Teach and Thrive Learning Circles: Priming Early Career Teachers to Flourish

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Abstract

This article shares innovative practices from a workshop series called Teach and Thrive Learning Circles (TTLCs) offered to pre-service and recent graduates from the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program at Colorado College (CC). TTLCs aim to proactively prime pre-service and early career teachers to navigate the pressures that can contribute to burnout and attrition. Inspired by the scholarship on teacher development and characteristics of thriving teachers, I invited twenty-two novice teachers ranging from pre-service through three years of experience to co-construct and co-facilitate the TTLC monthly workshops. In this article, I first share an overview of our co-construction process, the resulting workshop structure, and chosen topics. Based on trends from a pre-workshop questionnaire, the workshop topics included early career teacher development, maintaining purpose, self-care, navigating toxicity, and cultivating efficient systems. Next, I provide a detailed synopsis of the first workshop focused on early career development. I provide an overview of this workshop to offer readers an example of our TTLC structure and a glimpse into its value. I share the session workshop agenda, materials, and TTLC teacher reflection journal themes. Preliminary qualitative trends derived from the reflection journals suggest that understanding their development through the lens of the teacher lifecycle scholarship empowered them to be more patient with their pedagogical growth and to seek out mentorship and peer support to thrive. The TTLC framework, example session, and preliminary themes presented offer liberal arts teacher educators a dependable framework to establish similar offerings in their context.

Keywords: pre-service teachers, early career teachers, teacher educators, teachers thriving, teacher lifecycle

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As a teacher educator, I frequently ask my students why they want to teach. Aspiring teachers commonly remark that they love being with and empowering youth. They are passionate about the profession, were inspired by teachers from their past, and value teaching to contribute to positive social change. Yet, once they enter the workforce, new teachers undergo a reality shock as they learn to juggle the multifaceted professional learning curve (Botha & Rens, 2018; Dicke et al., 2015) and to navigate educational reform efforts that often prioritize standardized test scores (Dunn, 2018) over the altruistic reasons that inspired them to choose to teach (Moss & Ehmke, 2020). Navigating the tensions between one's professional vision and the complex reality of what it takes to be a teacher in contemporary times contributes to early-career teacher burnout (Sulis et al., 2022) and the endemic problem of teacher "churn" (Au, 2009; DeMathews, et al., 2022).

Numerous studies have calculated that between 40% and 50% of novice teachers exit the profession within the first five years of teaching (e.g., Papay et al., 2017; Räsänen et al., 2020). In the United States (U.S.), this revolving door is most prominent in urban schools, where studies reveal that as many as 70% of new teachers may leave their position by their fifth year (Papay et al., 2015). Rural schools are not far behind, with reports of up to 50% of beginning teachers turning over (Nguyen, 2020; Ulferts, 2016). Early career teacher turnover is a national crisis that perpetuates chronic instability. This revolving door adversely affects students, schools, districts, and our entire public education landscape (Wronowski, 2021).

Not only is teacher burnout and early career exit a waste of extensive training and talent, but this crisis also has damaging effects on student achievement (Madigan & Kim, 2021; Nguyen & Springer, 2021). Teacher turnover disproportionately affects youth in low-income schools who are more likely than their more affluent peers to experience poverty; be racially, ethnically, and/or linguistically minoritized; receive special

education services; and experience trauma (Camacho & Parham, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2019, 2022a & b,). Moreover, studies demonstrate that high teacher turnover rates impose significant financial costs on school districts, perpetuating the inequities experienced by low-income schools and their students (Blizard, 2021; Learning Policy Institute, 2017). More affluent school systems are also affected by this crisis. Studies indicate that increasing numbers of suburban teachers are moving schools or abandoning the profession altogether. An adverse school climate, ineffective school leadership, and top-down accountability pressures contribute to early career burnout and attrition across our nation's schools (Wronowski, 2021).

