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Training the novice teacher in the Pedagogy Department of Education of the University of the Andes, Tachira

La formación del profesor novel en el Departamento de Pedagogía de la Universidad de Los Andes Táchira

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a case study whose objective was to describe the process of training first-year college teachers. The information was collected through in-depth interviews. In the context investigated, the novice teachers do not get enough institutional support in their new jobs and develop their work alone, since they do not carry on research or learn to teach alongside more-experienced teachers. The new teachers said they felt nervous, insecure, rejected, distressed, alone and disoriented. The results of this study reveal a disparity between what is demanded by the rules established for the training of new university teachers, and what actually happens in the departments. This is because training plans are not carried out, and training is considered to be the responsibility of the novice teacher. Finally, recommendations are made for the development of a training policy for new faculty members.

Keywords: Teacher training, novice teacher, university teaching.

Resumen

En este artículo se presentan los resultados de un estudio de caso que tuvo como objetivo describir el proceso de formación de los profesores noveles universitarios. La información se recogió a través de entrevistas a profundidad. En el contexto investigado, el docente que ingresa recibe suficiente apoyo institucional para su inserción a la institución y desarrolla su trabajo de manera solitaria, ya que no investiga ni aprende a enseñar junto a los profesores de mayor experiencia. Los profesores noveles manifestaron sentirse nerviosos, desconfiados, rechazados, angustiados, solos y desorientados. Los resultados de esta investigación revelan una discordancia entre lo que demandan las normas establecidas para la formación de los profesores de ingreso reciente a la universidad y lo que realmente se ejecuta en los departamentos, porque los planes de formación no se cumplen y la formación queda bajo la exclusiva responsabilidad del profesor que ingresa. Al final, se presentan recomendaciones para la elaboración de una política de formación del profesorado novel.

Palabras clave: Formación del profesorado, profesores noveles, docencia universitaria.

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly urgent to train the trainers, key agents for ensuring the renewed commitments of educational institutions, and for providing appropriate responses to social demands. This preparation is even less renewable in the case of universities, given the complexity of professorial duties at that level, their commitment to the comprehensive training of new professionals and the challenge of today soaring knowledge production, which challenges them to lifelong learning.

In the last ten years there has arisen a considerable intellectual production which establishes and amply justifies the need for the training of university teachers, especially the newly employed. However, it is pertinent to explore in this discourse the precise levels of detail in the universities' daily practices. In that sense, the basic question prompting this research was: What is the training trajectory for new

teachers in the Department of Education, University of the Andes, Tachira? For purposes of this study, the term novice refers to teachers classed as instructors and assistants.

In the view of Escudero (1999), the ongoing training of teachers is undoubtedly one of the obligatory routes leading toward the improvement of education, although it often appears as one of the most difficult to resolve properly. Out of this idea arose our interest in knowing what the status of teacher training is in the department of education, specifically in regard to teachers in training.

Therefore, the following objectives were formulated:

- a) To investigate the current situation concerning the training of novice faculty in the Department of Education, University of the Andes, Tachira.
- b) To develop proposals based on identified needs and expectations concerning a university policy for training novice teachers.

I. Conceptual framework

The tasks which university teachers must address are diverse and complex, since they have been assigned responsibilities in teaching, research and extension. Medina (1998, p. 15) emphasizes that these tasks “require unique teacher training to carry them out in complement.”

However, Marcelo (1994) has found through research that there is between research and teaching, a gap that will seriously impact the quality of education received by university students—hence the need to develop teacher-training programs that would consider the nature and requirements of this professional activity.

Similarly, Benedito, Ferrer and Ferreres (1995) found, based on their research, that the preparation for these functions is not acquired through a systematic training process, as one would expect, but rather, it is routinely voluntary and self-taught. Therefore they propose training in these functions through information programs, the study of model, and modernization of the infrastructure of management, informatics, documentary, bibliographic and publications resources, among other things.

The aforementioned authors suggest that the professional development of a university teacher is an ongoing process which can be divided into three stages: initial training, novice-teacher training and experienced-teacher training. The second is that which occurs during the first years of teaching performance, when the new teacher joins the university organization and is becoming socialized within the institution.

