

Supporting New Teachers Through a New Teacher Academy

Educator Preparation Program (EPP) faculty work diligently to prepare teacher candidates for the realities of the chosen career path. By participating in authentic experiences in classrooms and systematic coaching and feedback during their preparation program, teacher candidates receive vital knowledge and experiences to step into the classroom. However, as stressors and unexpected challenges arise, studies show that about 20% of new teachers leave the profession after their first year. There is a great opportunity for EPP faculty to support new teachers to encourage persistence. This article will provide an overview of our innovative New Teacher Academy and lessons learned.

Keywords: *Best practices, New Teacher Academy, relationships, teacher retention*

According to the 2020-2021 Texas Teacher Workforce Report, new teachers are leaving the profession at faster rates after their first year than ever before (Texas Teacher Workforce, 2021). As the demand for qualified teachers rises, preparation programs are continuously seeking the best methods to equip teachers with skills needed to be successful and remain in the classroom. Because “novice teachers are significantly more likely to leave the field” (Bastian, et al., 2017, p. 1), it is vital that Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) find ways to support teachers beyond program completion, especially in the early years of practice. Therefore, we created a New Teacher Academy (NTA) for a local district to provide intentional support for novice teachers.

This article presents several distinguishing characteristics within the NTA that helped to create meaningful relationships between the university and the district. Additionally, we provide a framework for the creation of the NTA and explore some of the highs, lows, and lessons learned.

Theoretical Framework

The motivation behind the NTA was underpinned by the theoretical framework of McClusky’s Theory of Margin (McClusky, 1963). McClusky’s theory suggested that adults carry certain burdens, such as family, work, economic status, personal expectations, goals, and self-esteem, which affect their ability to feel competent and complete tasks. Adults are influenced by power sources that are physical, social, mental, economic, and skills based.

The theory addresses motivation as a measure of how many resources a person has to offset the demands that potentially diminish motivation for persisting (McClusky, 1963). If we apply this theory to new teachers, it means they continue working even in the most challenging environment as long as they have adequate resources to offset their stressors. We believed that

EPP faculty could support new teachers with key adequate resources that we will outline further in this article. The creation of our NTA had the benefit of supporting not only graduates of our EPP but was open to all new teachers in the region. This framework guided our philosophy and led us to seek ways to provide resources to help new teachers persist.

The New Teacher Academy

As we considered ways we could help new teachers in our region, we decided to start with a small, rural school district and work with the district administrators to form a support system. After several meetings, this NTA was collaboratively structured around needs identified by the administrators, as well as specific trainings and resources that would help struggling staff. The topics selected for the NTA were best practices to enhance collective teacher efficacy, practical tips and strategies, and innovative instructional practices. The district provided a budget for materials and food. They also provided the parameters for the NTA: Two-hour sessions held after school once a month for teachers with one to three years of experience in the district.

To help with this endeavor, we enthusiastically asked our fellow EPP instructors to volunteer to provide sessions on the topics identified based on each their strengths and passions. Because of the talented faculty and staff in the EPP, we were able to put together a solid NTA with the following sessions and presentations outlined for the first semester (Figure 1):

<p><u>Session 1: Enhancing Collective Teacher Efficacy</u> True Colors The Guide to Self-Care</p> <p><u>Session 2: Practical Tips & Strategies</u> Five Tips for Surviving the First Year Effective Communication for Better Classroom Management</p> <p><u>Session 3: Innovative Instructional Practices</u> Four-Fold Curriculum Utilizing Plickers</p>

Figure 1. Sessions for New Teacher Academy

In the following sections, we describe these sessions and presentations in detail.

Session 1: Enhancing Collective Teacher Efficacy

Our first session was held immediately after school in the superintendent’s board room. We began by explaining the purpose of the NTA and setting a positive tone for collaboration. For example, we provided dinner, and goodie bags filled with fun school supplies for every participant, and we told them the sessions would be informative, yet interactive and fun so that we could help them with strategies for self-care, as well as with instructional and management strategies to use in their classrooms. We also informed them that we were there to address their concerns and issues to support and help them along the way. This helped to generate excitement and develop a common understanding for the purpose of NTA. We chose two presentations to equip the new teachers with strategies to build on their individual and collective strengths and to help them stay motivated and able to persist: “True Colors” and “Self-Care”.

True Colors

For the first session, we invited staff from the Education Service Center (ESC) to provide the “True Colors” professional development to help empower participants to understand their individual and collective strengths (True Colors, n.d.). The activities in the presentation helped create a collaborative culture and build confidence and self-efficacy in the new teachers as they learned about their personality traits and strengths, as well as the personality traits and strengths of their colleagues. We wanted them to understand what they have to offer the district and how they can build upon their own strengths and work collaboratively with others.