While the profession has grappled with teacher burnout and attrition for decades, the consequences have become more apparent. COVID-19 exacerbated many educational inequities that existed pre-pandemic and caused additional teaching challenges. In 2020, teachers quickly shifted to remote teaching with little warning (Shedrow, 2021; Wu et al., 2020). In addition, most had to swiftly learn new formats (virtual, hybrid, in-person with COVID protocols, etc.), which required mastering unfamiliar technologies (Baliram et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2020), all while navigating the shared trauma of a global pandemic. The pressures of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic have been immense. For example, a 2022 National Education Association (NEA) study reports that many previously thriving educators are calling it quits. Furthermore, countless potential pre-service teachers are changing their plans. Finally, survey results also indicate that 90% of U.S. K–12 teachers feel burnout is a significant problem, and 55% plan to leave the profession sooner than initially planned (NEA, 2022).

Concerned with the longstanding crises of early career teacher burnout and turnover as well as the ways the pandemic has exacerbated these issues, this article shares innovative practices from a workshop series called Teach and Thrive Learning Circles (TTLCs). I invited pre-service and recent graduates from the MAT program at Colorado College to participate. By sharing the TTLCs practices and framework, I intend to inspire

other liberal arts teacher educators to adopt similar approaches to help prime early career teachers proactively to navigate burn-out and thrive.

Scholarly Context

The transition from pre-service to early-career teacher is a complex and demanding period (Dayan et al., 2018). Simultaneously exciting and intense, this formative period heavily determines whether people remain in teaching and, if they do, what kind of teachers they become (Cobbs, 2020). Despite the grim burnout and attrition statistics, some early career teachers sustain their passion for the profession and thrive. I conceptualized the TTLCs as a proactive opportunity to support the beginning teachers I train to thrive.

The Formative Years

Teaching is a developmental process. Scholars refer to teacher development as the "teacher career cycle" (Fessler & Christiansen, 1992) or "life cycle" (Steffy et al., 2000). This body of work concerns teachers' progression, growth, and stages, from student teaching through retirement (Bressman et al., 2018). Three broad stages of teacher development are discussed in the literature: early career, middle career, and late career (Coutler & Lester, 2011; Eros, 2011; Hargreaves, 2005; Sprague Mitchell, 2008).

Several teacher lifecycle theorists have examined the early career period, which commonly ranges from pre-service through five years of experience (e.g., Feimen-Nemser, 2001; Fessler & Christiansen, 1992; Huberman, 1993; Steffy et al., 2000). While most of these studies occurred 20-30 years ago, their frame-works continue to inform how we study and understand teacher development today (e.g., Headden, 2014; Kelchtermans, 2017). Lifecycle theorists agree that early career teachers often lack professional confidence and typically function in 'survival' mode (Huberman, 1993; Ro, 2019). Teachers commonly focus on their own professional needs in this early career stage. They tend to prioritize classroom management, curriculum mastery, and content delivery (Coutler & Lester, 2011). While concentrating

on lesson design and implementation, this exploration phase is often the teachers' first opportunity to develop their professional identity, including their beliefs, values, and commitments (Steffy et al., 2000). To thrive at this stage, early career teachers require mentorship and opportunities to set goals, reflect, and self-assess (Bressman et al., 2018).

How Novice Teachers Thrive

A dynamic interplay between personal characteristics and contextual factors contributes to teachers' capacities to flourish (Jennings, 2021). Studies suggest that personal characteristics of resilience, agency, and identity all operate interchangeably to contribute to a teacher's ability to thrive (Cobbs, 2021; Day, 2018). Teacher resilience entails an individual's capacity to bounce back from adversity (Ainsworth & Oldfield, 2019). Resilience enhances feelings of effectiveness for early career teachers (Hong et al., 2018). Teacher agency includes their active contribution to shaping their work and its conditions (Biesta et al., 2015). For beginning teachers, agency often depends on their self-confidence (Sulis et al., 2022).

