

BRING'EM BACK KATS! CREATING SUSTAINABLE PROFESSIONAL SPACES FOR EARLY CAREER TEACHERS

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Abstract

Far too many novice teachers say that they feel unprepared for the classroom after completing teacher preparation programs, yet we know that there is no more important in-school factor for students than having a great teacher, particularly in our highest-need communities. Understanding the importance of this idea, in conjunction with the Federal Teacher Preparation guidelines (2016) that ask universities to seek feedback from graduates about their teacher preparation program, led to the creation of an inaugural novice teacher event, Bring'em Back Kats (BBK). This paper highlights the initial data collected from the first and second annual BBK event that led to a sustainable in person and, because of the pandemic, virtual space to support our novice teacher candidates throughout their induction years. We were most interested in discovering if attending a university led professional development targeting early career teachers influences teachers' views regarding the role of the university. In addition, the study sought to determine professional development provided by their district's induction programs was relevant to their early career needs. Our research suggests that novice teachers do not seek out their college or university for support; however, they are seeking support in various content areas or pedagogy.

Keywords: novice teachers; university teacher preparation programs; support for induction years, teacher retention

Introduction

“Far too many teachers say that they feel unprepared for the classroom after completing teacher preparation programs, yet we know that there is no more important in-school factor for students than having a great teacher, particularly in our highest-need communities” (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, pg. 1). Understanding the importance of this idea, in conjunction with the Federal Teacher Preparation guidelines (2016) that ask universities to seek feedback from graduates about their teacher preparation program, led to the creation of Bring'em Back Kats (BBK) event. The initial BBK was a full day summer event, offered in August of 2016 and designed for recent graduates of our K-12 teacher education programs. With the success from the first event, the faculty created the second annual BBK event to offer even more teachers a professional development opportunity in August of 2017. This study examines data collected at the second event. The BBK event offered a variety of sessions that were presented by faculty to support early career teachers. The sessions dug deeper into issues of classroom management, diversity, special education issues in the classroom, and much more. These topics were

identified from the data collected from an annual College of Education Principal Survey seeking feedback about the effectiveness of our teacher preparation programs.

Upon the completion of the inaugural BBK event, university faculty saw this as an opportunity to develop a sustainable support model for their graduates. The long-term goal of the support model is to provide professional spaces where early career teachers can get support from fellow alumni and to continue to interact with familiar faculty. University faculty are aware that most districts have early career support for novice teachers. However, the district models and level of support vary greatly. Furthermore, “employer induction on its own cannot overcome the demands that individual beginning teachers invariably face in the day-to-day realities of teaching” (Maxwell, et al., 2016, p. 43). Thus, the faculty saw an opportunity and the need to create a model that allows for the development of professional spaces to support our graduates with the challenges they face in their induction years as teachers.

Literature Review

It is well documented that the first few years of teaching are exceedingly difficult, and many teachers do not remain in the profession. (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). It is also well known that beginning teacher mentoring programs assist in the transition from novice to competent during the early years of a teacher’s career (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Stanulis & Flooden, 2009; Wang, et al., 2008; Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Induction programs are intended to support new teachers to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Commonly, induction programs exist at the county or school district level. Often these programs have a more-narrow view of induction, which does not necessarily think about induction as part of the development on a professional continuum, but it is often considered a short-term support designed to help novice teachers to deal with the first year on the job (Fieman-Nemser, 2001).

Furthermore, “novices need opportunities to talk with others about their teaching, to analyze their students’ work, to examine problems, and to consider alternative explanations and actions” (Fieman-Nemser, 2001, pg. 1030). These types of activities support the development of a teacher’s efficacy. “The first years of teaching could be critical to the long-term development of teacher efficacy” (Hoy & Spero, 2005, p. 344). Developing an understanding of policy, deepening content knowledge, furthering teaching skills and supporting teacher efficacy development is quite a bit to ask of school districts, who are continually stretched to meet the needs of their students and teachers. So, this leads to the question: Is there a role for university faculty to be involved in beginning teacher mentoring programs?

