased confidence among the young teachers and improved ability to inspire and motivate their students;
- Söderhamn municipality became the preferred employer for a number of new teachers due to the introduction programme and the mentorship programme.

Alongside these developments, the project generated positive feedback among young teachers, provided knowledge and insight into the Teacher Education Programme, and made inroads for enhanced collaboration between the municipality and the university in the region.

The programmes impact on the work environment is significant. None of the new teachers has been on sick-leave caused by stress related problems since the introduction of the programme. The NQTs feel more secure in their new professional role as teachers and have acquired tools to better balance their work life and personal life, and in this way enhance their mental well-being. This is emphasised by the following comment from a NQT that participated in the programme:

“When I started in my job as a teacher I often felt insufficient, because I couldn’t meet all of the expectations. My mentor asked me questions that made me realize that I had to learn to say no, that I couldn’t do everything.”

2.5. Success factors

According to a number of evaluations, the introduction project has been very successful. Moreover, there has been a large national interest for the project. The project was based on real needs, which may be the most important success factor. Based on the experience of the project, the following success factors are also crucial:

- The project was implemented at central level in the municipality. This was essential for ensuring financial support as well as support from the schools involved in the project as it justified the use of time and resources locally.
- Participants must be willing to participate actively in all phases of the project. They must be motivated and eager to contribute.
- Invite the group of newly qualified to define the topics and challenges they find most relevant.
- Cooperate with researchers that have theoretical knowledge about the needs of newly qualified and preferably experience within the sector involved.

2.6. Further information

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2.7. Transferability

The Söderhamn model is a very good example on how to integrate the effort to promote the work health of employees and at the same time solve problems related to the working environment. So far the model has been successfully transferred to six other Swedish municipalities; Gävle, Bollnäs, Hudiksvall, Ovanåker, Sandviken and Tierp. The municipalities participate, together with the University in Gävle and representatives from the two Teacher´ unions (National Union of Teachers in Sweden and the Swedish Teachers´ Union), in the Municipality Induction Network, which deals with questions of research and developmental work concerning NQTs.

In recent years the focus has also been widened to other professions, for instance military officers, nurses and teachers in higher education. This project is a good example of a successful collaboration between the university and other institutions as well as a good example of successful combined efforts from employers, employees and the society to improve the health and well-being at work.

3. References, resources:

- The teacher´s association in Sweden: <http://www.lararforbundet.se/web/ws.nsf/documents/004BE2A0?OpenDocument&menuid=00326A1C>
- The University in Gävle: <http://hig.se/Organisation/Institutioner/Institutionen-for-pedagogik-didaktik-och-psykologi/Forskning-vid-institutionen/Forskning-Didaktik/Research/Induction-Research.html>