

SUPPORTING AND SUSTAINING THE 21ST CENTURY EDUCATOR: THE UNINTENDED BENEFIT OF THE NEW TEACHER ACADEMY

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Abstract

The enrollment in Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) across the nation has declined by about ten percent, and there is a projected need for more than 1 million new teachers over the next ten years (Barth, Dillon, Hull, & Higgins, 2016). As a result of this data, university EPPs are urged to create sustainable initiatives to recruit and retain teachers to meet the needs of a diverse student population. In response to this need of creating sustainable initiatives to support beginning teachers a New Teacher Academy was formed. The New Teacher Academy serves a bridge during the transition between preservice and inservice teaching. The implementation of such a program served as (1) a catalyst for professional learning and support once the new graduates left the confines of the university classroom, and (2) an opportunity to recruit recent graduates into graduate level programs.

Keywords: retention, faculty support of beginning teachers, recruitment for graduate programs

A common national concern among school districts, policy makers, and teacher education programs is the high rate of teacher turnover despite multiple efforts to address the situation. Since the early 1990's, researchers have noted that over 50% of beginning teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Luekens, Lyter, Fox & Chandler, 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) (2007) reports that teacher attrition in urban districts is over 20 percent, which is sometimes larger than the student dropout rate. These alarming numbers continue to concern researchers, teacher educators, communities and citizens. Furthermore, mentoring and induction programs have been created to support beginning teachers (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2008). Mentoring is considered a critical component in induction programs (Strong, 2009). In an attempt to positively influence retention rates among beginning educators, many school districts across the United States have implemented mentoring programs created specifically for teachers in their first

five years of the profession (Kelly, 2004; Parker, Ndoye, & Scott, 2009). Studies suggest that mentoring beginning teachers positively influences retention; therefore, support and guidance of the newly graduated teacher candidate may also have a substantial impact on the transition from preservice to inservice teacher (McMahan, Dunlap, & Fredrickson, 2017).

Over the many decades, induction programs have been reconfigured to assist, support and encourage beginning teachers to continue in the profession. Indeed, to “fix” the teacher turnover problem some policy makers, (such as those in the state of Texas), have required/mandated that novice teacher mentoring programs be created as a viable solution (Jimerson, Choate, & Dietz, 2015; Ensign & Woods, 2016). Texas Beginning Educator Support System (TxBESS) and Beginning Teacher Induction and Mentoring (BTIM) are such initiatives supported by the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC). TxBESS is “designed to provide systemic support for novice teachers in their first and second years as they enter into the classroom. Supporting beginning teachers assists in reducing turnover and a more experienced, better-qualified public school teaching staff. Beginning teachers who receive. TxBESS support appear to attain greater professional expertise more quickly than unsupported novices in the field. TxBESS has also been shown to lead to higher academic achievement among our Texas students” (Hutto Independent School District, 2016).

While effective mentoring programs help curtail the high attrition rates of new teachers, they must not be considered the sole support mechanism for new educators. Teacher educator preparation programs around the United States should consider restructuring and implementing new practices to better prepare 21st century teachers (Potter, Hollas, & Coyne, 2015). Focused efforts such as continuous course refinement to align with TEA, INTASC and TPESS implementing professional development schools, adding mentoring programs, and implementing best practices in student teaching experiences are examples of strategies/initiatives that have proven effective in better training beginning teachers for sustainability in schools (McMahan & Piro, 2013).

While all teacher education preparation programs are committed to implementing new measures to assist preparing teachers, many have not yet examined the potential impact supportive mentoring may have on new educators who have yet to step foot in their own classrooms. The responsibility for such guidance in this scenario, therefore, falls upon the school district which hires the new educator. It should be noted this structure may be beneficial and meaningful if novice teachers are mentored by veteran educators on their campus. However, if this is not the case, then a hole in the pipeline exists when teacher education preparation programs do not offer mentoring and coaching resources to support recent graduates as they transition into their first year of teaching.

This conceptual paper details one university’s attempt to aid recent graduates as they transitioned from student teaching into their first teaching position. Through the development and implementation of a New Teacher Academy, the university educator preparation program (EPP) sought ways to support recent graduates as they began their first year of teaching.

