



# “Who Will Help Me to Do Well?” How to Best Support the Professional Growth of Alberta's Newest Teachers

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“Who Will Help Me to Do Well?”:  
How to Best Support the Professional Growth  
of Alberta's Newest Teachers

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Report completed by  
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on behalf of the  
Alberta Teachers' Association



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## Preface

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Supporting and mentoring of new teachers constitutes a cornerstone commitment of the Alberta Teachers' Association. Both individually and collectively, Alberta teachers recognize that this historic commitment has even more gravitas as we see unprecedented growth in Alberta's student population, leading to considerable new hiring in the past years. While the hiring of 1,100 new teachers this past school year was considerable, it fell well short of the over 2,000 needed to bring class sizes closer to ten years ago with the 2009 levels – the closest we have come to achieving the government's original 2003 guidelines. Indeed achieving the 2003 targets would require the hiring of 3,000 new teachers. However, as we look to the future with the province's continued growth and increasingly complex student population, there can be no doubt that in order to provide optimal conditions for teaching and learning, a significant investment in new teachers and their support must remain a strategic priority for the government.

This study, along with others undertaken by the Association's researchers, underscores the need to assess the support for teachers in the early years of practice. In 2008, the Association commissioned a groundbreaking longitudinal study that followed the experiences of a cohort of 135 new teachers over five years. This study, undertaken by Dr Laura Servage, established the Association's commitment to research and evidence-informed policies and programs to create optimal conditions for new teachers. Published reports stemming from this study have become the focus of much scholarly review and discussion at national and international conferences, including publication of a chapter (Servage, Beck and Couture 2017) in an aptly named book, *The Bliss and Blisters of Early Career Teaching: A Pan-Canadian Perspective*, edited by Canadian scholars Benjamin Kutsyuruba and Keith Walker.

The Association's initial five-year study, and the national collaboration among researchers that it inspired, was the catalyst for this study undertaken by Dr Jaime Beck (University of Calgary). As outlined in the introduction to the report, the goals of the project moved beyond identifying the challenges encountered by new teachers, to focus instead on building on the growing body of research on optimal professional development supports for new teachers, particularly as these relate to the factors that support their growth and sense of professional identity.

Drawing on an initial exploratory survey of 397 beginning teachers in 2016–17, the study followed up with more targeted survey of 135 teachers and interviews with 19 participants. This mixed-methods approach allowed the research design to evolve as the issues reported by the study participants were identified and analyzed. As a result, the study findings offer insights and conclusions derived from survey data that reflects the experiences of large numbers of teachers, while capturing compelling individual narratives of individual teachers. For example, one of the key findings of the study is that while online professional development might be seen by some policy-makers as a promising helpful innovation, the interviews

with new teachers captured in the study’s vignettes speak instead to the need for rich and sustained conversations among colleagues, reflecting, not surprisingly, the highly relational nature of teachers’ work.

As with any comprehensive research study, collaboration and project management are crucial elements of successful completion. Special thanks to the study lead, Jaime Beck, as well as to Laura Servage for her important contributions. J-C Couture, who oversees the Association’s research projects, coordinated the study, and Lindsay Yakimyshyn oversaw the publication of this report. Most importantly, thanks go to the hundreds of new teachers who contributed to the study and who contributed their voices and experience to the project. Such an effort and commitment to share one’s experience and to give voice to one’s understanding of the rich lifeworld of the classroom is one of the hallmarks of a professional.

On behalf of the Association, the research team and Alberta’s teachers in the early years of practice, I trust you will find value in sharing these experiences.

*J-C Couture  
Associate Coordinator Research*

## Executive Summary

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The initial years of teaching are significant in terms of enabling teachers to be successful and have productive, career-long professional growth. Therefore, supports for Alberta's beginning teachers are key to ensuring the best for our students. In 2017, Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) predicted the need to hire 2,000–3,000 new teachers to account for Alberta's growth and to reduce class sizes (Himpe 2017). With this in mind, the ATA has committed to supporting its newest members through continued research, and through professional development initiatives like the Beginning Teachers' Conferences.

This report represents the latest research effort on teachers in the early years of practice. Note, however, that it follows a five-year longitudinal study on beginning teachers conducted by the ATA.

### BUILDING ON PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In 2007, conversations with beginning teachers became the foundation for a five-year longitudinal study that began in 2008. For five years, researchers followed 135 beginning teachers from across Alberta. The results from that study provided valuable insight into the experiences of beginning teachers in Alberta with particular regard to

- the core employment issues that teachers new to the career face in Alberta;
- the kinds of supports available and those they were wishing for; and
- the core learning of new teachers and the stages through which new teachers develop as they gain self-confidence, acquire skills and forge professional identities.

Following the five-year study, the number of Canadian schools, districts and provinces offering specific induction supports for beginning teachers grew (Kutsyuruba and Treguna 2014). These programs, as well as the literature related to the early years of practice, have shifted from a focus on helping the teacher “survive” to “sustaining” the teacher by helping them grow as professionals (Schaefer, Long and Clandinin 2012).

Research exploring the induction experiences of new teachers across Canada has been conducted by Benjamin Kutsyuruba and Keith Walker (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016; Kutsyuruba et al 2017). In the 2015/16 school year, they surveyed more than 1,300 teachers from across Canada; more than 350 (or about 27 per cent) of these teachers came from Alberta. The first section of this report, “Alberta in the Canadian Context,” summarizes and compares this pan-Canadian study with the ATA's five-year longitudinal study.

The findings from the ATA's longitudinal study and Kutsyuruba and Walker's work, along with additional Canadian research, informed the current study.

## PURPOSE OF THE CURRENT STUDY

The goals for this study were

- to gather information from beginning teachers on supports for their cohort;
- to gain understanding of how such supports had changed in Alberta since the ATA’s five-year longitudinal study;
- to gain insight into how the multiple supports offered to beginning teachers work together (or not) to meet the needs of new teachers; and
- to gain insight into how to best support the positive professional growth of beginning teachers, which in turn supports students—the ultimate aim of any teacher professional learning program (Timperley 2011).

## STUDY DESIGN

To accomplish these goals, the researchers adopted a mixed-methods approach (Biesta 2012; Creswell 2014). The research unfolded in stages in a constant comparative fashion, with findings at each stage informing the design of and questions in the next stage.

The initial sample for this study was drawn from the two Beginning Teachers’ Conferences held in Calgary and Edmonton at the beginning of the 2016/17 school year. Of those who attended the conferences, 397 beginning teachers responded to our initial survey that fall. After analyzing the responses, the researchers designed a follow-up survey, which was completed by 135 teachers from the initial sample (representing 34 per cent of the initial sample). Survey respondents were then invited to participate in an individual telephone interview; 19 teachers participated in the interview stage of the research.

## FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The current study was grounded in a flourishing body of (mostly) Canadian research. The researchers began by defining induction as a set of experiences that every teacher entering the profession will have that will continue to influence each teacher’s professional growth—for better or for worse, with or without a formal program.