Saint-Onge (1997) states that the inexperienced teacher usually goes through a period of anxiety and insecurity, in which she* seeks solutions, consults expert teachers, and sometimes by trial and error appropriates a nonreflective sort of practice, which may even be rigid, if she does not experience the process of camaraderie, and systematic reflection and dialogue. Ordinarily, her teaching work alone is limited to the classroom, constructing a solitary teaching practice, which over time, each teacher defends as synonymous with autonomy.

Marcelo (1994) considers that this first period is very fertile and important for learning the teaching profession, and therefore emphasizes the need to implement training proposals aimed toward potentiating the capacity for reflection and ongoing self-criticism. Such proposals should arise from a concept of the teacher as a reflective practitioner, able to construct knowledge based on her personal and professional involvement. In this author's opinion there are two types of teacher training:

- a) Training focused on the institutions, whose primary purpose is to train new teachers through activities integrated with the issue of professional development in the institution where they work.
- b) Training focused on experienced professionals; its purpose is to train new teachers through the support of an experienced teacher who can, among other things, observe the classes taught by the novice and then submit the observations to him for discussion. This is a very enriching learning strategy. In addition, the experienced teacher is the most suitable person to integrate the novice properly into university dynamics.

II. Research Methodology

This research was begun from the qualitative paradigm, with an ethnographic method considered appropriate for the subject matter of the work, since it reassesses researchers' autoreflective ability to monitor their own practice. The ethnographic method is defined as a qualitative method seeking the most accurate and feasible collection of the necessary information, in order to reconstruct the culture and understand the social phenomena of its communities or specific groups (Martinez, 1999). For this investigation, this approach involved the strong participation of women researchers in the social medium studied, and an effort to understand the events with the meaning it has for those in that context. Since the

* Translator's note: Before the feminist movement arose, in situations including both genders it was customary to use the masculine pronoun. Today, however, pronouns of both genders are used to avoid what is now seen as sexist language. To avert the awkwardness of continually using "s/he", "his/her", we shall, in this paper, sometimes use the feminine pronoun, and sometimes the masculine.

research focused on studying the problem in the Department of Education, University of the Andes, Tachira, it is also considered as a case study.

2.1. Delimitation of the research problem

The investigation focused on determining the status of novice-teacher training in the Department of Education, University of the Andes, Tachira, Venezuela, in 2001. In accordance with the provisions of the Statute for Teachers and Research Personnel (EPDI^{**}) of the University of the Andes (ULA) (1990), for the purposes of this research the novice teacher is considered as that teacher in training in the academic categories of instructor or assistant.

2.2. Application context

The study was conducted at the University of the Andes, Tachira, a public institution that offers degree programs in Education, Social Communication and Administration. It operates through academic administration units such as departments, to which the teachers are assigned as ordinary faculty and/or contract personnel. According to Article 87 of the Universities Act (LU), Venezuela (1970) the ordinary faculty members are teachers in the categories of instructors, assistants, assistant teachers, and professors who have entered by competitive examination.^{***} There are also categories of teachers hired as instructors and assistants as exceptions in emergencies, by means of competition based on credentials. According to the statutes of this institution, their contracts run for a maximum of one year.

The specific context of this study is the Department of Education, which handles the development of the pedagogical and didactic component of the BA in Education curriculum at the University of the Andes, Tachira, Venezuela.

The statute provides in Article 61 that teacher training is a responsibility shared by the university through the academic units and faculty, and it must obey coherent plans based on the needs and priorities for performing essential functions such as teaching, research and extension. Similarly, Article 58 states that teachers and research personnel at the first two levels of the scale (instructor and assistant) must undergo training and improvement in programs established by the University.

^{**} For ease of reference, where the names of organizations have been translated from the Spanish, their acronyms have been retained as given in that language. In the case of international organizations which have commonly-used acronyms in English, those acronyms have been used.

^{***} There is no permanent tenure. Even the highest-ranking faculty members must compete at intervals of a stated number of years in order to keep their positions. Competition is based on education, experience, achievement, and other aspects, and the contestant who scores highest gets the job.

2.3. Selection of informants

We selected all teachers in the Department of Education in the categories of instructor and assistant, whether ordinary or contract personnel, of which seven were interviewed.