It is a possibility that university faculty could be an additional level of support in a teacher’s growth during the early years. DeWert, et al., (2003) suggest this type of support is possible and beneficial to early career teachers. There has not been a follow up on this study to suggest that it was a sustainable model, thus there is a need to further examine university support models. Maxwell, Harrington, & Smith (2010) studied how an Australian university supported their primary and secondary graduates through on-line interactions. The results of this study showed participants sought the most support during the first school term and then continued to seek support throughout the school year at various levels depending on which grade they taught. A key recommendation from this study is “Induction needs to be distinguished from support. Induction necessarily prepares for the general context; this is our school and policies, etc. Support results from experience in/of a specific situation” (Maxwell, et al., 2010, pg. 55). This recommendation helps to delineate the role of the school district and the potential

role of the university faculty. The proposed research study wants to examine the idea of university faculty-led professional development supporting their graduates in the early years of their career.

While there is significant research on the impact and effectiveness of induction programs, there is limited research that addresses support models for early career teachers that do not consist of professional learning communities or professional development. This research seeks to create meaningful professional support models for our alumni throughout the induction years. This idea has not really been explored in the research. Furthermore, research suggests that novice teachers are often not comfortable sharing their struggles or problems with mentors’ due to the desire to keep their job (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Therefore, the researchers are interested in exploring if the university can provide a model that allows induction teachers to have a space to seek support.

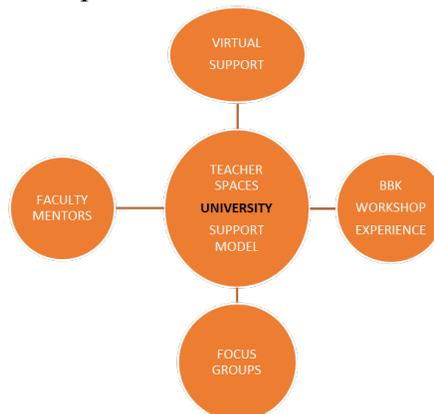
Few studies address a university’s role of support to their graduates during induction. DeWert, et al., (2003) examined the ideas of support from the university to recent graduates. However, since this study, there has been no recent research in U.S. on this topic. Maxwell, Harrington, & Smith (2010) conducted a study in Australia examining online support for recent graduates of a teacher preparation program. Since there is limited research on the role of the university as a support model for induction teachers, in addition to the new guidelines being set forth by the U.S. Department of Education, there is urgent need to pursue this line of research.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 was created by the researchers to consider different teacher spaces that can be used to support early career teachers as they transition from the novice to competent phase on the professional growth continuum. At the center of the framework is a 4-year state university, known for producing many Texas teachers. The faculty saw that it was necessary to create support spaces for our teacher graduates. Additionally, the BBK event, offered each semester, provides a space to recruit future cohorts of our teacher graduates. Through ongoing faculty mentorship, online support (blogs, journals, Discussion boards), and face-to-face focus groups, we hope to provide a meaningful, effective transition experience for our novice teachers. At the same time, university faculty become well informed about what methods and approaches to teaching are working various school districts. This research focuses on the BBK workshop experience both in person and virtually.

Figure 1

Early career teacher support conceptual framework for novice teacher support and mentorship both virtual and in person professional development.



Methodology

Since the researchers are in the beginning stages of developing their support model for early career graduates, this study looked to examine following research question: Does attending a university led professional development targeting early career teachers influence teachers' views regarding the role of the university?

Participants

Novice teachers. There were 45 participants in this study, of which 17 were practicing classroom teachers and 28 were student teachers. There were 6 first year teachers, 2 second year teachers, 1 fourth year teacher, 2 fifth year teachers, and 6 teachers with 6+ years of experience. Since the BBK event was trying to target early career teachers, the researchers decided only to collect data on years of teaching 0-6+. Of the practicing teachers, seven PreK-3, four 4-6, and three high school (9-12) teachers. Three teachers self-identified as Special Education teachers with no specific grade level. One high school teacher self-identified as both a High School and Special Education teacher. However, the participant was only counted once in the data. The three teachers that self-identified as a Bilingual or English as a Second Language teacher all taught grades PreK-3. Seventy-six percent of the classroom teachers were alumni of our teacher education programs.