A positive teacher identity is a continuing process of "interpretation and reinterpretation of who one considers oneself to be and who one would like to become" (van Lankveld, 2017, p. 326). A strong teacher identity can support one's capacity to teach according to their values and beliefs (Palmer, 2017). This dynamic interplay was evident in Cobb's (2021) in-depth study of four individual teachers during their first year. Cobb found that these first-year teachers' identities, resilience, and agency collectively helped them anticipate beyond challenges, pressure, and wavering confidence. Moreover, Trevethan (2019) found that early-career teachers' personal resources–including self-regulation skills (which encourages resilience), boundary setting (an agentive behavior), reflection, and self-awareness (promoting teacher identity development)–contributed to a positive teaching experience.

Several conditional factors are known to contribute to a teacher's ability to thrive, including targeted mentorship (Allies, 2021; Sulis et al., 2022), an affirming school environment,

administrator support (Baptiste, 2019), and strong collegial relationships (Hong et al., 2018; Trevethan, 2019). Zaharis (2019) found that novice teachers ranked mentorship from veteran teachers as highly important in supporting their practices and reducing feelings of stress. Baptiste (2019) found that administrators who promoted a shared mission, set high standards, valued teachers' self-interests, and promoted teaching as meaningful work, fostered a positive environment for teachers. Finally, Trevethan (2019) found that collaborative relationships with colleagues contributed to beginning teachers' success.

Most teacher preparation programs emphasize the technical aspects of the profession—lesson planning and delivery, assessment, and methods for teaching 21st-century literacy and mathematical skills (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2022; Ro, 2019). Later, when teachers transition into early-career educators, professional development typically centers on refining their technical skills to improve student academic outcomes (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). However, while technical skills are vital, pre-service and early career teachers also need transparent opportunities to appreciate the developmental learning curve. Moreover, they need explicit guidance to cultivate the characteristics of thriving teachers. Hence, I conceptualized the TTLCs to proactively encourage beginning teachers to stay and thrive.

Methods

Context

Colorado College (CC) is a highly selective private liberal arts institution in the western United States. Like at other small liberal arts institutions, students and faculty value CC's communal spirit and expansive offerings. CC's Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program is a 13-month, social-justice-oriented curriculum that enrolls approximately eight to ten K–12 general education teacher candidates each year. Candidates spend the fall semester in full-time coursework and the spring semester in their student teaching placement. Along with full-time student teaching in the spring, candidates attend weekly seminars focused on various topics.

Participants

Over the years, I have offered a version of the TTLCs once per month as part of our spring semester weekly seminar offerings. In the Spring of 2021, I had the opportunity to expand this offering to include early career program alumni. Furthermore, because of COVID-19 safety protocols that moved our programming online, we were no longer constrained by location. This allowed a small cohort of interested teachers across the U.S. to participate in the TTLCs, resulting in a broadened representation of early career teacher experiences.

Participants ranged from pre-service to 3rd-year teachers with 27% pre-service, 18% first year, 37% second year, and 18% third year teachers. Participants taught across several general education disciplines, represented elementary, middle, and high school settings, and were primarily in urban schools. The participants' demographics were moderately more diverse than national public school teacher demographics (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021), with over 30% teachers of color and 20% males, as indicated in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Participant Demographics, Certifications, and Schools in Percentages

Demographics(%)		Certifications (%)		School Type (%)	
N=22		N=22		N=22	
Female	72	Elementary	45	Urban	82
Male	23	Secondary	55	Suburban	14
Non-binary	5			Rural	4
White	64	All core subjects	45		
Latinx	14	ELA	27		
Mixed-race	9	Science	9		
Asian	9	Social Studies	15		
Black	4	Math	5		

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Data collection and analysis occurred both during and immediately after the TTLC sessions. Following IRB approval and gathering signed consent from participants, I collected and

used qualitative data to develop TTLC topics and to study how the learning circles shaped participants' thinking, feelings, and aspirations as novice teachers. My recursive process of collecting and responding to qualitative data integrated a pre-program questionnaire, ethnographic field notes, and reflection journal transcripts.

The short pre-program questionnaire sought to understand what teaching challenges participants were currently navigating. It asked them to suggest TTLC topics related to supporting their ability to thrive during the pandemic and beyond. Next, a research assistant collected ethnographic field notes during each TTLC session. Field notes documented the TTLC process, participants' thinking, and questions. Field notes were routinely member-checked by participants. Finally, at the closing of each TTLC session, I used reflective journaling to encourage participants to ruminate on their thoughts, feelings, and goals relative to each session. I transcribed and analyzed the field notes and reflection journals to understand how TTLCs supported participants' thoughts, feelings, and aspirations.