Table I. Teachers, Instructors and Assistants interviewed in the Pedagogy Department of the University of the Andes (December, 2001)

Teacher	Year hired	Status	Category	Work hours	Highest degree held	Presently studying
01	1997	Ordinary*	Instructor	Exclusive****	Master's	Doctorate
02	1995	Contract**	Instructor	Full-time	B.A.	Master's
03	1998	Contract	Instructor	12 hours	Specialty	
04	1996	Ordinary	Instructor	Exclusive	Master's	
05	1995	Ordinary	Assistant	Exclusive	Master's	Doctorate
06	2000	Ordinary	Instructor	Exclusive	Specialty	
07	1996	Contract	Instructor	12 hours	Master's	

* Winner of usual competition for the job

**Under short-term (1 year) contract

2.4. About the interviews

The information was collected by means of in-depth interviews in which increasingly detailed and insightful information was solicited, based on the interviewee's answers. The number of questions asked ranged between 15 and 21 (see an example in Annex I). The questions sought information on four aspects:

- a) The process of incorporation of teachers into the department.
- b) The training of instructors and assistants in the department.
- c) The link between teaching and research among the instructors and assistants as part of teacher-training processes.
- d) Training needs perceived by the instructors and assistants, and their proposals for training.

2.5. The interview process

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The texts were subjected to a process of inductive analysis to construct the diagnosis of the situations under study, through coding, categorization and the establishment of conceptual networks supported by the Atlas/ti Version 4.2 for Windows computer program for the analysis of qualitative data. The analysis was performed in accordance with the following steps.

**** "Exclusive" teachers are not allowed to moonlight, or to work at any other job or institution.

Table II. Steps for analyzing the interviews

Step	Orientation question
1. Codify: organize by ideas and/or thoughts.	How many different ideas did the subjects report for each aspect?
2. Classify: place the ideas and/or thought in groups of that would contain them.	Into how many categories can all the ideas produced for each aspect be grouped?
3. Organize: visualize the way it is structured as a whole.	For each aspect, how can we organize the categories that include all the ideas expressed by the subjects studied?
4. Summarize: organize the parts so as to draw the final conclusions.	What is the training situation of the new teacher in the Pedagogy Department of the University of the Andes, Tachira?

III. Results

In keeping with the guiding aspects of the interviews conducted, the results are also presented in four sections:

a) The incorporation process of the department faculty

The teachers interviewed reported that this initial stage of university teaching was difficult, caused them great distress and, that in general, they were lonely and did not know where to turn for support or information. It is noteworthy that they had perceived some discrimination on the part of some of the highest-ranking teachers in relation to the rights of contract teachers and instructors (see Figure 1).