The Guide to Self-Care

After the “True Colors” activities, our EPP’s professional school counseling instructors provided a presentation on self-care. The goal was to help the teachers identify strategies and plan for their own self-care so they would not experience burnout as the school year progresses and so that they would be better able to serve their students. For example, one of the strategies was to identify signs of stress that manifest in the physical dimension, such as through headaches, teeth grinding, insomnia, irritability, and muscle tension. The presenters explained that when these things manifest, it is important for the teachers to take some time for self-care by making time to exercise, rest, unplug from technology, and practicing mindfulness. The new teachers were given numerous resources, websites, and videos with ideas to practice self-care. All in all, this first session helped set the tone for a positive, supportive Academy and allowed the new teachers to gain a sense of community and trust among us and each other.

Session 2: Practical Tips & Strategies

The Five Tips for Success

The second session was focused on preparing the new teachers for the inevitable moments when they would face challenges at school. We chose two powerful presentations: “Five Tips for Surviving the First Years” and “Effective Communication for Better Classroom Management.” These were designed to help new teachers develop strategies to deal with current challenges and find strategies to help overcome obstacles.

For the first presentation, we provided a practical and fun ways to get through the first year. Because “novice teachers are significantly more likely to leave the field,” it is vital that they be provided with the support and resources necessary to find success (Bastian et al., 2017, p. 1). While working to find their groove in the classroom, the early years as a teacher can often feel like a fight for survival. To support our New Teacher Academy participants, presenters collected informal data from nearly 20 community teachers to find out what advice they had for new teachers entering the field. Below we elaborate on the 5 Tips for Success the veteran teachers identified.

Be willing to ask for help. Because teachers in rural districts may not have a set group planning time or may be the only one teaching their content and grade level, it is vital that they seek out help when needed. Attendees were encouraged to seek out brainstorming sessions with other faculty, ask to observe seasoned teachers, and pose questions after the observations.

Find your people. Mentoring is characterized by a practical approach to socializing newcomers within specific academic or professional settings through the support and guidance of a more experienced mentor (Colakoglu, 2015; Dominguez & Hanger, 2013). Within education, mentorship is characterized by a more experienced teacher or teachers who works alongside a novice to provide personal support and acculturation into the teaching profession (Gholam, 2018). However, in rural schools, a formal mentoring program is rare, and new teachers must be intentional about seeking out this invaluable support.

Find ways to manage the mess. Most educators would likely agree that teaching can get messy. Paperwork, unit plans, accommodations, parent contacts, test scores, and more can pile up quickly if teachers do not find a way to manage the mess. Academy attendees were encouraged to plan ahead when possible, find a planning system that worked for them, and to develop a system for managing administrative tasks like paperwork and parent contacts. For new teachers, this may mean putting together notebooks of related information to log parent calls and student details, getting organized with Google folders, or creating bins to hold important documentation.

Find ways to take care of yourself. The teaching profession often requires that teachers take work home with them to keep up with the demands of the classroom. The daily requirements of grading papers or planning lessons, along with the emotional stress of supporting students, can often feel overwhelming and lead to burnout. Within the training, new teachers were encouraged to be intentional about self-care by taking a day for rest when necessary and finding a balance between work and personal life.

Find joy. Research reveals that satisfied teachers are less likely to succumb to burnout and stress (Toropova, 2021). This reality makes it critical that new teachers work to focus on their “why” and find joy in the profession despite any particular challenges. It is vital that new teachers build relationships, work to be flexible, and celebrate all victories.

Effective Communication for Better Classroom Management

For the next presentation in Session 2, we engaged the new teachers through role play to review ways to positively and effectively communicate with their students’ parents. To do this, we reviewed strategies to help establish a relationship of mutual respect and trust by building relationships with parents from the very first day of school. For example, we explained that a short phone call telling a parent something positive about their child can set the tone for a great school year. The goal of that phone call is for parents to come away with the sense they can trust the teacher. Additionally, informing parents even about small problems along the way can establish positive rapport before challenging parent conferences arise.

This also helps when the time comes to have difficult conversations with parents. We have noticed that sometimes teachers feel so apprehensive about calling a parent when there is a problem in the classroom, they will ignore misbehavior to avoid a phone call. For new teachers, this seems to be a common fear. Therefore, to help the new teachers practice this strategy, we wrote and provided a sample script to use when contacting parents about student misbehavior in order to guide their conversation and make them feel more at ease (see Figure 2). We had the novice teachers practice this sample script and then discuss how they would utilize it in their own classrooms.

