

Teacher Academy Cohort 4: A Deep-Dive into NEPF

Introduction

For regional professional development programs to facilitate impactful professional learning, shifting from teacher acquisition of new knowledge to reflective practitioners is a must. The Northeastern Nevada Regional Professional Development Program (NNRPDP) met this challenge by facilitating Teacher Academy 2017-18, cohort 4, in conjunction with small collaborative groups called Critical Friends Groups (CFG™).

The overarching outcome of Teacher Academy was to improve instructional practices through the implementation of high-leverage instructional standards known as the Nevada Educator Performance Framework (NEPF). Teacher Academy focused on the first two goals of NEPF: 1) foster student learning and growth, and 2) improve educators' instructional practices (NDE: NEPF FAQ, 2018).

The following vignette provides an image of what it might look like for teachers to work with colleagues in Teacher Academy to deepen their knowledge of instructional practices aligned to the NEPF.

Vignette:

Forty teachers from northern Nevada convene for a day of learning about NEPF Standard 3: Students Engage in Meaning-Making through Discourse and Other Strategies. Teachers come prepared with background knowledge by reading and annotating the literature review for this standard. The day begins with a reminder to be the kind of learner you expect your students to be and to lean into discomfort. After a quick overview of the day, the focus is on *Indicator 1: Teacher provides opportunities for extended productive discourse between the teacher and students and among students*. To better understand extended productive discourse as described in Indicator 1, teachers engage in two tasks – a Tug of War task designed to explore multiple perspectives around a dilemma, and Stronger and Clearer Each Time (SCET), a strategy designed to utilize the power of collaboration to clarify thinking. In the Tug of War task, a dilemma, the pros and cons of rewards in education, is presented by the regional coordinators. Teachers work in collaborative groups to generate factors (tugs) that “pull” at each side of the dilemma. Collaboratively, members of the group place each tug, or factor, on the line representing a rope used in Tug of War. The tugs, or pros and cons, vary in importance, or weight, making placement on the rope crucial in the attempt to pull the other side across the middle. Important factors are often placed near the end of the rope to represent anchors while factors that make little difference are placed closer to the fulcrum. The ensuing discourse is influenced by research, experiences, examples, or philosophical beliefs as well as the diverse personalities engaged in the argument.

At the culmination of the Tug of War task, teachers reflect on how well the task provided opportunities for meaning making through extended productive discourse. With this reflection in mind, facilitators introduce the next task, the Stronger and Clearer Each Time strategy, illustrated in a video of grade 3 students (Zwiers & Crawford, 2011). They also provide teachers with a graphic organizer to scaffold the new strategy.

Reflecting on the thinking and learning opportunities produced by the Tug of War task, teachers are asked to consider the alignment to *Indicator 1: Teacher provides opportunities for extended, productive discourse between the teacher and student(s) and among students* and write his or her initial thoughts regarding the indicator in the graphic organizer.

Teachers pair up to compare ideas, evidence, and language with the goal of making their original thought stronger and clearer. After comparing with two other partners, the final task is to revise their original idea incorporating their partner’s ideas, to articulate concluding thoughts about what it means for a teacher to provide opportunities for extended, productive discourse between the teacher and students and among students.

The final task culmination asks teachers to reflect on their own learning and self-assess their understanding of NEPF, Indicator 1.

This structure of learning from acquiring background knowledge by studying the literature review, followed by engaging in tasks that lend themselves to specific NEPF standards and specific indicators, demonstrates what NEPF actually looks like. Moreover, giving teachers the opportunity to evaluate the skills and learning required to complete a task using the performance levels of the NEPF solidifies their understanding of these standards.

Instructional Context

Teacher Academy, cohort 4, was offered to every school in the six northern school districts that are encompassed in the NNRPDP’s designated service area. Each school principal was given the following email, “*Teacher Academy targets committed teachers who embrace learning and change so please begin thinking about teachers at your school who would benefit most from this opportunity. Past participants from your school have suggested _____ & _____. I will contact you by phone shortly to follow up and get the names of your nominees.*” Nominations from administrators, along with recommendations from alumni Teacher Academy participants helped ensure support for this professional learning. Teachers were carefully selected based on their applications.