Literature

The existing body of literature focused on the need for additional training of novice educators is rich (Zeichner, 2010; McMahan & Piro, 2013). New programs, initiatives, and strategies constantly strive to find the magic that will ensure novice educators succeed and remain in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2006; McMahan & Garza, 2016). Mentoring has been postulated as a resource to assist new teachers as they enter their classrooms (Boogren, 2015; Ensign & Woods, 2016). Building on this, a two-pronged mentoring approach includes (1) having education preparation faculty develop working relationships with preservice teachers, and (2) maintaining that faculty mentoring relationship into the introductory teaching years through professional development opportunities.

In the past thirty years, many programs and initiatives have been created to support beginning teachers. All of these program and initiatives focus on reducing the attrition rates among beginning educators. However, these initiatives are often poised as the sole responsibility of the school and school district; no longer that of an educator preparation

program (Clandinin, et al., 2015). One universities Educator Preparation Program (EPP) solution was to create, develop and implement a New Teacher Academy. The New Teacher Academy was established to provide tailored professional development opportunities for recent graduates embarking on their first year of teaching in an effort to facilitate the transition period that exists between university preparation and actual school district employment (McMahan, Dunlap, & Fredrickson, 2017). Continued teacher education faculty support during this time could offer guidance and expertise to beginning teachers through a supportive role before they are placed under the evaluative eye of a principal overseeing the process.

Darling-Hammond, Wei, and Johnson (2009) assert that “teacher effectiveness is enhanced when they have many opportunities to learn (p.631). Quality professional learning experiences allow teachers to think about what they are learning through hands-on, authentic activities where they can practice and reflect over time. Additionally, “faculty who serve as mentors set the course for professional learning through the modeling of setting goals and continually seeking growth opportunities” (McMahan, Dunlap, & Fredrickson, 2017, p.6). Research by Hathaway, Nagda, & Gregerman (2002) suggests that the more engaged students are in the undergraduate experience, the more likely they will look into furthering their depth of knowledge by returning to graduate school. Furthermore, that is, the interactions and experiences students have at an institution have a stronger influence on their pursuit of graduate education than do their incoming background characteristics (Ethington & Smart, 1986). Therefore, engaging teacher education faculty in mentoring relationships with recent graduates coupled with providing meaningful learning opportunities post-graduation can have positive benefits for the university as well. In the sections below, the authors address how the implementation of a New Teacher Academy positively impacted enrollment in graduate school at the institution.

NTA’s Initial Run: A Pilot

The New Teacher Academy was initially launched in summer 2014 as an additional opportunity to support recent teacher education graduates as they transitioned into their first year of teaching. This first summer edition of the New Teacher Academy served as a pilot event to determine if recent teacher education graduates would return to campus for professional learning. The inaugural 12 attendees (all graduated from this university’s program in spring 2014) participated in a free, half-day event. Nine of the twelve participants had obtained a teaching contract before participating in New Teacher Academy. There were 11 females and 1 male participant. Ten participants identified as Caucasian and two participants identified as Hispanic. It should be noted that faculty did not receive final approval for New Teacher Academy’s existence until two weeks prior to the event date; hence, the small number of participants. The first opened with an address given by an alumnus who had been recognized as Teacher of the Year for her district in her first year of teaching. This session was followed by three 45 minute periods of professional development focused on technology integration, classroom management strategies, and proven approaches to engage English Language Learners (ELLs) in the classroom. These tailored session topics were derived from the institution’s previous years’ Principal Satisfaction Survey Results. Each time slot was facilitated by Teacher Education Faculty members who had research and/or experience in the targeted topics. The event was free of charge for participants who for their attendance earned 4 hours of Continuing Professional Education (CPE) credits. Faculty organizers secured donations for light snacks, beverages and materials needed for the New Teacher Academy. Operating under short notice, various university components donated such items as pens, bags, university-logo promotional materials, light snacks, and folders for the event. At the conclusion of the half-day professional learning experience, participants were granted certificates noting hours of CPE credit earned and asked to complete an evaluation survey of the days’ activities. The survey included questions related to the session topics, ways to improve the event, and self-perceptions of their preparedness to enter into their own classrooms as a result of any new ideas/strategies learned.

