As part of Canada’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis, Red Deer Public Schools has welcomed 64 students from kindergarten to Grade 12 into our classrooms since coming from, why intake co-ordinator for English as a Second Language, I have met these children and their families, and my most powerful impression is that they are incredibly resilient, having experienced far more than they ought to have in their short lives. Before these newcomers arrived, it was really important that we provided our existing students and parents with information and resources that built awareness and understanding about where these new students were coming from, how they were here, what their journey had been like and how we could best support them. As these children have arrived, it’s been wonderful seeing how our teachers, students and school communities have welcomed them. Our overall community has played a significant role in welcoming Syrian families and supporting our schools. Initial intake has been managed through Catholic Social Services while ongoing supports are handled by the Central Alberta Refugee Effort Society (CARE). Most of these new students come to school excited and wanting to learn, but their learning needs are incredibly diverse. We have students who have never attended school at all — they are not even literate in Arabic and have never used a pencil. Some students require five minutes is a real challenge. Most have no idea what a locker is. Others have some education, which has made it easier for them to excel at school and English. We know some bring the scars of growing up in war-torn nations and refugee camps, so we need to consider their mental health needs as well. A few have arrived with specialized psychological learning needs that will need to be supported.

Language is one of the most significant challenges in connection with families and addressing issues that arise. A few of our staff speak Arabic. Some colleagues and I are taking Arabic lessons. Meanwhile, CARE provides translation services and other interpreters. Ideally, we would like to attract Arabic staff to provide academic and emotional and cultural supports, but this is a real challenge. Understanding the routines, culture and structure of a Canadian school is a challenge for new students and their parents. Add to that activities like fire or lockdown drills, which require considerable preparation and co-ordination beforehand to create understanding for these children, who have entirely different life experiences.

With most of the Syrian students spend part of their days congregated in English as a Second Language program, three days a week, others are attending neighbouring schools in an inclusive setting. There is no doubt that the arrival of these students has added to the diversity and complexity set. While we draw on our past experiences of welcoming other refugees and immigrant students, there is a real need to build capacity among our school staff to meet the needs of these unique learners. Our district has responded by hiring two full-time teachers and an educational assistant to work with these new students. There’s no doubt that the introduction of these new students has brought challenges for many classroom teachers, particularly when students are integrated in regular classrooms and have such diverse learning needs. Collaboration, creativity and communication among teachers has been essential. Our teachers have been welcoming and have worked very hard to respond to students’ needs. I am proud of what they have achieved.

We are in the early stages of this transition and know that students will be going through different stages, academically, emotionally and culturally. As the experience of Syria and the success of the situation wears off, we will have more challenges and adjustments for new students, especially those who are integrating and language barriers. As a public school district, we welcome all students. This has also brought challenges since there has been no additional funding from either the provincial or federal governments. Even with these constraints, our district is doing whatever it takes to meet students’ needs. We are doing the best we can with what we have.

While it’s easy to see this group of students as unique, it’s also refreshing to see that there are more similarities than differences. Kids just want to be welcomed and have a sense of connection with others, fit in and be noticed. They love to laugh, they want to learn and, like everyone else, they have good days and bad days.

A lot has happened in the last two-and-a-half months. When the government announced its ambitious plans to provide refuge to Syrian families, we had no idea what it would mean for our students, staff and schools. We’ve tried to be as responsive as possible. There have been challenges for sure, but we’ve also learned.

We are pleased to support Canada’s role in welcoming these students, who deserve to live in peace and achieve their very best.

Vanessa Yamazaki is the ESL intake co-ordinator for Red Deer Public Schools. This article was originally published on March 27, 2016 in the ATA News.
In the summer 2015 edition of the ATA Magazine, University of Alberta professor José da Costa discussed a landmark 2001 study he co-authored entitled “Literacy Achievement in Small Grade 1 Classes in High-Poverty Environments.” The study reinforced subsequent national and international studies that demonstrated that class-size reductions augmented with supports for high-quality teaching make significant improvements in student learning.

Q: One of your key findings was that reduction in class size produced various benefits, many of which have been previously recognized by researchers — less noise, fewer overt discipline issues, more space and hence a greater sense of autonomy, and sufficient resources. These benefits resulted in better learning, improved student interaction and positive social growth. Can you tell us more?

A: Our main finding showed that teachers with smaller class sizes had more time to devote to each child, to support and scaffold their learning more effectively. These characteristics you provide above were critical for teachers to create and focus on learning in their classrooms. Teachers talked about changing their instructional practices as well as re-imagining learning experiences for the smaller groups of students they were teaching. They spoke of having far more time to devote to each learner to address questions and to provide formative feedback to support their learning. Many teachers shared stories of being able to identify students who performed adequately, but not to the best of their abilities. These students they then supported much more actively to “push” them to the extent of their abilities.

The teachers talked about, in very real terms, what we now commonly refer to as differentiated instruction. Without the significant reductions in class size, teachers were not able to meaningfully develop and support individual program plans. I recall one teacher who realized, with the switch to the substantially smaller class, that one student who appeared to be progressing with the class was in fact falling behind but was skilfully masking this by asking her classmates for help and borrowing other students’ work. This sort of falling through the cracks happens when we expect teachers to work with large numbers of students with complex learning needs.

Alberta’s growing diversity and complexity

Special needs
Disability rates for children have risen. Most children with disabilities have multiple disabilities, making program planning and instruction more complex.  
– Statistics Canada, 2008

Poverty
In Canada, 19 per cent of children (1.3 million) are living in poverty

Mental health
Ten to 20 per cent of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder.  
– Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014

Class size
Class size in Alberta grew by nine per cent between 2010 and 2015.