Immediately after collecting each data set (after questionnaire completion, after session field notes were collected and member checked, and after session journal completion), a research assistant and I independently coded the session data for themes. Next, we shared and discussed our independently identified themes, collaboratively re-examined the data, and deliberated until we agreed on salient themes for each data set, including trends and discrepancies across each TTLC session's field notes and journal reflections. This constant-comparative approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) helped me monitor and respond to participants' thinking and simultaneously examine emerging themes throughout the TTLCs.

After the TTLCs, we revisited the entire body of data collected. First, we independently re-coded the data for common themes. Then, again, we shared and discussed our thematic findings and collectively re-examined the data. We deliberated until we agreed upon overarching themes across the entire TTLC data set. Finally, we identified new questions and ideas that emerged through a comprehensive examination of the

data. This article shares how the data informed our co-creation process of the TTLCs and an analysis of trends from the first TTLC session.

Findings

The pre-program questionnaire helped guide the TTLC co-creation process, while the ethnographic field notes allowed me to keep a detailed record of each session. Finally, reflective journals illuminated participants' thinking, emotions, aspirations, and whether and how each session contributed to their skills as thriving early career teachers.

The Co-Creation Process

The initial TTLC meeting began with introductions and community building. Then, to establish the TTLC purpose, I provided a brief overview of the teacher burnout and attrition literature and the scholarship on the characteristics of teachers who thrive. Next, I shared questionnaire themes. Then, as a group, we narrowed the five remaining workshops to the following topics: early career development, maintaining purpose, self-care, navigating toxicity, and cultivating efficient systems. This process was simple as the topics were salient themes across the questionnaire data. And while the pandemic was a prominent concern, these topics were prioritized by participants as necessary to their immediate and post-pandemic thrival.

After establishing topics, small teams of 4-5 participants collaborated in virtual breakout rooms to develop an agenda template. Our goal was for the template to encourage applying attributes of thriving teachers and support participants' collective needs and goals. We compared ideas once each team shared their proposed template with the entire group. Finally, we agreed on a final agenda template, purposes for each section of our agenda, and estimated time frames for future meetings, shown in Figure 1.

I created a shared drive with the agenda template, meeting dates, and agreed-upon topics following our initial meeting. Teacher participants signed up via the shared drive to plan or co-plan and facilitate each meeting's centering/mindfulness,

check-in, and/or written self-reflection. Given the time and energy participating teachers put into their classrooms, we agreed that I would plan and lead the topic conversations since they required the most preparation.

FIGURE 1
Co-Created TTLC Agenda Template

TTLC Agenda Template

1. **Centering/mindfulness** (3-5 min.)
   Purpose: to practice wellbeing tools to support our resilience.
   Facilitator(s):

2. **Check-in** (15-20 min.)
   Purpose: to build community.
   Facilitator(s):

3. **Teach and Thrive Topic** (45 min.)
   Purpose: to understand important topics that can build our resilience, agency, and teacher identities.
   Facilitator(s):

4. **Written Self-reflection** (10-15 min.)
   Purpose: to facilitate praxis (reflection and action) to help us explore our teacher identities.
   Facilitator(s):

TTLC Meeting Example: Early Career Development

We collectively agreed on the following TTLC meeting topics: early career development, maintaining purpose, self-care, navigating toxicity, and cultivating efficient systems. The main objective of the first topic of early career development was for participants to develop an understanding that teaching is a developmental process. Many participants felt they were "the only one" struggling to learn the ropes. I anticipated that this session would help them recognize that growing into a confident and effective teacher takes time. Equipped with this

knowledge, I hoped that participants would be more resilient as they experienced the developmental learning curve's ebbs and flows (French, 2018).