The researchers also acknowledged, at the outset, that every teacher is a unique individual entering a unique context. This had implications for our research design: in order to determine how effectively a teacher is being supported, one must look to the context to determine what is needed.

*Induction is a set of experiences that every teacher entering the profession will have that will continue to influence each teacher’s professional growth.*

The literature also helped confirm the following points regarding effective supports for beginning teachers:

- Any support is better than none, but not all supports are equally effective.
- The best support is an environment conducive to professional learning and growth. This implies that supporting induction experiences is a collective undertaking.
- Mentoring can be an effective support. Conditions for effective mentorship include:
  - ◆ a good “match” between mentor and protégé;
  - ◆ regularly scheduled, dedicated time for mentorship pairs to work together; and
  - ◆ a focus on pedagogical growth in the mentorship pair’s work together.

In keeping with the last point, professional growth should be the main focus of all supports related to induction. As the beginning years of teaching are known to be highly stressful and induction experiences have a lasting impact, the supports in the early years of practice are crucial. Such supports can help set teachers on a path of continued professional growth and promote feelings of pedagogical success.

## KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

### Valued Sources of Support

Respondents to the fall and spring surveys identified the supports they experienced, as well as those that they most valued. The responses to the spring survey indicated which supports were experienced in a sustained way throughout the school year. While Alberta’s beginning teachers are experiencing many supports, those related to face-to-face relationships with colleagues were the most valued by respondents. These highly valued supports were informal support from colleagues, sharing resources with colleagues, a formal mentor, relationships with other new teachers, and formal observations and feedback related to evaluation.

#### *Sources of Support*

- Informal support from colleagues
- Sharing resources with colleagues
- A formal mentor
- Relationships with other new teachers
- Formal observations and feedback related to evaluation

### The Role of Online Supports

Teachers in this study accessed online resources frequently to find resources and ideas, or to increase professional competency. Most agreed that online resources are convenient, and indicated that they are in the habit of looking online first. However, respondents still placed a higher value on in-person supports and, given the choice, overwhelmingly stated that they would prioritize in-person supports if they had input regarding supports. In-person supports offer information that is contextually valuable and that comes with that important human connection.

### Desired Supports

Researchers asked survey respondents to describe the supports they would offer as administrators and as more experienced teachers. If they were administrators, respondents said they would offer formal

mentorship programs, site-based supports (paperwork support, opportunities for collaboration and so on) and school-based orientations. If experienced teachers, respondents said they would offer resources (lesson/unit plans, videos and so on) and other forms of support (coffees, debriefs, encouragement and so on).

Respondents also said they desired “check-ins,” which were defined as face-to-face, personalized supports that could offer help with day-to-day pedagogical needs and affective needs. Respondents wanted someone to check in to see how they were doing, but also to help them stay on track pedagogically. Check-ins were seen as having the potential to provide opportunities for the constructive feedback that would support professional learning.

To be effective, respondents said check-ins would need to be nonevaluative, offered by someone sincere in their desire to help and offered on a regular (monthly) basis.

#### **Desired Supports**

- Formal mentorship programs
- Site-based supports (paperwork support, opportunities for collaboration and so on)
- School-based orientations
- Resources (lesson/unit plans, videos, and so on)
- Other forms of support (coffees, debriefs, encouragement and so on)
- Regular check-ins

### **Conducive Environments**

The majority of respondents found a lot of support at their school. For example, almost all respondents felt confident that they had at least one colleague in whom they could confide. However, some teachers felt reluctant to approach others for help. In some cases, this was because they did not want appear to incompetent, but in other cases it was a recognition that their colleagues and administrators had their own heavy workload.

### **Workload and Work–Life Balance**

Workload was a source of stress for respondents; most felt they had more to do than they could comfortably handle. Others frequently felt they could be doing more for their students.

### **Efficacy, Optimism and Feelings of Success**

Despite the workload, most respondents reported high levels of both confidence in their abilities and feelings of optimism about the profession. Most respondents also reported feeling successful most, or at least some, of the time. When asked what contributed to those feelings of success, the majority described pedagogical success or positive relationships with students. Encouragement from colleagues and parents, and respondents’ ability to stay “on top of things” also contributed to feeling successful.

Conversely, when we asked respondents to describe times when they did not feel successful, most respondents described challenges related to planning or pedagogy, or difficult experiences with students. Other things that impeded feelings of success included workload, feeling overwhelmed, beginner self-doubt and negative interactions with colleagues.

## KEY FINDINGS FROM THE INDIVIDUAL TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

In the telephone interviews, researchers asked each interviewee questions that stemmed directly from their individual survey responses. The responses provided a sense of the supports that each teacher had experienced and valued, factors that contributed to their feelings of success or that impeded success, and the experiences that had been critical for that teacher.

The findings section, “Vignettes of Alberta’s Newest Teachers,” presents three representative narratives of beginning teacher experiences. These narratives can deepen understanding of how the multiple supports come together, or not, for a positive induction experience.

### Karri: Signs of Growth

Karri’s vignette portrays an overwhelmingly positive induction experience. Karri’s supports are multiple, and many of them are intensely focused on supporting her professional learning. Despite this, Karri still struggles to navigate site-based requirements like report cards, as she is one of many in the study who does not have a school-based orientation. Karri’s story illustrates how these stressors affect her ability to feel successful. Karri’s vignette also highlights the potential benefits of opportunities for observations and feedback, and the benefits of working with an instructional coach. It is clear that Karri is optimistic about her future in teaching.

### Brooke: Treading Water

Brooke’s vignette portrays a teacher overwhelmed by workload in an environment that is not conducive to professional learning. While she is resourceful (she creates her own school-based orientation and has created a strong network of beginning teacher peers), she does not have the support she needs to focus on pedagogy. She expresses her desire to do well, have more feedback on her teaching and receive guidance on managing her heavy teaching load. At the same time, she recognizes the other teachers at her school face similar pressures. Brooke is dismayed to say that, looking ahead, she can imagine herself no longer finding happiness in teaching. For now, she plans to keep teaching for as long as she can.

### Aoife: A Unique Situation

Aoife’s vignette portrays a teacher alone, and in a unique circumstance. Teaching in a colony school, Aoife has no colleagues and few resources. Aoife has found some supports—her principal helped her connect with other colony teachers—but she desires more supports to support her pedagogy and her professional growth. Aoife’s story highlights the need for context to be considered when designing induction supports. For Aoife, supports might take the form of digital tools to connect her to key resources and support staff (like counsellors) for consultation, a structure for regular contact with other teachers, and an increase in observations and feedback.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

The final section of this report presents several key recommendations for policy-makers, stakeholders, school leaders and experienced teachers to consider in better supporting teachers in their early years of practice.

### **1. Ensure that site-based supports are reliable, effective and responsive**

It is vital that schools and districts create opportunities for beginning teachers to be well oriented to their new environments to reduce stress and enable new teachers to focus on teaching.

### **2. Prioritize informal mentorship**

Informal support from colleagues is extremely valuable to beginning teachers. Schools and districts should take steps to increase the effectiveness of informal mentorship by offering teachers protected time and space to work together, and by encouraging the development of positive school cultures.