Student Teachers. The twenty-eight student teachers started their student teaching placements the week following the Bring 'em Back Kats (BBK) professional development. At the time of the event, fourteen student teachers were completing their credential in Early Childhood through sixth grade. There were five middle grades (4-8) student teachers and two high school student teachers (9-12). Furthermore, three student teachers self-identified as Bilingual teachers with no grade level designation and four student teachers self-identified as Special Education teachers with no grade level designation.

Procedure and Analysis

A mixed method approach was used to collect and analyze data from a survey that was given at the end of the BBK event. The survey included both Likert scale questions and a space for open-ended responses to each question. There were six questions, in addition to some demographic information questions. Four of the questions had both Likert scale and space for open-ended responses. Two of the questions were open-ended responses only. The survey instrument was developed by the researchers with the intent to seek feedback from the BBK event.

This study used nonprobability sampling procedure (Ross, 2005), which limits the generalizability of the results. However, the intent of this research was to examine a targeted population, thus resulting in the use of a convenience sample. There was a total of 53 teachers present at the BBK event. With 45 respondents to the survey, the response rate for this research was 84.9 %. The high response rate can be attributed to the target population of the survey, who self-selected to attend the event.

The analysis of the responses from the open-ended questions of this study draws on the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in which participant data is currently being analyzed to seek common themes and categories that reflect the participants' perceptions of their teacher development. The

quantitative analysis involves descriptive statistics. A process of triangulation of all data sources will validate our data analysis and overall findings.

Results

Results from the survey data indicate the teacher participants' views regarding the role of our university faculty-led professional development.

Prepared to Teach

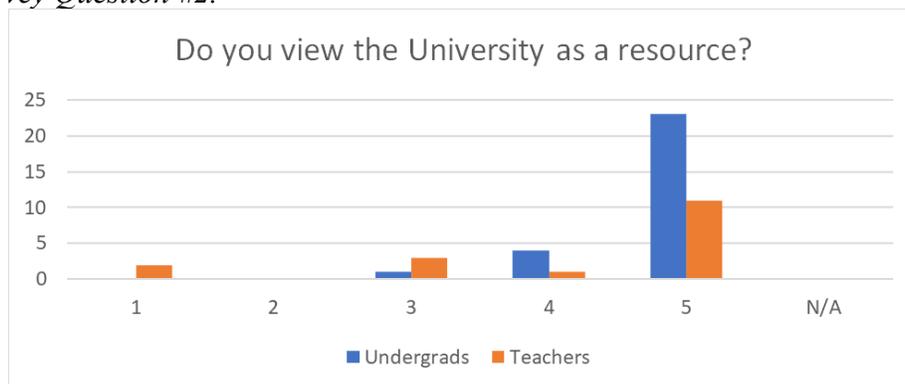
Question #1 on the survey asked participants to rate how well their teacher preparation program prepared them to teach. Both teachers (94%) and student teacher participants (90%) indicated that they felt well-prepared to teach. Seventy-six percent of the teacher responses were our graduates. Two early career teachers provided the following comments, "I felt prepared for my first year completely" and "The [Literacy/Content Methods] Block classes really helped with real world experience. I liked having them at the elementary schools." Furthermore, a first-year teacher said, "There are some things I am still figuring out, i.e. balanced literacy." Sixty-one percent of the student teacher responses scored this question a 5; 29% gave the response of a 4 and 11% gave an NA response. The overall student teachers' response of 90% might be a result of their lack of solo full-time teaching experience. "Although I am not in the classroom yet, I think Sam Houston State has prepared me well," shared one student teacher participant.