Hello, [Mr/s. Smith.]

This is your child's teacher, and I sure hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I need to let you know what happened today. *[Johnny had a rough time out on the playground today. As I was monitoring the children playing, I saw Johnny get upset about a game tag that he and some friends were playing. He pushed a little girl down and kicked some dirt on her after she tagged him during the game.]*

I talked to him and got his side, and he admitted that he was just upset and taking it out on the little girl. I've explained to him why it is unacceptable, and I know you wouldn't approve of this behavior at home either. You know that I have already assigned consequences for this same type of behavior (*or this is a more serious Code of Conduct violation*) so I have referred this incident to the principal to assign consequences.

I wanted to give you a **courtesy call** to let you know the whole story. The principal will talk to your child and assign consequences according to our school's Code of Conduct. She will notify you of what those consequences will be.

I know it isn't fun to receive negative feedback from school, but I know with your support, Johnny will learn from this and will make better choices in the future. I will make an effort to call you in a few days with some positive feedback! Thank you so much for your time and support!

Figure 2. Sample Script for Parent Phone Calls

This is a sample script for an elementary teacher (written by the authors), but it can be adapted to any level.

Lastly, in this session we utilized strategies from Kosmoski's and Pollack's (2005) techniques for difficult conversations. This book contains the top ways to diffuse difficult situations in the context of education, and it is filled with scenarios for practical application. We discussed our own scenarios regarding difficult situations involving classroom management and the potential for parents to become upset with the teacher, and we talked through some of the strategies for diffusing conversations that turn defensive. Then, to help the novice teachers gain a full understanding of these strategies, we provided scenarios and sample scripts that we wrote ahead of time, and we had the new teachers role play to practice ways to respond to difficult parent conversations. The fun part about these skits was that we provided a "what not to do" scenario for each one. For an example, see Figure 3, which is a sample scenario for an elementary teacher.

Presenter: A parent comes to see you after school, angry about what happened on the playground. You know nothing about it because the student didn't tell you. Here is one way to handle this:

Parent: Look at this! My daughter came home with a bruise on her head. She said that Jim pushed her into the monkey bars on the playground and that YOU did nothing about it!

Teacher: (Inappropriate) Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah! That's what I hear you saying right now. I can't be everywhere all at once, you know. When they're at recess, there's like 100 other kids out there. How am I supposed to know what happens while they're playing? I'm visiting with my coworkers who I haven't gotten to talk to all day! Plus, your kid probably made it up!

Presenter Response: Wait, wait, wait. That may be what you want to say, but it isn't going to win any points with the parent, and it is actually going to make it worse. Understand that parents believe everything their children tell them when they get home. Plan on that. When a parent calls or comes in upset, it's because they have only heard one side. If you are defensive, they will definitely believe their child. You have to help them calm down and tell them what you will do about this. Let's see the scene again with a more appropriate response.

Parent: Look at this! My daughter came home with a bruise on her head. She said that Jim pushed her into the monkey bars on the playground and that YOU did nothing about it!

Teacher: (Appropriate) This is serious! I was on the playground the entire time, walking around monitoring as the students were playing. I warned the students several times to quit playing tag around the jungle gym because it's dangerous. She did not tell me that she'd gotten hurt, probably because she didn't want to get in trouble herself. I will look into this further tomorrow and find out exactly what happened and who's responsible. Would you like an ice pack for her?

Presenter Response: Much better! One of the best techniques for resolving problems is to defer action until all parties are calm (until the next day, usually). When dealing with hostile parents, it is advantageous to have solid, accurate information about circumstances prior to your meeting. If a parent feels heard and believes that you are going to take care of the situation, they will quickly calm down and be on your side.

Figure 3. Sample Elementary Scenario and Script

This is a sample fictitious skit for an elementary teacher based on the strategies from Kosmoski and Pollack's (2005) work, but it can be adapted to any level.

After each scenario, we debriefed the types of responses that would be most effective in similar situations. The new teachers participated and really got into the scenarios, which made the presentation even more effective and a lot more light-hearted. Overall, Session 2 truly served to help the new teachers develop strategies to deal with current challenges and find strategies to help overcome obstacles.