Teacher Academy 2017-18 was made up of 39 teachers from 24 schools, representing grade levels kindergarten to high school (see table 19). The diverse cohort included a high school agriculture teacher, special education teachers, charter school and public school teachers, teachers in self-contained contexts as well as departmentalized contexts, teachers from small departments, and solo teachers who are the department. Some teachers traveled 180 miles one way to attend the full day sessions and collaborate with colleagues.

Table 1: Teacher Academy Participants by District and Grade Level

District	Number of Schools	Number of Teachers	K-5	6-8	9-12
Elko	13	21	14	3	3
Eureka	1	1	1	0	0
Humboldt	4	9	7	2	0
Lander	3	6	2	2	2

District	Number of Schools	Number of Teachers	K-5	6-8	9-12
White Pine	2	2	1	0	1
Total	24	39	26	7	6

Demographics of the students taught by the cohort 4 teachers are also diverse. Multicultural populations of Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Blacks, and Whites make up the demographics. There are English language learners, special education students, and many students who qualify for free or reduced lunch/breakfast. It is not uncommon for any one teacher to have one or more students in each of the above subcategories.

Initial Data and Planning

NNRPDP launched the first cohort of Teacher Academy in 2014-15 in response to the passage of AB222 which outlined the expectation of a statewide performance evaluation system for teachers and school administrators. Nevada Department of Education tasked the Regional Professional Development Programs to administer trainings on the NEPF. The depth of the framework and the limited number of teachers who could be supported in each year’s Teacher Academy led to continued cohorts in subsequent years. Teacher Academy 2017-18 was cohort 4 serving veteran teachers as well as teachers in the first few years of their careers. Responses to application questions revealed the need to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the NEPF as well as practical instructional and pedagogical strategies aligning to the NEPF. For example:

What do you want to learn about improving your pedagogy through the NEPF instructional standards?

As an instructor, I want to continue to learn how to perfect the craft of teaching, by implementing all NEPF instructional standards on a daily basis. All students deserve to be in a collaborative learning environment where they can work with others to show their critical thinking and metacognitive skills. I would like to learn about more strategies to increase student participation and dialogue where students are using accountable talk strategies to facilitate their own classroom discussions based off of instructional content.

What exactly meets NEPF Standards?

Since I am the only teacher at my school, I am responsible for the delivery of all subjects. Having a better understanding of the NEPF instructional standards will help me in the delivery of these subjects to my students. The fact that I will be working with other teachers will help me to view these standards from different perspectives. As of now, I have little or no interaction with other teachers in our district. Being able to witness how other teachers apply these standards will help me become a better teacher.

Cohorts 1, 2, and 3 supported a total of 134 teachers. This is a mere 12% of the teachers in the NNRPDP region. Continued professional learning focused on NEPF is crucial for the remaining 88% of the region’s teachers.

Guided by John Murray's *Designing and Implementing Effective Professional Learning*, as well as Thomas Guskey's *Five Levels of Professional Development* (2002), regional coordinators collaborated in the initial planning creating a broad overview of the professional development opportunity that included both full day Teacher Academy and half-day CFG. Through careful consideration of teacher location, grade level, and subject area, coordinators created diverse and equitable CFGs.

Pairs of coordinators assigned a specific NEPF standard and planned content details for the full day Teacher Academy as well as content for the accompanying CFG. Peer feedback guided planning of content delivery, participant engagement and interaction, reading assignments, intentional questioning, and reflection prompts.

Learning Design

Teacher Academy cohort 4 began with an orientation day in August 2017 prior to the start of the school year. Teachers arrived excited about this unique professional development opportunity. They were energized and easily motivated. Being nominated by their principals and having to apply for Teacher Academy set the tone for this elite opportunity.

Following orientation, Teacher Academy met as a whole group for five full-day content trainings beginning in September 2017 and concluding in February 2018. This targeted, sustained professional development, extended throughout the school year, gave teachers an opportunity to reflect on the learning and implement it into their classrooms. Facilitated by NNRDPD coordinators, each of the five days focused on one NEPF standard and its indicators. Each day began with learning outcomes and success criteria. Throughout the day, coordinators intentionally modeled instructional strategies and pedagogy aligned with the NEPF standards. Learning included a deep dive into the meaning of each indicator, examples of instructional strategies aligned to the standards and indicators, and research that supports each standard. In addition, teacher participants used the NEPF performance levels to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies and tasks of the day. Careful planning ensured that participants had opportunities to experience the standards and indicators first-hand throughout the day.