As shown in Figure 2, and in line with our agreed-upon template, the meeting began with a five-minute meditation led by one of the pre-service teachers. Next, one of the third-year teachers introduced our check-in, and then teachers broke into breakout rooms and discussed the prompts on the agenda. Once we came back together as a collective community, each small group shared one theme from their check-in. From there, I facilitated a 45-minute interactive lecture on the early career teacher lifecycle. Finally, we closed with a 15-minute personal written reflection in which a first-year teacher introduced prompts listed on the agenda. The session agenda and lecture materials are shown in Figure 2, and the teacher development session topic is detailed below.

FIGURE 2
Teacher Development Agenda

TTLC 2021
Session #2
Agenda

1. **Centering/mindfulness** (3-5 min.)

   Facilitator: *Katherine*

   - 'Happy Place' guided meditation

2. **Check-in** (15-20 min.)

   Facilitator: Maria

   - Positivity Prompts
     - What is one funny moment from this school year?
     - What is your favorite moment from this school year?
     - What was one of your biggest successes from this school year?
     - What will you miss the most from this school year?
     - What is something you look forward to next year?

3. **Teach and Thrive Topic** (45 min.)

   Facilitator: *Author*

   Topic: Teacher Life Cycle & Early career stages

   Breakout Rooms

FIGURE 2
Teacher Development Agenda, continued

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4. **Written Self-reflection** (10-15 min.)
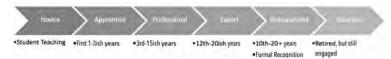
   Facilitator: *Jordan*
   - What phase in the early career lifecycle would you currently place yourself in? Why?
   - As you plan toward thrival, what aspects of the career lifecycle do you need to keep in mind?
   - What actions can you take to support your thrival in the immediate to near future? What steps will require you to think big picture?

5. **Housekeeping/Announcements**

Early Career Development Interactive Lecture Materials

While there are many teacher lifecycle models, I found Steffy's (2000) and colleagues' Lifecycle of the Career Teacher Model (LCTM) especially helpful for this TTLC session, in part because at the time of 2021 TTLC offerings there was not a more current model. Steffy and team found six phases of teacher development rather than the three broad lifecycle phases agreed upon in the literature (Bressman et al., 2018; Coutler & Lester, 2011; Eros, 2011), as shown below. Moreover, they studied career-long teachers, so their findings iterate the characteristics, contexts, and practices of educators who remained committed to the profession.

FIGURE 3
The Teacher Lifecycle Model (Adapted from Steffy et al., 2000)

| Novice | Apprentice | Professional | Expert | (Distinguished) | (Emeritus) |

- Student Teaching
- First 1-3ish years
- 3rd-15ish years
- 12th-20ish years
- 10th-20+ years
  - Formal Recognition
- Retired, but still engaged

For our session, I focused on the first three phases and began with an overview that included the continuum shown in Figure 3. Next, I discussed the following phase indicators, synthesized from Steffy et al. (2000) and other lifecycle scholars (e.g., Fessler & Christensen, 1992; Huberman, 1993). The information in Figures 4-6 was verbally discussed, shared as slides, and provided as an electronic handout to participants.

FIGURE 4
The Novice Phase of Teaching (Adapted from Steffy et al., 2000)

The 'Novice' Phase: Student Teaching

To thrive during this phase, it is important to understand that:

1. This is the exploration phase of teaching:
   - You are beginning to make sense of your professional identity.
   - Student teaching is an opportunity to take risks and learn through trial and error. A growth mindset is key!

2. You are likely to have your idealism tested for the first time due to:
   - The clash between your teacher preparation coursework focused on "best practices" and your schools' actual practices.
   - Feeling overwhelmed by the multiple tasks that come with student teaching.
   - Experiencing a range of conflicting emotions including anxiety, frustration, disillusionment, elation, fear, insecurity, and more.

3. Your focus is on mastering lesson design and delivery:
   - At the same time, pay attention to the organizational, administrative, and interpersonal factors that teachers in your school juggle. You are likely not directly responsible for these parts of the job yet, but it's smart to have them on your radar.
   - You are likely to struggle balancing the competing demands that professional teachers juggle.