### **3. Provide manageable assignments**

Teachers in this study reported having challenging assignments, including split classes, as well as too many extracurricular activities. School and district leaders can support beginning teachers by offering manageable assignments.

### **4. Support professional learning through observations, feedback and instructional coaching**

Participants who were supported through observations, feedback and instructional coaching described such supports as highly effective in bolstering their professional growth. Schools and districts can increase the availability of instructional coaches, and create more spaces for observations and feedback to occur to support all teachers, but particularly those in the early years of practice.

### **5. Encourage beginning teachers to share their strengths**

When the ideas and strategies beginning teachers offered were well received by their experienced colleagues, the experience deepened understanding of career-long growth, and nurtured feelings of efficacy and belonging. The reverse was also true. When beginning teachers were discouraged from contributing their insights and expertise, the experience was often described as negative, if not devastating.

### **6. Ensure that induction supports are responsive to contexts**

Districts, school leaders and experienced teachers have the insights required to predict what a beginning teacher will need given a specific school context and can help support beginning teachers’ induction.

### **7. Establish feedback mechanisms to refine induction supports**

It is vital that beginning teachers be offered opportunities to provide meaningful and detailed feedback on their induction experiences so that induction supports offered are responsive. Those designing induction supports must move beyond “counting” supports to identifying what supports beginning teachers themselves “count” as valuable.



## Alberta in the Canadian Context: Summary of Two Studies Foundational to This Inquiry

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This section summarizes two studies on beginning teachers: a recent pan-Canadian study led by researchers Benjamin Kutsyuruba and Keith Walker (2016), and the ATA's five-year longitudinal study. Building on existing research, rather than repeating it, researchers for the present study examined these two studies very closely as part of the research design process. A detailed summary is provided below, and relevant findings from these two studies are incorporated throughout the report.

### THE PAN-CANADIAN STUDY <sup>1</sup>

#### Profiles of Early Career Teachers

In Kutsyuruba and Walker's pan-Canadian study, most teachers surveyed entering the profession were women, and most entered with a Bachelor of Education degree. Of the respondents, 85 per cent had engaged in some substitute (occasional) teaching. In the Alberta subsample, 75 per cent of respondents had been substitute teachers. Of those, 60 per cent had been substitute teachers for one year or less, compared to 50 per cent of the national sample, indicating that Alberta teachers spend a little less time as substitute teachers than the national average. In both the Canada-wide and Alberta cohorts, most teachers surveyed were teaching the grade level and subject area for which they had prepared, and most had been at their current school for two years or less.

#### Supports Beginning Teachers Experience and Supports They Value

Figure 1 below indicates which supports beginning teachers (both the full national sample and the Alberta subsample) experienced. In general, the Alberta beginning teachers who participated in this study experienced more supports as compared to the pan-Canadian sample.

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<sup>1</sup> Additional information about this pan-Canadian study led by researchers Benjamin Kutsyuruba and Keith Walker can be found on their website: <https://earlycareerteachers.com/>, or in one of the publications of their findings (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016; Kutsyuruba et al 2017; Walker et al 2017). The summary here presents only the portion of their study findings most relevant to the Alberta context, and is presented with the authors' permission.

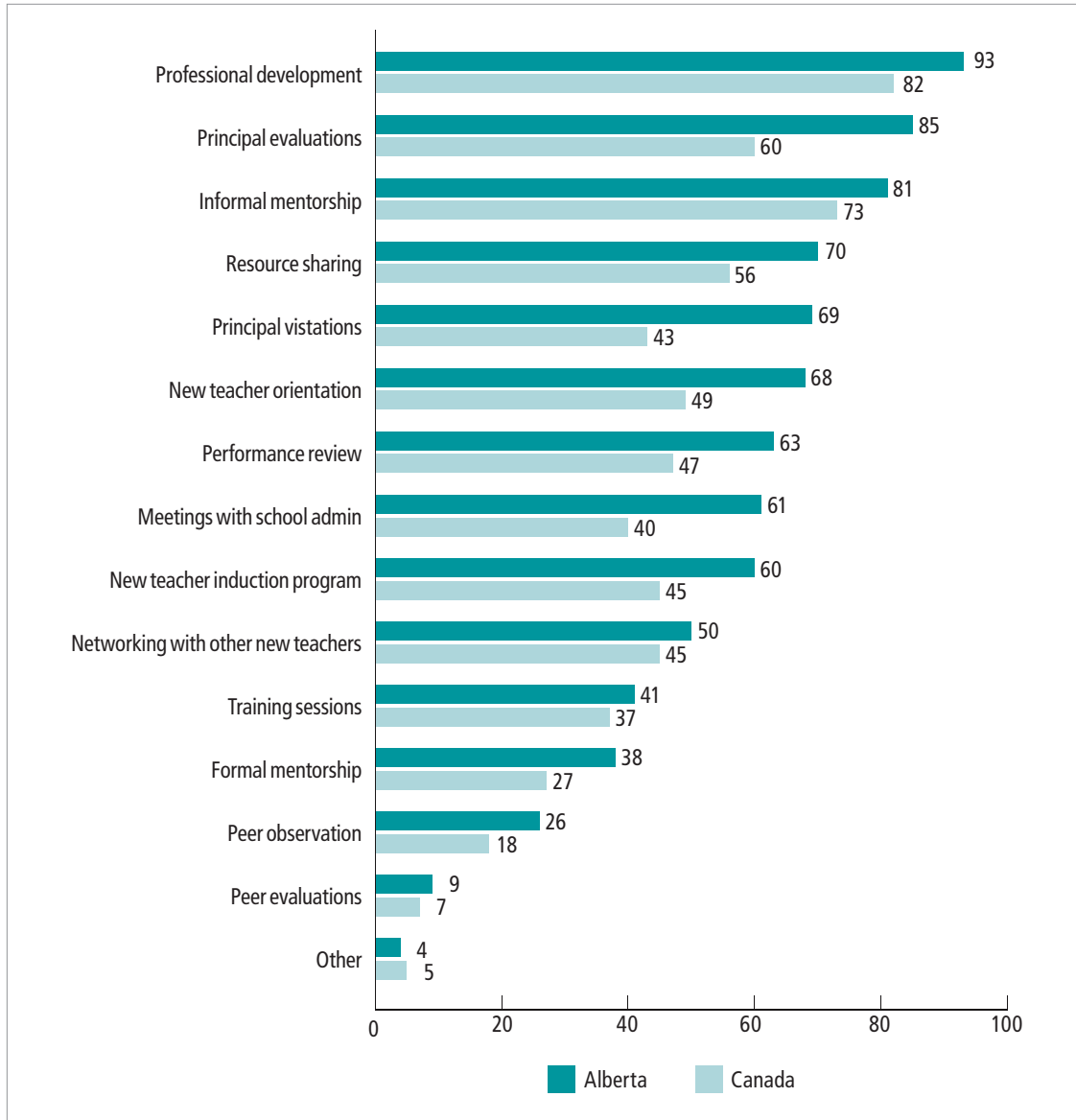


FIGURE 1. Responses to “How have you been supported as you started your career as a teacher?” (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016)

When asked which of the supports offered were the most beneficial, most teachers in the study cited informal mentorship. Professional development was a distant second, followed by resource sharing (Figure 2). This indicates the importance of supportive professional cultures over and above formal induction programs or formal mentorship pairings.