In addition to the full day professional learning, teachers deepened their NEPF knowledge by participating in CFGs. These half-day professional groups, limited to five or six teachers per CFG, met in between whole day Teacher Academy to provide additional support for implementation. CFG also met the last hour of the whole day Teacher Academy. CFG work included looking at student work together, professional reading and reflection, and supporting each other as professionals. The members of the CFGs developed a close relationship that allowed this support to happen.

Processing time happened throughout the day and was maximized in their small group CFG during the last hour of Teacher Academy. Teacher reflections and goals indicate learning and intended transfer into their classrooms. For example:

Throughout the Teacher Academy I find myself coming in in the morning with preconceptions and am surprised as to what the standard is really about. I am motivated

to really think about my classroom culture and try to purposely analyze what I can do to improve and make things even better.

We were able to have some really good discussions regarding metacognition, formative assessments, safe classroom environments, and dilemmas that we may have in our classroom. I found a lot of value in that we are able to discuss and also share real applications to these concepts. The discussions today allowed me to “feel” what that would look like in my classroom and how to use the strategies to better my teaching.

I really want to get better at teaching standard 4.1. I want to work hard on making sure my students know what they are learning, why they are learning it, and how they will know if they’ve learned it.

Metacognition plays a much larger role in my classroom than I had originally thought. I want to implement new visual learning strategies for students to utilize. One idea that stood out to me was the concept of taking the initiative in our thinking/learning. I want to show my students how to be “out of the box” thinkers.

Measurement

Teacher Academy participant reflections, NNRPDP evaluations, post surveys, teacher goals, and progress toward individual goals were the measurements used to assess educators’ instructional and pedagogical practices aligned to NEPF standards and indicators. Additionally, teachers created a year-in-review presentation showcasing take-aways from the experience.

NNRPDP Evaluation

The NNRPDP evaluation consists of seven self-assessment statements which are rated using a 1-5 Likert scale. Participants completed this evaluation at the end of every Teacher Academy full day and every half-day CFG.

Teacher Reflection

Participants completed an open-ended reflection after every Teacher Academy session and CFG. To support teachers in reflecting deeply, reflection prompts from the National School Reform Faculty were provided. NNRPDP coordinators reviewed these reflections and considered the feedback when debriefing each Teacher Academy and planning for the next session.

Post Survey

At the conclusion of Teacher Academy cohort 4, participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire designed to measure various attributes of their learning. Educators responded to questions regarding

- understanding of NEPF standards and indicators;
- confidence in implementing NEPF standards and indicators;
- self-assessment of standards most effective in implementing;
- individual learning that impacted instructional pedagogy; and

- affective benefits of Teacher Academy.

Goal and Progress

At the culmination of each CFG, teachers routinely set a goal based on the content learning of CFG or Teacher Academy. Reflection on progress was recorded in a shared document and reported during the CFG. The goal setting and reporting protocol provided evidence of teachers changing instructional practice aligned to the NEPF.

Results and Discussion

Results from the NNRPDP evaluation (see figure 27) demonstrate teachers' self-assessment of learning progress as a result of Teacher Academy. The collective evaluation ranges from 4.34 to 4.85 on the Likert scale of 1 to 5 where a rating of 1 indicates not at all and a rating of 5 indicates to a great extent.