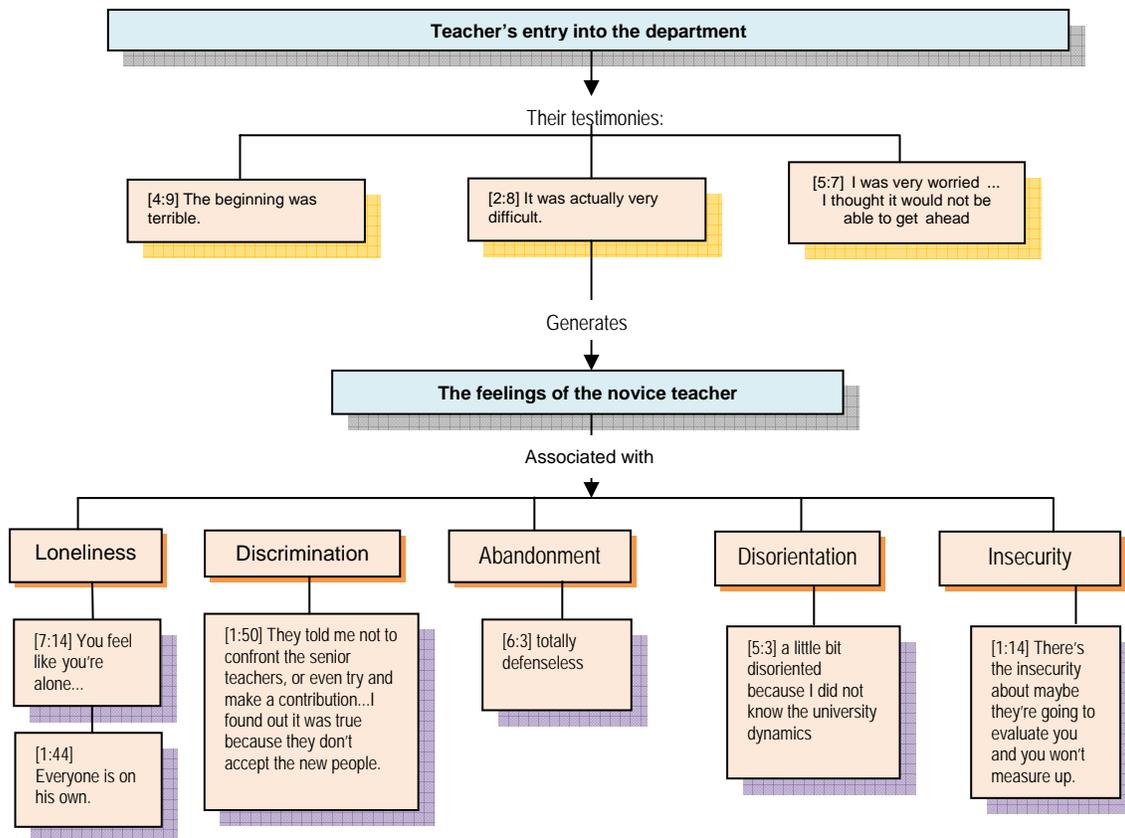


Figure 1. The new teachers' feelings^{*****}

In the actual work of teaching, new teachers have too heavy a work load, and are left mostly on their own. In the case of teachers hired by the hour, there were difficulties regarding collective and collaborative work, because they have little time to get together. Additionally, teachers' meetings are usually limited to administrative work, and do not address the specific aspects of teaching and teacher education.

Teachers believe that during the integration period they are not treated in a systematic or institutionalized manner, because they did not participate in activities planned for this purpose. In that sense, they said there are no induction programs; they are not given enough information on the aspects of administration and curriculum they should address; they believe that there is no proper policy for training incoming staff, since no there is no advisor/mentor to guide the new teacher concerning recognition and incorporation into the institution. The adaptation of the novice teacher is left solely to his own initiative and interest (see Figure 2).

***** The appointment numbers for the interviews are associated with the code that identifies each interviewee and the line of the transcript of the respective interview. For example: [7:14] refers to informant 7 and line 14 of that person's interview.