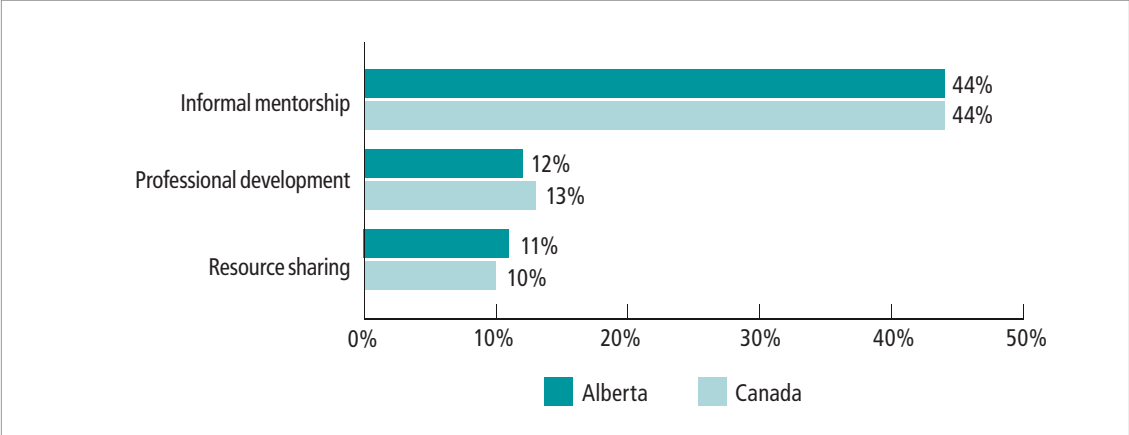


FIGURE 2. Responses regarding most valuable supports (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016)

In relation to satisfaction with the induction supports, beginning teachers in Alberta reported being more satisfied than the national average with the supports that they received (Figure 3). Alberta teachers were also more likely to agree that the orientation they received helped them learn about their school and district (Figure 4). Those in the Alberta sample were also more likely to describe the supports made available to them as “comprehensive” (Figure 5), and were slightly more likely to agree that the support they received gave them the resources to persevere (Figure 6).

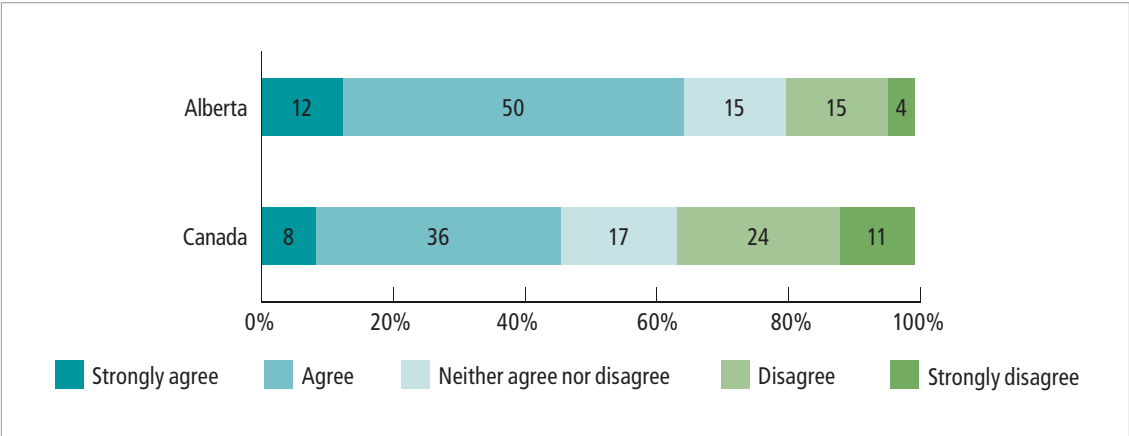


FIGURE 3. Responses to “I am satisfied with the induction supports I have received as a new teacher” (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016)

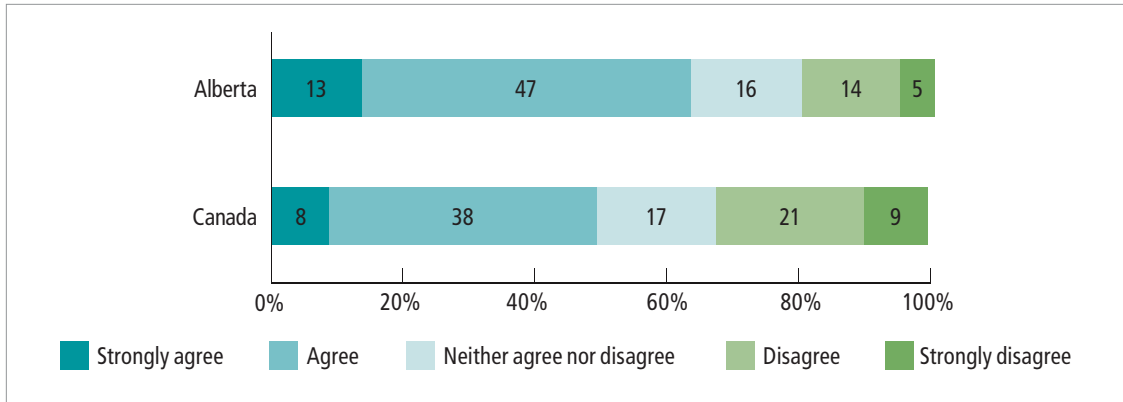


FIGURE 4. Responses to “The orientation provided to me as a new teacher has helped me learn about the school and district” (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016)

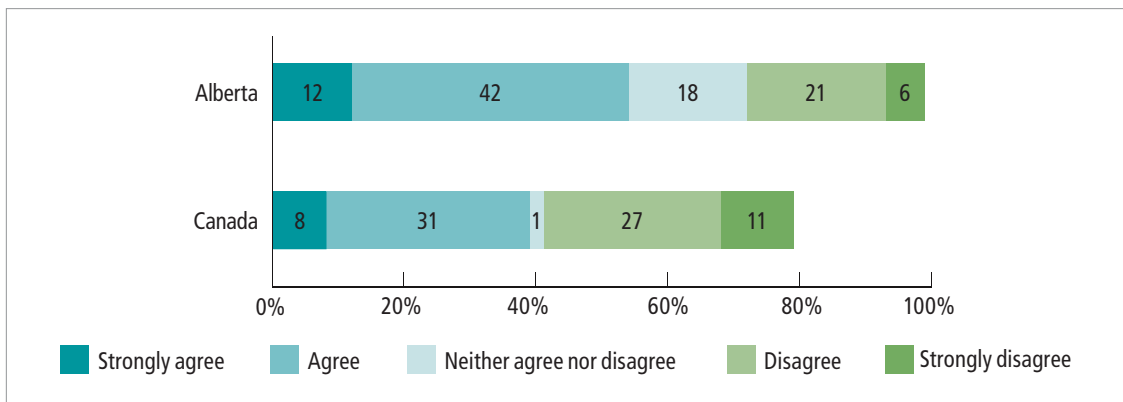


Figure 5. Responses to “The support made available to me as a new teacher was comprehensive” (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016)