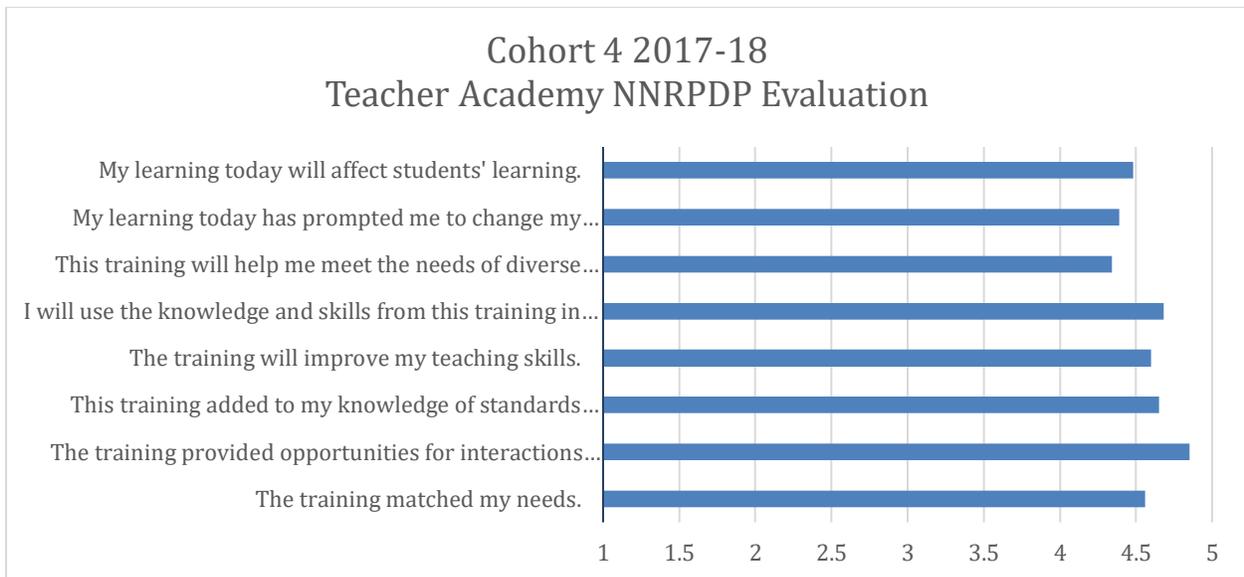


Figure 1: Teacher Academy Evaluation

Reflections from participating teachers related to instructional and pedagogical strategies required to meet the NEPF standards and indicators include

- *My biggest take away from Teacher Academy was the deepened understanding of the NEPF that I am evaluated on and the toolbox of strategies that will enhance my instruction with purpose.*
- *Teaching is a fluid practice; strengthen teaching through NEPF indicators and truly understanding them and now they promote quality teaching and learning.*
- *Participating in Teacher Academy has helped deepen my understanding of the NEPF standards as well as analyze how to better understand my student's thinking and how to help them make connections. I need to minimize teaching top down and allow students the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning.*
- *I have a better understanding of the NEPF standards, which I implement daily in my classroom. This process has helped me synthesize this information and implement new strategies in my classroom.*

Highly correlated to the NNRPDP evaluation’s results, the Teacher Academy post survey indicates a deep understanding (see Figure 28) of the five NEPF standards and indicators by participants as well as high levels of confidence (see Figure 29) to implement them.