Upon reviewing the "novice" phase of the teacher lifecycle, I prompted participants to identify and discuss points that resonated with their early career experiences. Next, we repeated this discussion process with an overview of the "apprentice" stage (Steffy et al., 2000).

Since the TTLCs cohort featured in this article included pre-service through third-year teachers, I also prompted more experienced teachers to use the "novice" and "apprentice" indicators to share how their experiences had evolved since their teacher training. Finally, we unpacked what Steffy and colleagues (2000) named the "professional phase" of the teacher lifecycle. My goal was to communicate to teacher participants that this next period was within reach and would provide a sense of stability.

Once we explored the lifecycle phases, the teachers met in breakout rooms with peers who had the same years of experience (pre-service, year 1, etc.) to analyze their current phase and debrief related insights and experiences. Next, after the

FIGURE 5
The Apprentice Phase of Teaching (Adapted from Steffy et al., 2000)

The 'Apprentice' Phase: The First Few Years

To thrive during this phase, it is important to understand that:

1. This is the most *complex* intellectual & emotional transition in the teacher life-cycle. Give yourself grace!

2. It is typical to feel a sense of simultaneous survival & discovery.

3. You are often laser focused on classroom management, curriculum mastery, and content delivery. Stay focused on mastering these important skills!

Apprentice teachers often navigate two common challenges:

1. Meeting your personal and professional needs:
    *   You want to be respected by your colleagues.
    *   You want to feel competent at your job.
    *   You are navigating a whirlwind of emotions which can include feeling: overwhelmed, discouraged, anxious, exhausted, depressed, uncertain, excited and rewarded.
2. A Reality Shock:
    *   You are adjusting from the cooperating teacher support you had during student teaching.
    *   It's common to underestimate the time commitment of meeting your multiple duties: juggling planning and instructional delivery, student assessment, classroom management, induction, professional development, state testing accountability measures, and more.
    *   This phase can feel overwhelming. This sentiment is normal. Things get easier over time!

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breakout rooms, we collectively discussed small group reflections, insights, tensions, and questions. This was followed by fifteen minutes of reflective journaling, using the prompts provided on the session agenda shown in Figure 2.

Reflection Journal Themes

The research assistant and I completed a thematic analysis of the teacher development journal reflections after the first TTLC session. Our analysis of the journal transcripts revealed two themes. First, understanding the lifecycle phases illuminated the importance of participants being patient with their developing skills as beginning teachers. Second, teachers often wrote about the magnitude of seeking out supportive

The Professional Phase of Teaching (Adapted from Steffy et al., 2000)

The 'Professional' Phase: Over the Hump!

To thrive during this phase, it is important to understand that:

1. You will have figured out your personal needs in the classroom, leaving space for you to put your focus on the needs of your students.

2. You will have increased self-confidence:
   - Confidence often reinvigorates your commitment to the profession.
   - Your renewed commitment can fill you with more emotional & mental energy.

3. You will have greater command of your pedagogy:
   - Instruction becomes a *living process* at this phase.
   - This is known as a stabilization phase where after lots of earlier trial and error, you begin to consolidate your pedagogical repertoire. You've figured out what works for you and your students!

4. You've learned how to navigate the education system including school and district protocols.

5. You're in a phase of continuous growth seeking. You see yourself as a life-long learner.

6. You've established a network of supportive colleagues.

7. You may be comfortable taking on leadership roles including mentoring student teachers, early career teachers, peer coaching, and more.

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colleagues. As the saying goes, "knowledge is power." In this spirit, first-year teacher Maria wrote in her reflection journal, "this [our session about the teacher lifecycle] oddly makes me feel better. The struggle is real. I feel better and affirmed that I am doing the right thing."

Practicing Patience

Teachers at each stage of their early career trajectory recognized that having patience with their development into expert teachers would support their ability to thrive. Pre-service teachers connected patience to a growth mindset. These participants, who were student teaching during our teacher development workshop, recognized that a growth mindset, or as Casey put it, "a mindset of always learning," will help them maintain perspective and support resilience as they navigate the early learning curve. In this vein, Jeffrey acknowledged that

"becoming a strong teacher won't happen in a year or two; it takes time and dedication." Similarly, Jasmine recognized the importance of taking time to "notice and reflect on successes instead of just failures." Moreover, Nikki reflected:

> I just need to keep reminding myself that feeling secure will take time, and I must be patient with that. I am one of those people that tends to quit when I don't see instantaneous results. This is a habit I will have to get over to thrive.