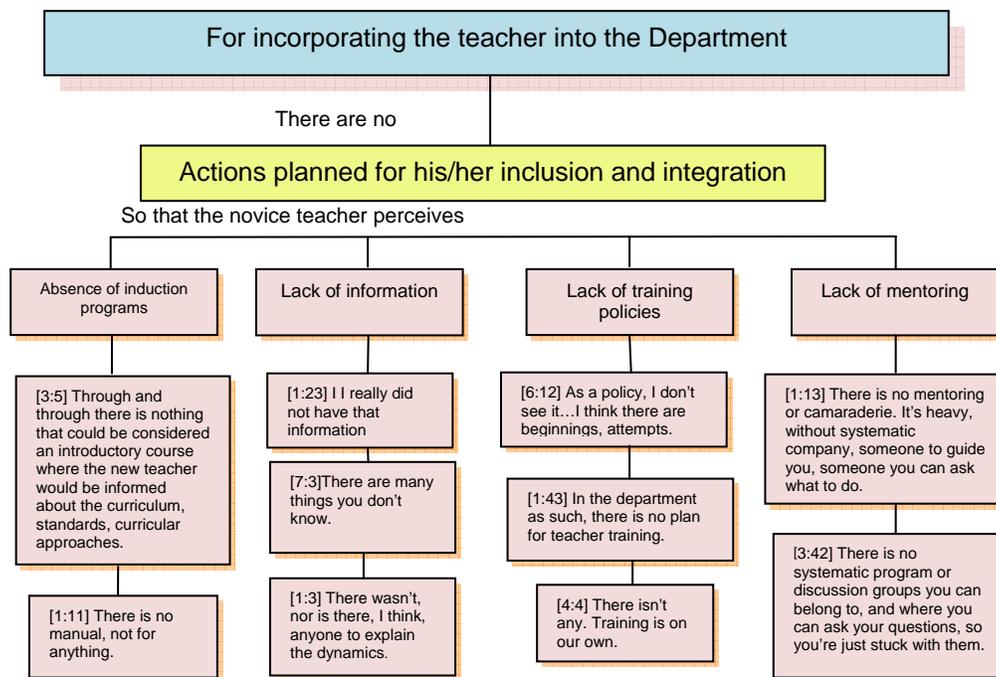


Figure 2. The new teachers' perceptions about entering the Department

b) Training of instructors and assistant professors in the department

Article 58 of the Statute for Teachers and Research Personnel at the University of the Andes (1990) states that teaching and research staff at the first two levels of the scale (instructor and assistant) must go through training and improvement programs established by the university, and that they should be considered as teachers in training; therefore the department as the academic and administrative unit receiving them, should design a training plan for them, and appoint a tutor. There were found no documents to establish the characteristics, scope or specifications for the design of that plan; however, based on the personal experience of the authors of this work, as well as and what the interviewees report, that the plan is known to have been drawn up in haste and under pressure from an administrative obligation to satisfy a requirement involving the incorporation of the teacher as ordinary faculty, after she has obtained the position through competition. It should be noted that this legislation does not consider the situation of contract teachers, and does not consider including them in the training plans, probably because it is assumed that they cannot remain longer than one year at this level. The reality we found in the Department of Education is that there are contract teachers, instructors, who have been hired at that level for more than a year.

Figure 3 shows the key testimonies that corroborate the above statement:

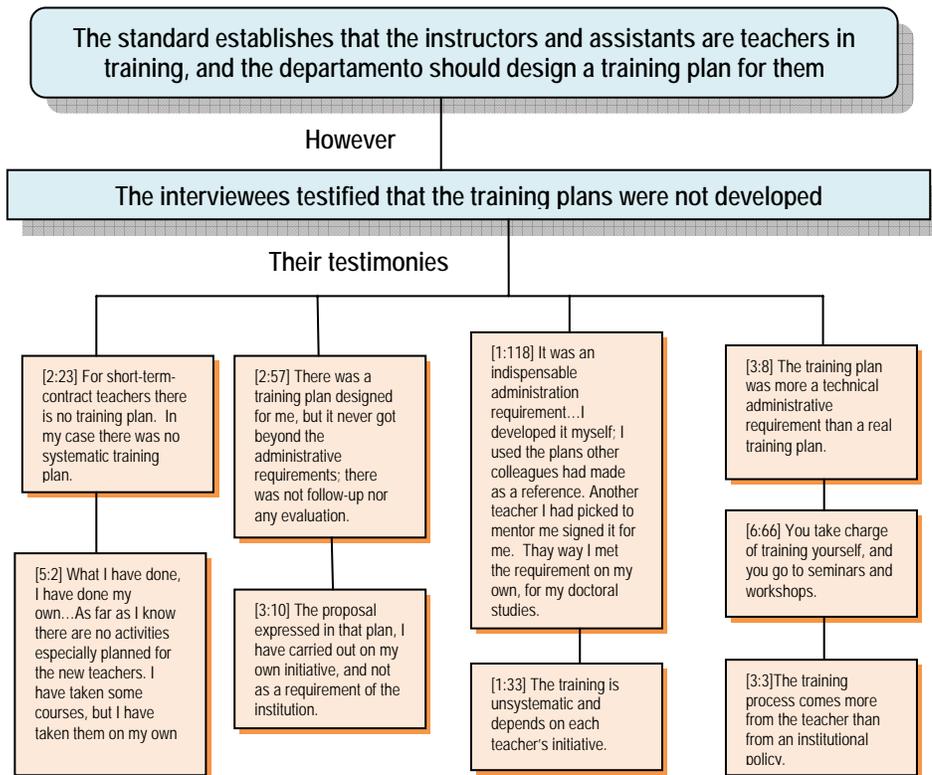


Figure 3. The failure of plans for training new teachers

The interviewees reported that on their own initiative they have developed some training activities: seminars, workshops, graduate programs (specialties, master's degree programs, and doctorates). Similarly, these teachers valued as meaningful experiences for training, any participation in study circles with co-workers, and the preparation they have individually undertaken for the job competition.

c) The link between teaching and research among instructors and assistants, as part of the teacher-training process.

Most of the teachers interviewed find it difficult to do systematic research for their teaching; some argue lack of time and preparation for it. The teachers interviewed had not had the opportunity to participate in existing research groups in the department. This is evident in the testimonies of interviewees who state that “in practice, we teachers are not prepared to do research on our pedagogy”, [7:10]; “in practice it seems that we limit ourselves more to teaching for administrative and technical purposes than for research, which is one of the essential functions of a university teacher” [5:9].

d) Training needs perceived by the instructors and teacher assistants, and their proposals for training.