After the event, the session organizers carefully combed the end of event evaluation survey from the participants and analyzed for future planning purposes. Survey data from the event, revealed that participants wanted more “hands-on” sessions in which they could make things that they could then “take with them to their classroom.” The participants noted that the session that provided the most useful information was the classroom management one,

where they learned different ideas and classroom management techniques. Additionally, the technology session provided useful technology apps to use with students in their own classroom. The participants noted they would like “actual practicing teachers” to facilitate the sessions. This would allow the participants to “see what they did in their own classroom.” After a month into the start of the 2014-2015 academic year, the researchers followed up via email communication with New Teacher Academy participants as a means of providing continued vested interest and support as they began their school year. This email follow-up continued throughout the 2014-2015 academic year.

One unintended outcome of the pilot years of the New Teacher Academy was that it sparked interest in pursuing graduate school in two of the participants. Once the researchers learned of these former participants’ interest in Graduate education, they began to share information about extending their professional learning through the Masters of Education in Curriculum and Instruction and Masters of Education in Special Education graduate programs. While these two individuals (one male and one female), had not planned to enter graduate school in the first semester of their teaching job, it did facilitate the process of these individuals completing the necessary paperwork and applying to Graduate School at this institution (which they did) and are currently on track to complete their Master of Education in Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum.

NTA Year Two

Armed with the pilot data from 2014 New Teacher Academy, planning began for the 2015 NTA. Unlike the pilot year, the planning for the 2015 NTA involved forming a New Teacher Academy planning committee encompassing representatives from the university marketing team, members of the graduate school admissions team, and other interested TWU faculty members. During the early planning meetings, the university buzz was about recruiting more graduate students into programs. Armed with this knowledge, information about recruiting for graduate school was incorporated into the activities and a session in the 2015 New Teacher Academy. Using the information gained from the attendees of the pilot year New Teacher Academy and the Teacher Preparation Effectiveness Survey of First Year Teachers data, the 2015 version of the New Teacher Academy was facilitated by university professors and clinical partners (teachers and administrators in area districts). Unlike the pilot year, the 2nd year of New Teacher Academy included an expanded day in which participants attended more sessions, were provided lunch that was donated by area businesses, and earned 6 hours of CPE credits. During the summer of 2015, forty-five participants (over double participants than in the pilot year) attended the New Teacher Academy and participated in sessions focused on topics that previous 2014 data had demonstrated were of most importance to new teachers:

- Classroom Engagement;
- Classroom Management;
- Differentiated Instruction;
- Technology Integration; and
- Working with English Language Learners

These semi-structured sessions allowed recent teacher education graduates/new teachers to embark on a close professional mentoring relationship with clinicians and professors. Additionally, a working luncheon was presented by the Dean of the Graduate School on the importance returning for Graduate School to assist them in their first year in the classroom.

Data collected from participants in the 2015 New Teacher Academy suggested that faculty support and continued professional development opportunities during the transition time of preservice to inservice was valuable in terms of support and morale during the first year of teaching. Moreover, the data indicated that the event encouraged them to consider attending Graduate School. One participant said that discussing Graduate School created more questions than answers: “Next year have more [information] on Graduate School, like how many hours you have to take.” Furthermore, twenty-two participants agreed that they would be pursuing Graduate School at the institution in the 2016 academic year. Two of the participants, who were awarded a \$500 graduate scholarship award at the New Teacher

Academy, were planning to enroll into the Department of Teacher Education's master's program during the summer 2016 semester.

Implications

Today's educational environment will continue to battle the high levels of attrition for beginning teachers. Supporting new teachers is of paramount importance to university based EPPs as well as school districts. Induction activities, such initiatives like New Teacher Academy, not only support beginning teachers in their professional learning journey, they also have unintended benefits that can be helpful to universities that are challenged to increase enrollment in graduate level programs. As noted in this paper, recruitment efforts for graduate level education start immediately following the undergraduate experience. The authors postulate that beginning a graduate level program during the early years of teaching further support beginning teachers and ultimately might assist in efforts to decrease the high turnover rate of beginning teachers.

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