First-year teacher participants shared similar insights. As Denise put it, examining the early career lifecycle reminded her, "I will grow over time, and the challenges I am experiencing right now are not forever." Similarly, it was common for first-year teachers to acknowledge that "change is slow," and understanding the lifecycle is a helpful "reminder of the teacher that I can become in time" (Jordan, first-year teacher).

Second and third-year teachers noted their progress since beginning their careers. When James compared his first year to his second, he noticed that he was now "able to focus on specific things rather than just trying to get through the day." Second and third-year teachers acknowledged that "teaching is fluid" and that thriving is a "continuum." Summer wrote, "I will toggle back and forth between stages as my journey continues." And third-year teacher Mike offered the following insight, "Learning [to teach] is hard, there will always be room for growth. Don't just focus on the bad things. Look at how you have grown. It takes time. Remember why you are here."

Thriving in Community

While embracing patience, participants also acknowledged the importance of mentorship and supportive colleagues. Participants viewed their teaching community as critical to supporting their potential to thrive. As they anticipated their first teaching jobs, pre-service teachers hoped to seek out a positive support system. Carter wrote, "Finding others who are passionate about learning and growing themselves for the good of their students is key." Moreover, pre-service teachers hoped for guidance and mentorship. For instance, Jasmine emphasized

her desire to "find a community and teammates who have made it through many years and can be an emotional support and professional mentor to me."

Likewise, first-year teachers acknowledged the importance of asking for help, seeking out and "learning from mentor feedback." For example, Catherine reflected on "knowing that it is okay to ask for help, and that feedback means they care about you and want you to succeed, not that they think they are better than you." Likewise, her first-year peers recognized that acknowledging their vulnerabilities and seeking support are essential.

While pre-service and first-year teachers most frequently recognized the importance of mentorship, second and third-year participants viewed like-minded peers as contributing to their ability to flourish. Therefore, these experienced early career teachers emphasized seeking out positive colleagues. For example, second-year teacher Layla wrote, "surrounding myself with positivity is what I hold most dear." Similarly, third-year teacher Aubrey wrote that "collaborating and being creative with other teachers or people in the community" keeps her going. She concluded that "thriving does not happen in isolation." Finally, third-year teacher Katherine synthesized our session on the teacher lifecycle like this:

> As I plan toward thrival, I think the big picture thing to remember is that each year gets better. Even with switching schools, moving across the country, having a quarter-life crisis, and surviving a global pandemic, the knowledge that things will improve is a huge relief. The information we looked at today was very helpful because it reminded me of the skills I have developed at this point in my career. It also reminded me of what all I've already gone through in terms of early-career struggles. Reflecting on how far I've come has been joyful!

Discussion and Implications

This article imparts promising practices from the Teach and Thrive Learning Circles (TTLCs) at Colorado College. I conceptualized the TTLCs under the premise that offering pre-service

and early career teachers deliberate opportunities to learn about and develop the characteristics of thriving teachers may help proactively prepare them to flourish.

TTLCs were co-designed and co-facilitated with the pre-service and early career teacher participants. This offered teacher participants a learner-centered approach (Ignacio, 2020) as we collaboratively determined topics, designed our agenda template, and co-facilitated sessions. As such, I was able to foster a learning community centered on the experiences of the participating teachers (Bergmark & Westman, 2015).

Our collaboratively developed TTLC agenda template helped us focus on the characteristics of thriving teachers (Figure 1). For example, by beginning each session with mindfulness, participants could gain ideas for self-care practices to incorporate routines known to support teacher wellbeing (Allies, 2021) and resilience (Harris, 2021). Moreover, by closing each session with self-reflection, participants could make personal sense of each topic and connect insights to their emerging professional identities (Valtierra & Siegel, 2019; van Lankveld et al., 2017).