Novice teachers see a necessity for the implementation of an induction program to facilitate the integration of new faculty into the dynamics of the institution. This program could include a tour of the facilities to familiarize new people with the university environment, as well as to inform them about issues related to the mission and vision of the university, its organizational and administrative functioning, available resources, curriculum design, and what its teachers do, among other things. They also mention the need for continuing education programs that address issues such as university teaching, educational research and updates on the disciplinary content of the academic fields.

Those interviewed wish that the university would promote collaborative work, so that they would no longer be working alone, and could develop professorial groups in the departments. In the testimonies there stands out the proposal for designating tutors/mentors, to guide new teachers in the process of integration into university teaching, and to direct and supervise the training plan.

Conclusions

The training plans for instructors and teacher assistants proposed in the Statute for Teaching and Research Personnel at the University of the Andes are part of what Marcelo (1994) calls *training focused on experienced professionals*, whose purpose is to train new teachers through the guidance of a higher-ranking teacher. It says this because theoretically, the proposed training plan should be developed by an expert department professor, who must assume the supervision of it.

The results of this study reveal a disparity between what is demanded by the rules established for the training of teachers recently entering the university, and what actually happens in the Department of Education; since training plans developed for instructors are not carried out, and training is the sole responsibility of the novice teacher. These plans are not evaluated, the instructor and the mentor assigned give no report to the department about its results. This situation confirms Escudero's (1999) finding that training teachers is often a difficult problem to solve in practice, although in theory, and officially, its importance and necessity are admitted.

The information collected allows us to say that within the context studied, the teacher learns to be a teacher through a self-taught, intuitive, empiricist and solitary process. This situation is similar to that found by Benedito, Ferrer and Ferreres (1995) and Blazquez (1999) in the Spanish context, in that new teachers do not socialize with the rest of the faculty, do not carry out research, and do not learn to teach alongside their supposed teachers.

The psychological situation in which the department's new teachers find themselves is similar to that mentioned by Saint-Onge (1997), in that the inexperienced teacher often goes through a period of anxiety and insecurity, and that in general, their teaching work is generally confined to the classroom, so that they construct a teaching practice alone. The psychological states generated by isolation, the lack of support and the rejection of other teachers can generate discomfort in teaching, so as to cause what Santos Guerra (1983) calls the erosion of the teaching function, which means the deterioration of dreams, hopes, efforts and commitments (cited in Marcelo, 1994, p. 153).

It is noteworthy that this emotional state expressed by teachers can result in a vicious cycle which hampers them in their educational process, because they feel insecure and afraid to ask for clarification or to request support from those more experienced, because they think they may be seen as incompetent for the job. This situation can be overcome if we believe what Marcelo (1994) proposes: that teacher-training programs should promote the personal and professional welfare of the learners during the induction period. The suggestion is that for this purpose, a new teacher be assigned a lighter teaching load; that she be integrated into a line of research and be provided with resources for training. One might add that it is also necessary to be explicit about the knowledge and procedures the teacher must learn in order to function appropriately within the organization established—information informing her about the statutes, regulations, administrative procedures, duties and rights.

The results show a conflict between teaching and research functions. Novice teachers do not carry out research on their teaching, nor are they linked to research groups. This situation, according to the issues raised by Marcelo (1994), can have serious repercussions on the quality of education because teachers do not delve deeper into the knowledge of their field of study and, consequently, the relationship between knowledge production and its communication is neither smooth-flowing, nor stable.

The results also show a high level of awareness on the part of new teachers regarding the need for training for university teaching. These teachers propose, among other alternatives, the need for a mentor and the creation of groups of teachers, both of which form part of the model of *training focused on experienced professionals* set forth by Marcelo (1994).