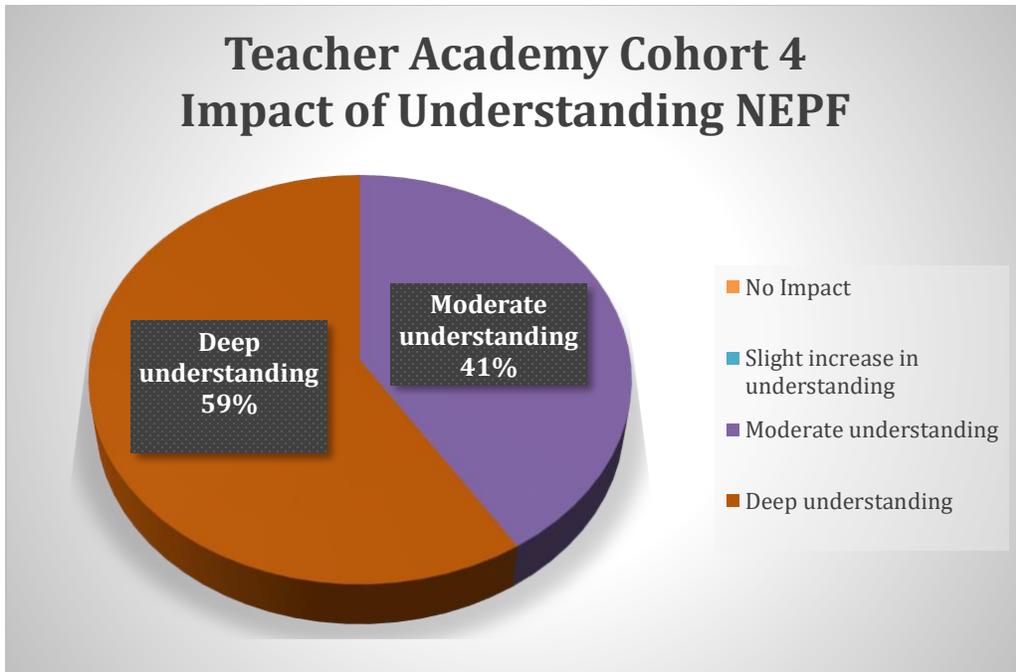


Figure 2: Impact of Understanding NEPF

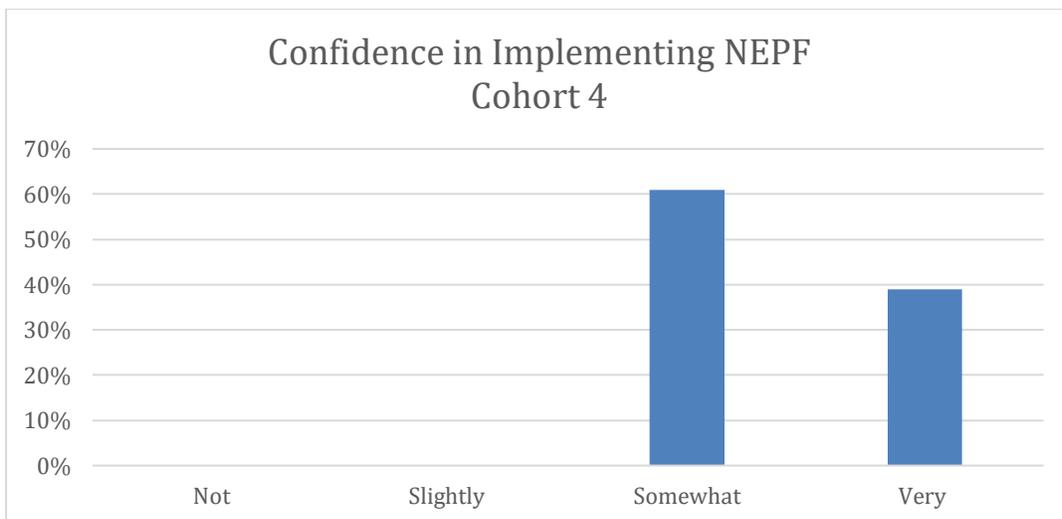


Figure 3: Confidence in Implementing NEPF

Affective Benefits

Teachers reported secondary benefits stemming from Teacher Academy having a profound impact on teaching and learning that extend beyond the professional development experience. Four major benefits surfaced in the teacher reflections:

- Teachers stated being more reflective of their instructional practices than before attending Teacher Academy.
- Teachers often summarized Teacher Academy as rejuvenating.
- Teachers felt more confident to share what they learned, not only with their students, but also with their colleagues.
- Teachers indicated the value of professional interactions during Teacher Academy.

The questionnaire asked teachers to rank the secondary benefits (see figure 30) in order of greatest impact. *More reflective of my practice* was overwhelmingly popular with 59% of the responses ranking it first. The graph below indicates the breakdown of the ranking.