Our collaboratively chosen topics of early career development, maintaining purpose, practicing self-care, navigating toxicity, and cultivating efficient systems, not only honored teachers' immediate experiences and concerns, but also mirrored novice teacher needs and challenges discussed in the literature (e.g., Allies, 2021; Boogren, 2015; Hewitt, 2019). For example, while scholars often use the teacher lifecycle literature to study teacher development, the technical focus of teacher preparation and professional development means that most teacher training does not address this topic (CAEP, 2020; Ro, 2019). This can result in new teachers feeling alone and that they are the only ones struggling to learn the ropes. Concurrently, current teacher evaluation expectations expect early career teachers to perform like their more experienced colleagues (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017). These expectations are incongruent with teacher development theories (e.g., Feimen-Nemser, 2001; Fessler & Christiansen, 1992; Huberman, 1993; Steffy et al., 2000).

These lofty expectations can contribute to early career

burnout and attrition (Ford et al., 2018). Therefore, while creating space for TTLC participants to understand and reflect upon the early career lifecycle will not change teacher evaluation practices, this knowledge can empower participants to "see the big picture" (Coulter & Lester, 2011). And as journal reflection themes suggest, teachers may consequently be more patient and optimistic with their developmental trajectory. Trends from participant journal reflections also suggest, along with patience, that these teachers may be more likely to embrace mentorship and seek out collegial support, which is known to bolster early-career retention (Sulis et al., 2022; Zaharis, 2019).

Through sharing TTLC practices and detailing one learning circle session, I want to inspire other liberal arts teacher educators to establish similar offerings in their programs. Colleagues in different liberal arts contexts could certainly adopt the featured agenda template, our chosen topics, and example TTLC session. However, I urge liberal arts colleagues to consider these examples a springboard to initiate a co-construction process with the novice teachers they support. By co-constructing this type of offering, teacher educators are more likely to offer timely and relevant offerings customized to their participating teachers' specific contexts and concerns (Bergmark & Westman, 2015; Ignacio, 2020). Furthermore, since this genre of scholarship is in its infancy, replication of the co-construction process may help us better understand the collective needs of novice teachers across various contexts.

Conclusion and Limitations

Within the first five years of teaching, numerous studies have determined that between 40% and 50% of novice teachers exit the profession (e.g., Papay et al., 2017; Räsänen et al., 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated K–12 teachers' feelings of burnout and accelerated their plans to exit the profession (NEA, 2022). Given these challenges, as a teacher educator, I am highly invested in ensuring my teacher candidates stay and thrive. Therefore, I invited teacher candidates and alumni from the CC MAT program to design and facilitate the Teach and Thrive Learning Circles (TTLCs) collectively.

Our collaborative process and resulting framework provide other liberal arts teacher educators a launching pad to initiate similar offerings at their institutions. Finally, the qualitative themes from participant reflection journals suggest that the TTLC session on the teacher lifecycle empowered participants to embrace patience, mentorship, and like-minded colleagues to support their developmental trajectory.

While the TTLCs provide a useful framework, the small sample of participating teachers who graduated from the same teacher preparation program may be a limitation. As such, participants likely shared common values and practices that influenced the content and format of the TTLCs, reiterating the importance of the collaborative design process to ensure context-specific relevance. Furthermore, while I attempted to limit my personal biases through partnering with a research assistant and collaboratively developing and facilitating the TTLC sessions with participants, these precautions could not eliminate my inclinations. Furthermore, while I provided an overview of one of the TTLC sessions, this article does not examine the program holistically or analyze the field notes collected throughout the study. Finally, a forthcoming project will examine whether the TTLCs had a longitudinal effect on participants' retention and thrival.

While the problems of early career teacher burnout and attrition are immense, our collective commitment as teacher educators to proactively set up new teachers to thrive can contribute to a promising new trajectory. Therefore, I invite other liberal arts teacher educators to adopt their own versions of the TTLCs as we work to prime the promising new teachers we invest in to thrive.

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