Session 3: Innovative Instructional Practices

For Session 3, we provided dinner and more snacks, and we gave the new teachers lunch totes personalized with their district's name and mascot. We chose the theme of best practices for instruction, which included presentations called "Plicker Musical Chairs" and the "Four-fold

Curriculum.” As it was the last month of the fall semester, the goal was to provide teachers with strategies to work on in the spring semester. The presentations included a deep dive into the curriculum and innovative ways to gauge student understanding. To do this, we utilized Plickers, which is “a free, accessible and engaging educational tool used by millions of teachers around the world to assess their students and collect instant results in the classroom” (Plickers, 2021). We provided every new teacher with a set of Plickers cards, and we modeled implementation by giving them a Christmas-themed quiz while playing musical chairs for a little more fun mixed in. After the activity, we presented a thorough overview of the four-fold curriculum model to help teachers understand that curriculum is more involved than just a lesson plan.

Four-fold Curriculum

When having important conversations with groups of teachers or administrators, it is helpful for everyone to view the curriculum through a common lens. The word “curriculum” conjures up many images in different educators’ minds. Most educators perceive “curriculum” as content a teacher is supposed to teach. However, based on some of John Dewey’s original work, the curriculum is much broader than that. In other words, students learn from much more than just the content of a subject (Simpson, 2006). The curriculum model termed the “four-fold” curriculum is broken down into four parts. These four parts are: ecological, anthropological, epistemological, and pedagogical. Each of these four parts play an essential role in determining success of a teacher and most importantly, success of the student. Figure 4 provides more details on each of these four parts of the curriculum. Using the 4-fold curriculum model as a tool, we had teachers do a “self-assessment” in each of these four areas to better pinpoint areas of strengths and challenges. In this way, the new teachers were able to create a focused and effective action plan for instructional strategies to reach diverse learners.

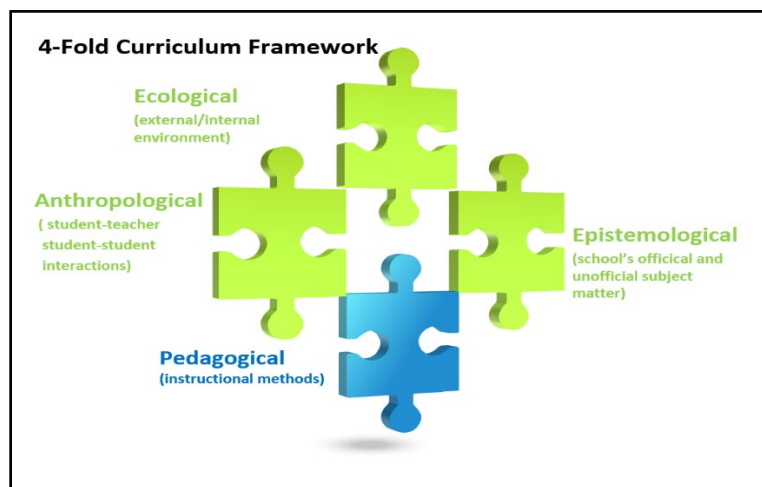


Figure 4. 4-Fold Curriculum Model

The image was created by the authors using the information from Simpson (2006).

Recommendations

There were several things that went well for the inaugural NTA that could be replicated. We recommend surveying administrators to determine district needs prior to developing the sessions. Using pre-surveys allowed us to be purposeful with the presentations and support we provided, meeting the specific needs of the district. We also recommend engaging Education Service Center (ESC) staff and EPP faculty to present professional development in the NTA. Utilizing these individuals helped to bridge the divide that often exists between districts and university faculty, and it served to strengthen collaboration among the district, university, and ESC. This also provided new teachers with specific experts they could contact throughout the year.

Another recommendation is to invite campus and district administrators to attend the NTA alongside their new teachers. In our experience, helped the new teachers to feel supported and valued by their own administration. This also allowed administrators the ability to monitor implementation of NTA strategies in the classroom and reinforce best practices. Additionally, providing food, snacks, and prizes during the NTA sessions are highly recommended. Dinner and snacks seemed to help to ease the stress of being kept after school, and we noticed all the participants took advantage of the complementary treats. Furthermore, the prizes seemed to create an atmosphere of celebration and excitement for attending the NTA. These goodies were purposeful and connected to the sessions for immediate use in the classrooms.

We continue to support these teachers by visiting the campus and classrooms, and we look forward to seeing the long-term benefits of the NTA. Whereas we recommend that EPPs build upon these successes, we also acknowledge that there is certainly room for growth.

Conclusion

We feel confident this NTA model works well because the feedback we received from the district administrators and the new teachers was highly favorable. These successes served to create a strong network of educators and allowed the EPP to build positive relationships with ESC staff, new teachers, and district administrators. Grounded in the framework of McClusky's Theory of Margin, which posits that adults will continue to work in the most challenging environment as long as they have adequate resources to offset their stressors, the NTA provides resources to help new teachers persist beyond the first year.

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