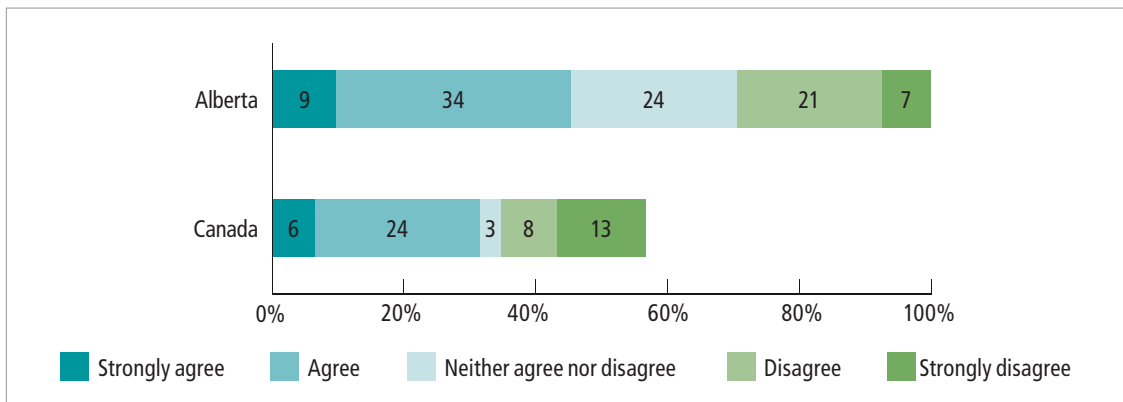


Figure 6. Responses to “The induction support I received gave me the resources to persevere when things got difficult” (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016)

The pan-Canadian study also offers insight into some general trends for teaching across the country. For example, when asked to identify the most effective source of professional development in their early years, the pan-Canadian study found that “external sources” were valued more than “personal ventures.” “External sources” describe professional learning activities undertaken with others in either formal or informal settings, including activities with “other teachers (observations, conversations, collaborations, informal mentorship), embedded PD (conferences, content sessions, mentorship sessions, school based PD, new teacher program), resource sharing, ATA, school or district publications, and external learning centres.” “Personal ventures” are described as “social media, online resources and time to focus on personal growth.”

Though the external factors described above were more valued in terms of professional supports, when asked to identify factors instrumental in their continuing in the profession, respondents to the pan-Canadian survey were more likely to identify “internal factors” such as “self-reflection, work/life balance, reminding self of limits, income, hope for change, passion, enjoyment, feeling capable, and so on.” Likewise, when asked what helped them “flourish” or “thrive,” beginning teachers described more “personal factors” such as “work/life balance, confidence in abilities, passion, good sleep, daily successes, physical activity, faith, organization, work ethic, and so on.” Notably, respondents turned to colleagues for professional growth, but relied more on time away or internal, individual endeavours to sustain themselves in the profession.

When beginning teachers describe their induction experiences as difficult or lacking, the supports described by teachers as the most professionally beneficial are those most noticeably absent. New teacher orientations, new teacher professional development, and supportive colleagues and administrators contribute to feelings of comfort and confidence, and when absent, they contribute to feelings of being undervalued, isolated and afraid to ask for help.

Beginning teachers also indicate that the intensity and pace of teaching has a negative effect on their home and social life, causing fatigue and being “all consuming.” Despite the data presented in the above analysis, many respondents in the study (71 per cent) agreed that the first years of teaching can be described as a “trial-by-fire” experience. This affirms a finding from the ATA’s longitudinal study indicating that beginning teachers feel that a challenging induction experience is par for the course (Alberta Teachers’ Association 2013). At the same time, when asked if they “regularly consider leaving the profession,” only 24 per cent of respondents in the pan-Canadian study replied that they often consider no longer teaching.

### What Do Beginning Teachers Want Others to Know?

The pan-Canadian study asked respondents what they would want others to know about the teaching profession, based on their experiences. Respondents indicated what advice they would offer a beginning teacher (Table 1) and what they would do as a mentor teacher (Table 2), in addition to other comments (Table 3). As this report goes on to highlight, many of the insights offered here are reflected in both the current study and the ATA longitudinal study summarized below.

TABLE 1. What advice would you give a teacher just starting their career?

Internal	Make it through first (year, four months), temper expectations, take risks, advocate for yourself, have fun, don’t take things personally, pace yourself, don’t expect affirmations, make sure it is for you, prioritize, exercise, expect change, expect criticism.
External	Ask questions, find balance, plan, don’t be afraid to teach differently (than mentor), go electronic, find mentor, find good resources, try substitute teaching, know the curriculum, know the students, hands on activities, pick your battles, live close to the school, get involved in the school community, communicate with parents.

TABLE 2. If you were a mentor to a beginning teacher, what would you be sure to do?

Relationship	Be encouraging, be honest, be supportive, be approachable, regularly check in, check on personal health, be confidential, do something outside of work together, ask them what they need
Teaching/ School-Related	Share resources, build their network, observe them/offer observation, show different teaching styles, edit their plans if desired, help with routines (school transition), talk about profession, collaborate (plan, classroom strategies), provide feedback, help with time management, help them deal with administration (advocate).

TABLE 3. Is there anything else you think is important for us to know?

Support	School leadership makes a difference, evaluations are unfair, need resources and support, need more team teaching, school community makes a difference, unfair class assignments.
Profession	Training needs improvement, not paid enough, teacher burnout, mental health of teachers, emphasis on students passing, government changes initiatives too often, expectations for teachers too high, lack of jobs, hiring systems poor, hiring systems inconsistent, lack of specialization, need smaller classes, not enough prep time, parents challenging, teaching is rewarding.
Mentoring and Induction	No mentoring support up north, mentor teachers need more training, want extended mentoring and support, need observation, nonpermanent staff need support, new teacher support too time consuming, no induction program, apprenticeship model, mentoring makes a difference.

## TEACHING IN THE EARLY YEARS OF PRACTICE: ALBERTA'S FIVE-YEAR LONGITUDINAL STUDY

The ATA's five-year longitudinal study (reported in ATA 2011, 2012a, 2013; Servage, Beck and Couture 2017) resonates with the pan-Canadian study, and both help frame the current inquiry. The sample in the five-year study consisted of 135 beginning teachers, drawn randomly from the approximately 850 teachers who participated in a Beginning Teachers' Conference in the fall of 2007 organized by the ATA. The sample was representative of the provincial teacher population in terms of gender (83 per cent of participants were female and 17 per cent were male) and geography (all convention areas were represented as well as urban, rural, remote and semirural settings). Data was collected via annual telephone interviews, which included closed-response questions, open-response questions and conversation. In the last two years of the study, findings were enriched by the addition of five focus groups that included 18 participants, and 10 one-on-one in-person extended interviews.