Proposals and recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, experiences in other contexts, theoretical references and reflections on the case studied, we propose the urgent definition of a training policy for new teachers of the Department of Education, University of the Andes; this may be based on the following premises, and the implementation of several strategies:

- The Department should be considered as the natural space for teacher training. Therefore, it must develop comprehensive training programs based on the profile of university teachers and the needs and expectations identified. Programs must be flexible and open, so as to take advantage of offers and resources offered by other departments of the university or other institutions.
- The new teachers must participate actively, but voluntarily in the planning, development and evaluation of such a program. Their involvement should be based on a personal decision, a sine qua non for the success of any project.
- Put into service the figure of the tutor, also called the mentor or counselor. This person will be a ranking professor in the same department, possessing: teaching experience, skill in classroom management, discipline, communication skills, up to date, and with personal qualities such as patience, tolerance and flexibility. Her pedagogical role will be to accompany the novice teacher in his first years of professional performance so as to advise him professionally and personally, thus becoming a significant support. Her work will be targeted toward meeting the emotional, social and intellectual needs of beginning teachers.
- It is recommended that university teachers make their pedagogical labors a research object, for which they can choose strategies that will become autodidactic: such as action research, autobiographies, self-evaluation, active participation in discussion and study groups. All these encourage reflective, critical, self-critical and creative thinking—essential for decision making and for achieving meaningful participation in the changes taking place in the university.
- The university teacher must be considered, and must consider herself as, an intellectual with a strong readiness to act in different scenarios inside and outside the institution, able to interpret the sociopolitical dimension of the university. She must engage critically and creatively in the construction and dissemination of knowledge of her respective discipline.
- It is necessary for the authorities of the university to recognize the urgency of comprehensive teacher training; to create in the Department the administrative and technological conditions to ensure the improvement of teaching and the training of the faculty; in principle, to give equal weight to teaching and research, creating networks for collaboration and exchange of knowledge, both for the development of discipline and for didactic and curricular innovations.
- Raise the awareness and co-responsibility of the faculty with regard to the importance of their own training. The range of activities should be varied and imaginative so that every teacher can find some sort of way in which his training needs can be met. It is recommended that there not be set rigid rules that

might be coercive in the training activities; on the contrary, there must be developed guidelines that encourage participation, guiding and facilitating means and resources so that other departments or groups of teachers can participate.

- The training program for new faculty members should include an institutional-information phase, in which would be incorporated that which regards the origin, mission, vision and philosophy of the university; the curricular design of courses, the assessment regulations; the regulations concerning teaching and research personnel; the laws and administrative processes, all to enable quick and effective integration into the dynamics of the university. This information should be reinforced with a tour of the facilities in order to familiarize new personnel with the university environment, and enable them to make the best use of it.
- Beginning teachers should be assigned a reasonable number of hours, in order to guarantee time for their satisfactory integration into training activities, research and extension.
- Departments should encourage the creation of support networks for beginning teachers through email, personal contact—group and individual—in order to provide emotional and technical support.

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Annex I. Questions asked in one interview with teachers

1. What support has the university given you as a beginning college teacher?
2. Can you tell me more precisely about your initial experience? What did you do to help you get to know the university's work dynamic? How did you feel at this new stage of your professional life?
3. From what you say, can we infer that you think the person just starting out should be assigned a sort of mentor or person in charge of this beginning stage?
4. Can we say that in the beginning one accepts nearly all the requirements without making any objection?
5. Did you feel that way in the beginning?
6. Thinking about those beginning days at the university, could you mention the specific training a new teacher should get at this new stage in his or her professional life?
7. It seems to me that when you are hired by the university and they assign you to a particular field of learning, you should receive information about the university, the curriculum, the profile of the professional they are trying to train, the resources available, the duties and rights of the teacher, as well as the administrative aspects of the development of that curriculum, the academic programming, the rules of evaluation of learning. What was your experience concerning all that?
8. Individually, what activities have you done to meet your own professional training needs?
9. All these initiatives you have mentioned to me, do they fit into the training plan you are registered in, given that you are a classroom teacher?
10. I understand that at the university, when a teacher is hired as an ordinary teacher (like you, at present) as a result of an employment contest, the department must present a training plan for that teacher. I would like you to tell me about that training plan, what areas it has taken in, and what is happening with it right now.
11. I am interested to hear you say that you developed that training plan. I understand that in the training plan you have to consider things that concern you personally as well as what the department needs. Can you make that a little clearer?
12. As you see it, does the department have a policy and a training program for the teachers?
13. Could it be said that in that professional development one acts quite reluctantly?
14. Was it not a policy of the department?
15. Do you check out or do research on your teaching practice in any systematic way?
16. Are you right now participating in some research or study group?
17. Are the study topics connected with your disciplinary area?
18. Of all these initiatives that you have begun for your own training, which ones have been the most meaningful?
19. What are your training needs right now?
20. How do you think the training of teachers, instructors, and assistants should be handled at the university?