Indigenous growth
Canada’s aboriginal population is growing faster than the general population, increasing by 20.1 per cent from 2001 to 2006. The non-aboriginal population grew by 4.9 per cent during this period.
– Canadians in Context—Aboriginal Population, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada

Refugees
Worldwide displacement is at the highest level ever recorded, with one in every 122 people now either a refugee, internally displaced or seeking asylum. Sixty million people were forcibly displaced at the end of 2014 compared to 37.5 million a decade earlier.  
– United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2014

As of July 2016, 29,712 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada, representing the second largest intake of refugees after more than 37,000 Hungarians were admitted in less than a year in 1957.

Religion
In 2001, 6.3 per cent of the Canadian population declared its religion as Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh or other non-Christian religion. This is projected to rise to 11.2 per cent in 2017.

Forecasted increases:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>145%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Gender and sexual minorities
A study of 3,700 Canadian students conducted by Egale Canada found that 14% of students in the study identified as LGBTQ.

Size matters
The impact of class size on classroom complexity

In the summer 2015 edition of the ATA Magazine, University of Alberta professor José da Costa discussed a landmark 2001 study he co-authored entitled “Literacy Achievement in Small Grade 1 Classes in High-Poverty Environments.” The study reinforced subsequent national and international studies that demonstrated that class-size reductions augmented with supports for high-quality teaching make significant improvements in student learning.

The following is an excerpt of that Q&A:
Resilience researcher shares insights

There are many factors that go into the development of resilience in children, says child psychologist Emma Climie, who is the lead researcher in the Strengths in ADHD research group, based at the University of Calgary. In this Q&A, Climie shares her insight as a researcher who’s focused on resilience.

Q. What is resilience?
A. Resilience is the ability to overcome things that happen in one’s life, the ability to bounce back from some kind of adversity. We measure resilience by looking at how well children can bounce back from adverse events with the understanding that some children are able to do it better than others.

Q. How long has resilience been around as a subject for academic research?
A. It really started to pick up in the last couple of decades, sort of in the late ‘90s. It ties into the idea of the positive psychology movement, which looks at building on strengths rather than primarily focusing on weaknesses.

Q. What kind of progress has resilience research taken in the last 20 years or so?
A. The first series of studies were looking at homeless youths in the States, and they were looking at factors that were allowing these kids to be more successful in school. We’ve moved from “what are the factors” to “how do we build the factors” and now we’re looking more into the neurological factors — are there neurotransmitters, what is the role of neuropsychology, more genetic components.

Q. Why is resilience a trait that is desirable to foster in children?
A. Kids who aren’t resilient are the ones who struggle when obstacles are in their path. They have a hard time getting around them or sorting them out or problem-solving. The kids who are able to roll with things a little bit better are often the ones who are able to manage life’s ups and downs a little bit more easily.

Q. At what stage is it possible to tell how good a child is at this?
A. It really depends on the individual child. You can see it easily on in terms of infant and toddler temperament — where some babies are calm and easygoing and others are more fussy or demanding — but it doesn’t mean that when they’re older they won’t develop some of those skills to be resilient and manage situations.

Q. What is known about the impact that parents can have on a child’s resilience?
A. When we look at the children who are more resilient, they’re the ones that have strong connections with parents and other important adults. It’s the kids who are in secure, safe family environments, who have a network of people around them, who often are the kids who are able to do well when they encounter adverse situations. One of the most important factors for developing resilience in children is having that supportive environment.

Q. What are some other factors?
A. More generally speaking, having social relationships is another important factor. Having a friend — it doesn’t have to be a big network of friends — but having one other buddy to play with or do activities with is important. The school environment is also very important — are they involved in the school; are they involved in extracurricular activities? That opportunity to have some independence, to think on their own and have some success in different aspects of their lives, is important.

Q. How do learning disabilities factor into the resilience equation?
A. The kids who have learning disabilities, these are the kids who have some adversity, they have something in their lives that’s causing a bit of difficulty or adversity. They’re just one of the ones that will need to find some support, whether that’s through schools providing modified learning or accommodations or parents providing extra supports at home, maybe tutoring, maybe practicing reading or math, or whatever their difficulties are.

Learning issues are just one piece of the puzzle. There are other aspects of life that could be going well, and the important thing is to have a balance between areas that are working really well and areas not working as well. The key is to find ways to use those areas of strength to support those areas in which they need some support.

Q. Is that a universal concept, the idea that children have problems in one area of their lives, it’s important to help them have success in another area?
A. I would argue for that, yes. I work very much from a strength-based approach to working with kids. You don’t necessarily ignore the things that they’re not doing well, but you find ways of helping them in those areas of difficulty using areas of strength.

Joni Turville

Alberta teachers have been consistently and insistently describing the conditions of work as being one of their biggest areas of concern. Responding to this concern, the ATA spearheaded the creation of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Inclusive Education in Alberta Schools, in collaboration with the University of Alberta. The panel conducted a study focused on better understanding the current state of inclusion in Alberta schools and among its key findings was the assessment that classrooms are large, increasingly complex communities.

Teachers participating in the study frequently described the increasing size and complexity of Alberta classrooms. The number of children with whom teachers worked varied, but the classroom size and the level and diversity of student needs clearly affected the extent to which teachers can attend to each student’s needs.

The study results emphasize that classroom size and composition constitute a major factor in the capacity of schools to implement inclusion in a way that supports all learners.

The overall conclusion of the study was that positive possibilities for inclusion exist, but shared vision, leadership, research and evidence, resources, teacher professional growth, time and community engagement are necessary to facilitating effective implementation.

Joni Turville is an executive staff officer with the Alberta Teachers’ Association.