### Employment Profiles of Alberta's Early Career Teachers

The majority (70 per cent) of our sample had moved into a continuous contract by the end of their third year of teaching. By the end of the fifth year, approximately 10 per cent of participants, through no choice of their own, were still underemployed. A substantial minority of participants had difficulty obtaining continuing contracts, and a number remained insecurely employed. Regardless of contract type, however, most teachers in our study still experienced instability. When asked (in year five of the study) how many "major changes" they had experienced in teaching assignment in their career so far, 42 per cent had experienced three or more, while 42 per cent had experienced one or two. Facing major changes was difficult for these teachers, not only because it denied them the opportunity to refine their work in particular grade levels or subject matters, but it also required them to reorient themselves to a new set of norms and routines.

### Supports Beginning Teachers in the Five-Year Study Experienced

Beginning teachers in Alberta reported experiencing a wide array of supports during their induction years. In year four of the study, participants identified three main supports: a "self-selected mentor," a "professional learning community" and an "assigned mentor" as their top three "most valued supports to date" (ATA 2013, 42). The most desirable mentors were those "genuinely committed to the relationship" (ATA 2013, 9). Some teachers reported having such a mentor, while others reported having an assigned mentor that never "panned out" in terms of tangible supports or, alternatively, found mentorship supports in more informal relationships or grade-level partnerships. In fact, many participants told us that "regular grade-level collaborations were central to their learning and sense of being supported" (ATA 2013, 38). Both mentorship and professional learning community relationships were more effective with district support for embedded collaboration time.

#### *Top Valued Supports in Longitudinal Study*

- A self-selected mentor
- A professional learning community
- An assigned mentor

Participants in the five-year study often referred to challenges new teachers faced in orienting themselves to the norms and routines of their schools and district. An orientation to the school environment was identified as one of several “basic” or survival-level needs placed within what was identified as a “hierarchy of learning needs” (ATA 2013, 44–46). Participants also expressed the need for a site-based mentor to support orientation to the school and district.

Additional basic needs identified by participants included “a secure placement; access to teaching resources; access to lesson and unit plans; advice on classroom organization; and affective support from colleagues” (ATA 2013, 46). When these needs were not met, it was easy for teachers to become “stuck and frustrated” and distracted from “the important work of becoming better teachers” (ATA 2013, 46). If teachers’ basic needs were met, they were better equipped for “honing pedagogical, assessment and classroom management skills; becoming a lifelong learner; taking on leadership roles by helping peers to learn and by contributing to the school culture; engaging with students, parents and the community; and reflecting on and refining teaching practice” (ATA 2013, 46).

### What Alberta’s Beginning Teachers Want Others to Know

In the final year of the study, researchers found that the participating teachers no longer identified as beginners, but were making the transition to identifying as experienced teachers (ATA 2013, 22). Nonetheless, participants could still viscerally remember what it was like to be new. Given this perspective, participants were asked what they would like others to know about their experiences, or the experiences of their beginning teacher peers. Respondents indicated that, in general, “more supports” are needed to support teachers as they enter the profession; participants could remember the “difficulty and uncertainty” that characterized their first years, and “stressed that more could be done to ease the transition” into teaching (ATA 2013, 27). Specific requests for support included

- greater stability in teaching assignment and in the path to the continuing contract;
- colleagues and administrators who demonstrate an understanding of beginning teachers and the mistakes they might make as they learn;
- high-quality mentorship for at least the first two years;
- collaborative relationships with colleagues;
- encouragement and reassurance;
- a school-based orientation and a reliable person for ongoing school-based questions; and
- professional development offered by districts and professional associations.

The comments from beginning teachers reflect a general desire for more supports. Beginning teachers also have a hierarchy of needs, and some supports are implemented more regularly or more effectively than others. Therefore, further investigation was required into how the supports, while increasing in number, are operating together. In addition, the researchers engaged in the present study wanted to explore the extent to which these supports are encouraging positive professional learning.



## Literature Review: Supporting New Teachers in Canada

Having reviewed the findings of the pan-Canadian study and the ATA's longitudinal research, this report now turns to the body of Canadian literature focused on the experiences of beginning teachers and the programs designed to support them. This research reflects the growing recognition of the induction period as pivotal moment in a teacher's career. This (primarily Canadian) research shaped the foundational assumptions that frame the current study.

### FRAMING THE STUDY: EVERY INDUCTION EXPERIENCE IS UNIQUE

#### Teacher Induction

The term *induction* is often associated with programs or program components, such as mentorship, designed to support the entry of teachers into the profession. However, from another perspective, induction might be seen as a set of experiences that every teacher entering the profession will have that will continue to influence each teacher's professional growth. In this sense, "teacher induction happens with or without a formal program" (Feiman-Nemser 2010, 16). These experiences have the potential to benefit one's career, or they may—as Dewey (1997, 25) says of any experience—be "mis-educative" and encourage the foreclosure of professional growth. Therefore, instead of simply examining the programmatic components offered to new teachers during their induction period, stakeholders might expand their focus to develop a deeper understanding of "how novices gain skill and develop competence over time" (Feiman Nemser 2010, 17), as well as the ways in which induction experiences continue to influence a teacher throughout his or her career.

#### Individual Teachers Enter Unique Contexts

Induction experiences unfold in that space where an individual teacher meets a unique and multifaceted context in which they develop their professional identity (Flores 2006). The scope of this study did not include exploring each respondent's capacities, skills or narrative history; researchers proceeded with an assumption of each teacher's individuality. A recent international review of the literature reveals that "personal and individual" factors play a role in shaping induction experiences and outcomes (Walker et al 2017). This is reflected in some beginning teachers being able "to adapt and flourish despite the conditions in which they find themselves" (Kirincic 2017, 365), while others encounter challenges in their specific context that become significant obstacles to their professional growth.

As the current study progressed, the researchers noticed—similar to the five-year longitudinal study—that at least some of Alberta's new teachers recognize their own agency in influencing their induction experiences by, for example, not being "afraid" to ask questions, or being more or less individually inclined to "let things slide" (ATA 2013). This is not to say that induction experiences

should be left to chance; rather this highlights the need for induction components to be flexible enough to respond to the needs of individual learners (the new teachers) and to the unique and multifaceted context in which their learning unfolds.

In Canada, the contexts in which induction experiences unfold are diverse. A recent compendium of Canadian research into beginning teacher experiences (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2017) reveals several such contexts. A new teacher in Canada may work in an urban or remote context, and may be part of one of many unique cultural or multicultural settings: “Beginning teachers reveal they are not inducted so much into a profession as into a place that belongs to a community and its children” (Davies and Hales 2017, 357). Given that induction happens in these multiple unique contexts, Davies and Hales (2017, 361) argue for centralized induction policies that “maintain governance authority over mentorship initiatives while still enabling diverse practices, adaptive responses and even a bit of disruptive pedagogical ‘wildness’ to flourish.” This has implications for research as well.