Viewed as a Resource

Question #2 from the survey asked the participants if they viewed Sam Houston State as a resource. All special education (SPED) and Bilingual practicing teachers viewed the university as a resource, and all were 1st or 2nd year teachers. Overall, 65% percent of the teacher participants scored this question a 5 indicating that Sam Houston State University (SHSU) was viewed as a resource (See Figure 2). Six percent rated this question a 4; 18% rated this question a 3 and 12% gave a score of a 1. Most of the teacher participants who scored this item a "1" had over 6 or more years of teaching experience. One first year ESL teacher said, "Although I have not used it [SHSU] as a resource I do understand that I can use Sam Houston State as a resource." Another teacher participant shared the following, "Absolutely, our professors always keep the door open for us!" another said, "Yes, I like getting updates [from the university] on things I can do."

Figure 2

Responses to Survey Question #2.



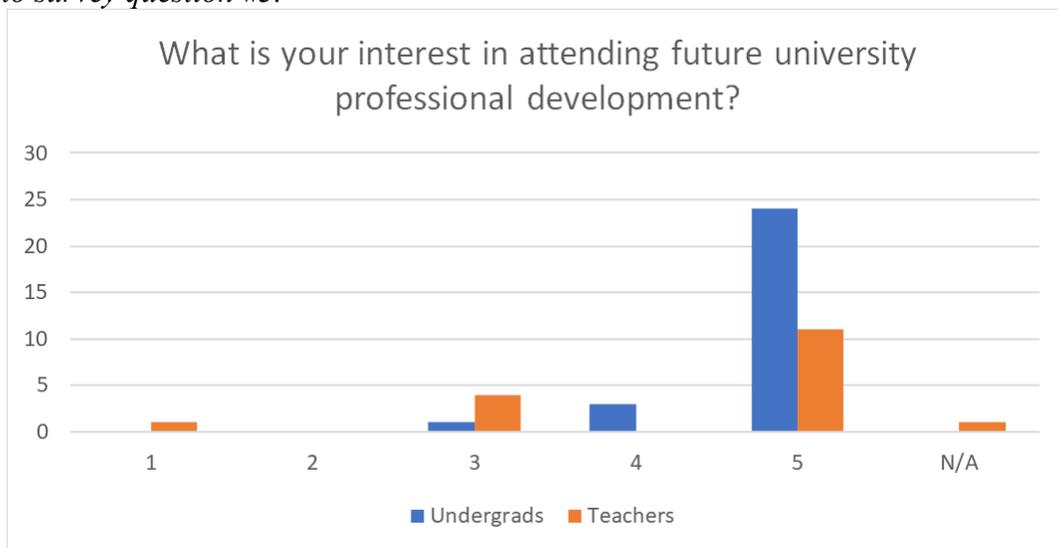
Note: 5 = Very likely; 1 = Not very likely

Not surprisingly, 82% of our student teacher participants viewed their university as a resource. Fourteen percent gave a rating of a 4 and 4% gave it a 3 (See Figure 2.) “Yes, I believe Sam Houston State is a great school for educational learning and for furthering education, providing career services and the testing center.”

Interest in Participating in Future University Professional Development

Question #3 on the survey asked both teacher and student teacher participants to rate their interest in participating in future professional development. Figure 3 show that 65% percent of the teacher participants rated this item a 5; 24% gave a rating of a 3; 6% rated it a 1 and 6% marked N/A. Most of the 65% of the teachers interested in future university-led professional development were early career teachers; whereas those who gave a rating of 3 or less had more years of teaching experience. One teacher responded, “Yes! I love guided math! I would love to learn more about small group session instruction and helping struggling students.” Most of the student teachers (86%) were interested in additional professional development. One student teacher participant shared the following, “I really enjoyed this event. It really opened my eyes to teaching and what it is going to take to be a teacher. I loved hearing the stories from seasoned teachers. I can never learn enough!”

Figure 3.
Responses to survey question #3.