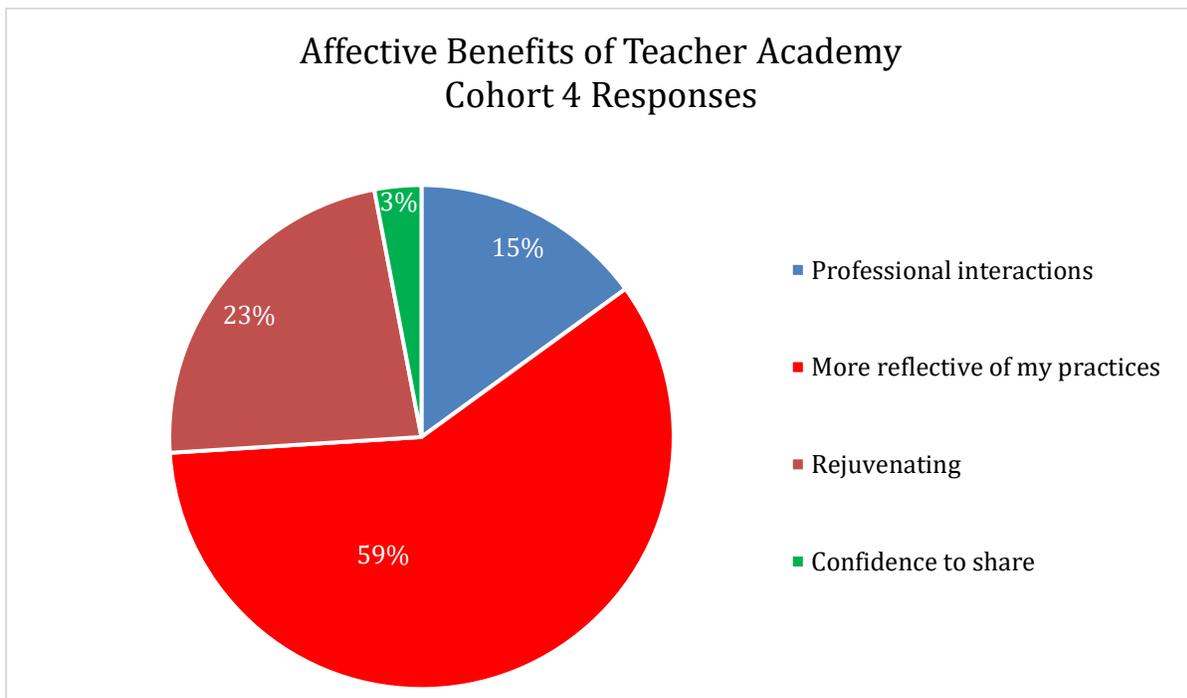


Figure 4: Affective Benefits of Teacher Academy

Further evidence indicates teacher transfer of knowledge and skills acquired in Teacher Academy. This was identified by their self-reported goals and progress made (see table 20).

Table 2: Teacher Academy Self-Reports Goals and Progress

Goal	Progress Toward Goal
Work on clarifying my learning goals and start brainstorming ways for students to track their own data.	My learning goals are now crystal clear and stated on the board for every class. I discussed this with my students and they truly appreciate knowing what they are expected to learn. Definitely keeping this up! I am still working on ideas for metacognitive trackers. Students' metacognition is also my professional goal for the NEPF this year.
I would like to routinely help my students in thinking about their own thinking,	I am doing well asking questions to help my students think about their own thinking. I am

Goal	Progress Toward Goal
understanding why and how they can be more successful.	doing this more routinely and it's been great to see the kiddos sharing their thinking and being able to tell why they thought that, and what do they need to do better.
I want to continue facilitating curiosity. I would also like to try the Close Viewing protocol with a video to encourage students to become critical viewers.	I am still encouraging curiosity. My students are feeling a little more comfortable with this. I have been using it mostly in social studies and I had a kid say, "History sure is confusing without any right answers." I have not used the close viewing protocol for a video but adapted it for an image. The kids are getting so good at thinking critically!

Conclusion

Teacher Academy improved instructional and pedagogical practices through the implementation of the NEPF high-leverage instructional standards evidenced by multiple measures. These results clearly demonstrate a correlation between teachers' understanding of the NEPF standards and indicators and their confidence to implement high quality instructional pedagogy through the lens of the NEPF. The culmination of evidence is a strong indication of teachers' effectiveness and responsiveness to the needs and backgrounds of their students. In addition, 59% of the teachers noted they were more reflective of their practice as a result of Teacher Academy. Being more reflective, as well as the other affective benefits, enhanced their experience during Teacher Academy and have the potential to transfer to many areas of professional practice.

Cohort 5 will take place in the 2018-19 school year. As a testimony to the success of Teacher Academy, 39 teachers have applied and 28% of the applicants are alumni Teacher Academy participants. This tribute both reflects and indicates the need for continued professional learning around NEPF and the value of Teacher Academy across the region.

References

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