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of supports for new teachers during their induction years, both individual and contextual factors must be considered (Walker et al 2017). For example, Hellsten et al (2017) assert that, of necessity, mentors in rural contexts must take on a greater role in supporting new teachers than their urban counterparts. Here, mentor–protégé collaborations facilitated “opportunities for beginning teachers to learn the routines and logistics of their schools and divisions ... co-learning opportunities for both the beginning teachers and their mentors ... emotional support which increased beginning teacher wellness” (Hellsten et al 2017, 325). However, in another context, the role of introducing teachers to routines and logistics may fall to district personnel. This highlights the need for a consideration of context, both in practice and in research.

## FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE SUPPORTS FOR BEGINNING TEACHERS

In 2011, a review of empirical research related to teacher induction and mentorship established that, in general, formalized programs that aim to support beginning teachers have a positive impact on job “satisfaction, commitment, or retention,” on “various aspects of teaching” and on “student achievement” (Ingersoll and Strong 2011, 225). Further, research indicates that factors contributing to positive induction experiences for beginning teachers include a conducive environment that includes multiple supports and positive relationships, strong mentorship relationships, and a focus on professional growth. Despite evidence indicating the value of induction programs, initiatives aimed at improving induction experiences for Canadian teachers remain somewhat “sporadic and inconsistent” (Kutsyuruba and Treguna 2014, 32).

### Conducive Environments

In any profession, “an organization’s climate and culture can significantly affect an employee’s ability to balance work and family demands, work stress, overall stress, job satisfaction, work involvement and commitment to the organization” (Duxbury and Higgins 2013, 40). For teachers, especially in the early years of practice, school climate has a significant impact. Early studies inquiring into beginning teacher supports in Ontario helped to establish that beginning teachers need induction

environments where they can “openly communicate their questions, clarify ambiguities about their practice, and genuinely discover a personal response to each circumstance” (Cherubini 2007, 5).

Positive induction environments are created when taken on as a “collective responsibility” (Cherian and Daniel 2008, 6). More recent research echoes this finding and highlights the significance of relationships for any beginning teacher’s experience: “everyone surrounding early career teachers, and the early career teachers themselves, has an active role to play in building their resilience” (Le Cornu 2013, 13). In these environments, supports must be offered that focus on both pedagogy and some of the organizational and cultural needs of beginning teachers—needs that are seen as foundational in the “hierarchy of needs” described above (ATA 2013). Research in the Northwest Territories echoes this need, describing the “ecological support” that acquaints new teachers “with the ecology of the school and the hierarchy of the staff and the communication network” as needing to be addressed in the induction process (Rass 2012, 158).

### Mentoring

Mentoring has been well established as a key support for teachers in their early years of practice, but it requires care in implementation to be effective. As Kardos and Johnson (2010) established, pairing beginning teachers with mentors is but one step in creating effective mentoring relationships: “just any type of mentoring and/or induction program is not enough to turn a novice teacher into a ‘good’ teacher” (Dias Lacy and Guirguis 2017, 270). As Hoover (2010, 16) describes, effective mentoring “moves far beyond an inconsistent buddy system of informal emotional support (‘Come to see me if you have any questions or problems’) or meetings to acclimate novices to pragmatics such as district procedures and paperwork.” To be effective, care must be taken in matching skilled and eager mentors with compatible protégés (Hellsten, et al 2009), and these mentor–protégé relationships must be “prioritized, especially with release time to facilitate the relationships” (Rass 2012, 159). Within these relationships, the focus should be primarily on “teaching practice” (Kardos and Johnson 2010), or pedagogical growth. Research should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of mentorship within each unique context to support effective mentoring that, in turn, improves professional learning outcomes (Kirincic 2017; Rass 2012).

### Positive Professional Growth as the Key Outcome

A focus on pedagogy is critically important to enhance beginning teachers’ professional accomplishment and should be ongoing throughout the early years of teaching in order to retain quality teachers in the profession. It is important that policy makers consider the need for new teachers in the profession to receive continuing opportunities to examine and improve their own skills and knowledge of the profession under the guidance of more knowledgeable and experienced practitioners. (Ferguson-Patrick 2011, 125)

As noted above, beginning teachers experience a “hierarchy of needs” (ATA 2013). Once hired, beginning teachers begin the complicated task of learning “the ropes in a particular school and school board . . . while at the same time surviving the trial by fire of classroom management, instructional planning, lesson delivery, and student assessment. The task is frequently overwhelming” (Glassford and Salinitri 2007, 2).

Beyond contributing to early career attrition, this difficult work of acclimation can also prevent teachers from attending to diverse learning needs and becoming better pedagogues. While some beginning teachers are able to “develop as reflective professionals,” for others, “early coping mechanisms morph into their teaching practices, resulting, at best, in strongly disciplined, but pedagogically and relationally impoverished classrooms” (Anderson 2009, 93).

It is therefore critically important that teachers, even as they orient themselves to the microculture of a particular school and district, be supported in professional learning that is directly related to student outcomes (Timperley 2011). The current study also indicates that it is those positive moments of pedagogical interactions that contribute to beginning teachers’ feelings of success. As Johnson and Birkeland (2003, 593) so clearly established, how beginning teachers feel about their induction years is inextricably linked to attrition from the profession.

Because of these lasting impacts of induction experiences and the possible variances in induction experiences, these experiences must be examined using methodologies capable of assessing both. As Schaefer, Long and Clandinin (2012) highlight, there is a need to understand beginning teacher experiences narratively, as happening over time, and as a result of the meeting of individual and contextual factors. This study, therefore, employed a qualitative approach informed by these narrative principals.

## Methodology

The current study took a mixed-methods approach (Biesta 2012; Creswell 2014). The overall research unfolded in stages in a constant comparative fashion, with findings at each stage informing design and questions in the next stage.

- **Fall Conference Survey**  
A total of 397 surveys were received, either in person at the conference (n=288) or via an e-mail invitation following the conference (n=109).
- **Spring Follow-Up Survey**  
Of the initial survey respondents, 295 agreed to be contacted for a follow-up survey. Of these 295 contacts, 135 completed this second survey (a 46 per cent response rate).
- **Individual Telephone Interviews**  
Respondents who participated in both surveys were invited to participate in a telephone interview. Of these respondents, researchers purposefully selected 24 potential participants representing both positive and negative teaching experiences in a variety of school settings. Of those selected, 19 completed an interview.

As the study progressed, qualitative questions were increasingly emphasized to “add depth, meaning and detail to statistical findings” (Fink 2003, 64). The researchers continued to build and deepen understandings of the “diversity of experiences” (Jansen 2010) of Alberta’s beginning teachers, seeking to understand the interplay between the context, available supports and the individual beginning teachers involved in the study.

### Fall Conference Survey Design

As noted above, the results of the ATA’s five-year longitudinal study and the pan-Canadian study completed by Kutsyruba and Walker were very influential in the design of the fall survey of this study. The survey inquired into whether the immediate needs of beginning teachers in Alberta were being met, as well as current issues teachers in the province are facing. The resulting survey comprised five sections: Demographic Data, Current Employment Profile, Professional Growth Plans and the Teaching Quality Standard, Sources of Support, and Professional Practice and Well-Being.