Note: 5 = Very likely; 1 = Not very likely

Likelihood of attending BBK next year

Survey question #4 asked participants to rate the likelihood that they would attend BBK next year. Eighty percent of the participants indicated that they would attend next year’s event and 18% said they were not interested in attending future BBK events. It is interesting to note that the participants who were most likely to attend next year’s event were *all* early career teachers and student teachers. Whereas those participants who indicated that they were not likely to attend next year’s BBK were all veteran teachers with more than 6 years of teaching experience. This data supports the idea that early career teachers are more likely to seek and attend professional development than their veteran counterparts. One first year

teacher provided the following feedback, “This [BBK] was a wonderful refresher. As I am going into my first full year, I am sure I will need it all again! Thank you!” Another said, “Very likely... I feel it will prepare me to set me up for a good school year.” One teacher said that she liked the timing of this year’s BBK event as it was planned a week earlier to avoid interfering with school district in-service training. “I could not attend last year’s conference because I had already gone back to work. I like how this year it was earlier in August.”

Areas of Additional Preparation

Survey question #5 asked participants to identify areas in which they felt they needed additional preparation. Classroom Management, Technology Integration, and Strategies for working with Bilingual students were identified by both the early career and student teachers. Early career teachers are still struggling with similar areas of teacher as the student teachers. Some teachers were interested in training that involved “getting grants” and “interactive word walls, small group instruction, student engagement and struggling students.” Several student teacher participants were interested in topics such as “leadership” and “...using technology in mathematics and secondary classrooms.” The student teachers identified additional preparation in, “getting ready for the first day of school and first year learning and teaching.” One student teacher said, “I’m never done learning – so I’m always looking for extra preparation.”

Motivation for Attending BBK

The final survey question #6 asked participants to share their motivation for attending the BBK conference. Teacher responses ranged from “love of learning” to the “price was right!” Participants viewed the event as a “great professional development opportunity” and a “worthwhile learning experience.” One teacher participant said she, “Loved the idea of getting back to Sam Houston State.” Another claimed that she came because she wanted to see her professors, students, and alumni that she knew and had graduated with. She went on to say “I loved the education I got at SHSU and looked forward to attending. Everything—from the professors to the content – has helped me as a teacher.” One student said that she had recently graduated and felt that she needed, “an extra boost to get things going.” Another said that she wanted to increase her knowledge about technology, applications and be better prepared for the school year. She also said that she saw attending BBK as a “Great opportunity to go to different workshops and walk away with knowledge in areas I’m not the most confident about.” A veteran teacher shared the following,

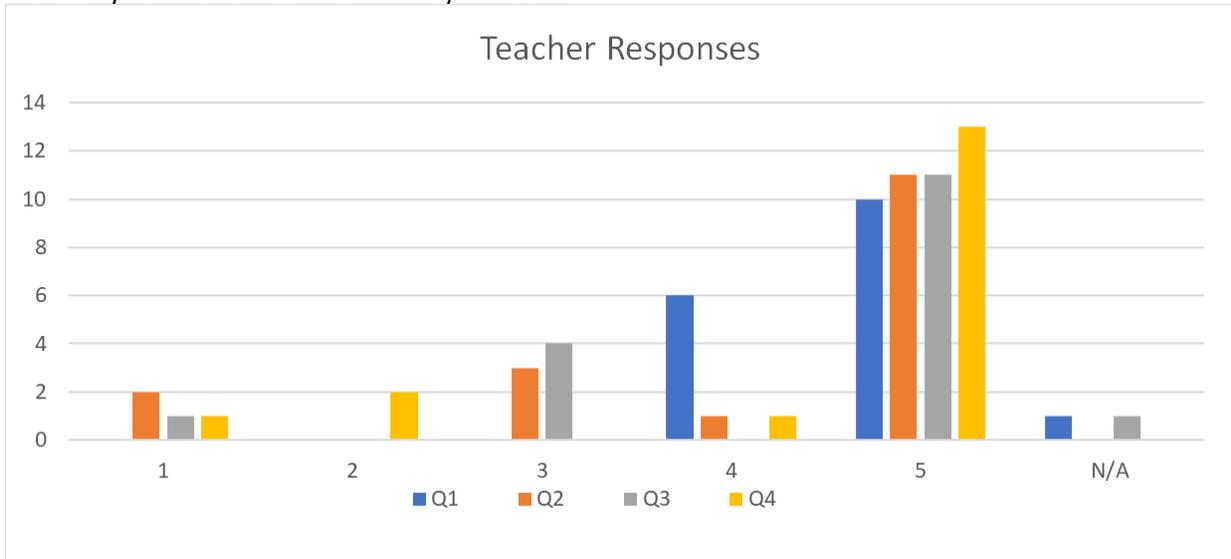
As a teacher, I am always looking for where to improve and having taught for 25+ years, I sometimes feel the need to get “updated” with trends and methods. A former student of SHSU and fellow colleague encouraged me to attend this conference.

Most student teacher participants indicated that they were encouraged to attend this professional development at the recommendation of a professor to gain professional development hours. However, others were simply motivated by the opportunity to grow professionally, further develop as a teacher and “...to have something to put on their resume.” One future teacher summed up her motivation to attend BBK in this way, “I am here to continue my education. I always want to learn!”

Practicing Teachers

When examining only the teachers’ responses, there were some interesting findings. Overall, the classroom teachers had positive views. Interestingly, teachers with more than six-plus years of teaching experience had more negative responses than teachers with less than 6 years teaching. Our most experienced teachers had the least interest in working with the university in future endeavors. These findings suggest that our target audience is accurate. Early career teachers are seeking more assistance and seem to gain more from university-led professional development than their veteran counterparts.

Figure 4
Teachers' responses to all Likert scale questions.



Note: 5 = Very likely; 1 = Not very likely

Lastly, questions 5 and 6 provided insight to the topics that induction teachers are interested in learning about. The session topics of the BBK event were based upon feedback from principal surveys. While the topics of classroom management, technology integration, and bilingual education best practices were like the principal surveys. The participating teachers also identified grant-writing, leadership training, mathematics in secondary education as future topics to be explored. Furthermore, a love for learning in conjunction with the need to connect and network with fellow alumni as well as professors motivated many of the BBK participants.

Conclusions

After taking a closer look at the findings of this research, participants did feel well prepared to face the challenges of their first year of teaching. With 76% of the participants being graduates of SHSU, this is a positive affirmation for our teacher preparation programs. The participating teachers and student teachers did view Sam Houston State as a resource for learning and teaching. These same teachers and student teachers were interested in attending future university-led professional development events. There was an interesting parallel in the response percentages for questions 2 and 3 on the survey. If the participants viewed SHSU as a resource, there was interest in attending future BBK events. This was true for both practicing and pre-service teachers. This finding is important as the university faculty continue to develop their support model for induction teachers. The results indicate that participants have a strong

interest in continuing working with SHSU. This interest allows for the space for the development of a support model.

Implications

There are several implications from this study. First, we verified our target audience. Data from this study shows that early career teachers (0-5 years) will participate in future university-led professional development. This willingness to participate will open a professional space for a support model to be created by university faculty. Furthermore, induction programs occur in numerous ways at the district or county level. Typically, induction programs focus on district on school policies and procedures with some mentoring. Well-meaning mentoring programs can falter upon implementation due to lack of training of mentors and overemphasis on structure. Teacher retention research suggests that early career teachers need both induction and support to be successful (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Maxwell, Harrington & Smith, 2010; Smethem, 2007; Wynn, Carboni & Patall, 2007). Induction occurs in districts across the country; however, where is the support occurring for early career teachers? Maxwell, Harrington, & Smith (2010) indicate that support needs to be “situationally specific.” Our research suggests a similar idea in that our participants are seeking support in various content areas or pedagogy which is different from what is typically delivered in districts’ induction programs. We are continuing our plans to provide this support program for all our early career graduates. We were able to sustain the BBK professional development program twice during the pandemic years using Zoom as a format and will be embarking on our first In-person event post pandemic in the Fall 2022.

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