### Spring Follow-Up Survey Design

The follow-up survey had two purposes. The first was to discern change over the school year, as teachers’ perspectives on initial supports provided might shift after several months of teaching experience. Further,

to evaluate whether supports offered early in the school year were sustained in a meaningful way through the school year, several closed-response questions were repeated in the fall and spring surveys.

The second purpose of the follow-up survey was to strengthen qualitative components based on the initial data analysis. To this end, several open-response questions were added to the follow-up survey. These qualitative responses in turn would inform the format for the in-depth telephone interviews.

### Individual Telephone Interviews

Rather than develop a standard set of questions for each of the individual interviews, researchers instead employed a narrative framework to guide the questions, which were oriented to the “past, present, and imagined future” (Clandinin 2013) of each teacher’s experiences.

With this frame in mind, researchers developed guiding interview questions based on a careful reading of each respondent’s individual fall and spring survey responses. These survey responses spoke to what supports that teacher had experienced and valued, what contributed to their feelings of success, what got in the way of success, and what experiences had been “critical” for that teacher. Therefore, in the interview, the researcher and the respondent were able to enter into a discussion that had, in a way, already begun.

In each interview, the researcher asked some questions that were backward looking (eg, Why did you want to be a teacher? How has the reality of teaching been the same as or different from what you expected?). Several questions centred on the respondent’s experiences in the present year (and based on the surveys). Also included were a few forward-looking questions (eg, What do you think might be easier or harder about next year? What would you need to have an ideal year of teaching?). This provided a sense of how each teacher’s induction experiences were unfolding over time and offered insight into how stressors and supports were coming together to create each individual’s experience.

This report outlines the findings from the individual interviews, sharing illustrative vignettes to demonstrate the interplay between context, supports and individual beginning teachers.

## Survey Findings: How Alberta's Teachers Are Being Supported

The findings from both the fall survey (completed by respondents at the beginning of the 2016/17 school year) and the spring survey (completed at the end of the school year) are reported here. Findings from the fall survey were encouraging. It was immediately evident that teachers beginning their careers in Alberta are being inducted in contexts in which there are multiple supports and that, overall, these teachers were feeling confident in their abilities and optimistic about the profession. Of course, the findings also led to further questions, which the spring survey addressed.

### PROFILE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The fall survey, conducted at the Beginning Teachers Conferences, had 397 respondents, most of whom indicated full-time employment (Figure 7). Only four respondents were currently teachers on call (this was not unexpected, as the Alberta Teachers' Association hosts a separate conference for substitute teachers). More than half of survey respondents had some teaching experience (time substitute teaching, at least one year of teaching experience) prior to the 2016 school year. The remainder of respondents were first-year teachers (Figure 8). Almost all respondents were on a probationary or temporary contract. Survey respondents were drawn from a variety of contexts across the province (Figure 9).

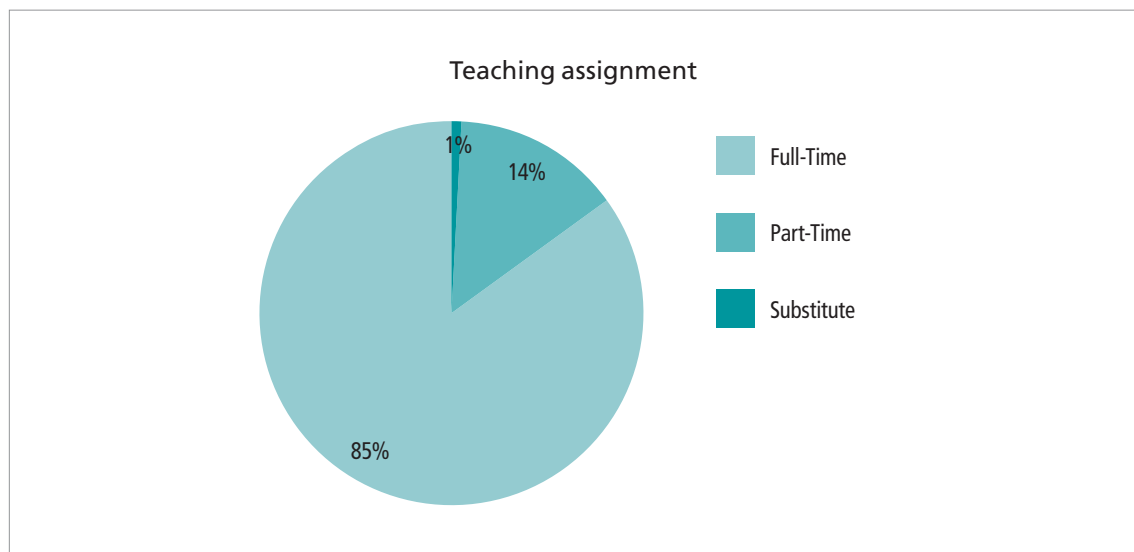


FIGURE 7. Teaching assignments of fall survey respondents ( $n = 397$ )

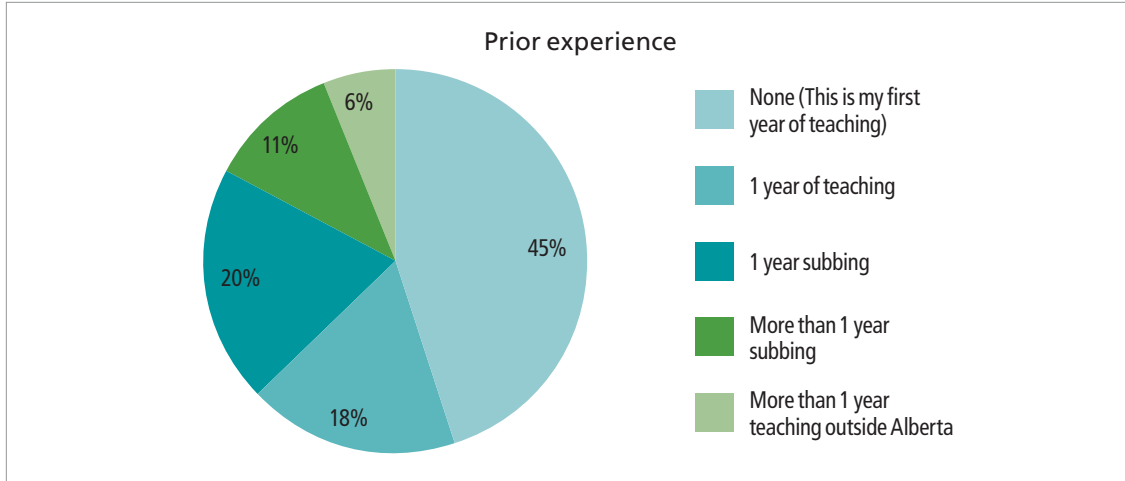


FIGURE 8. Experience fall survey respondents had prior to the 2016/17 school year

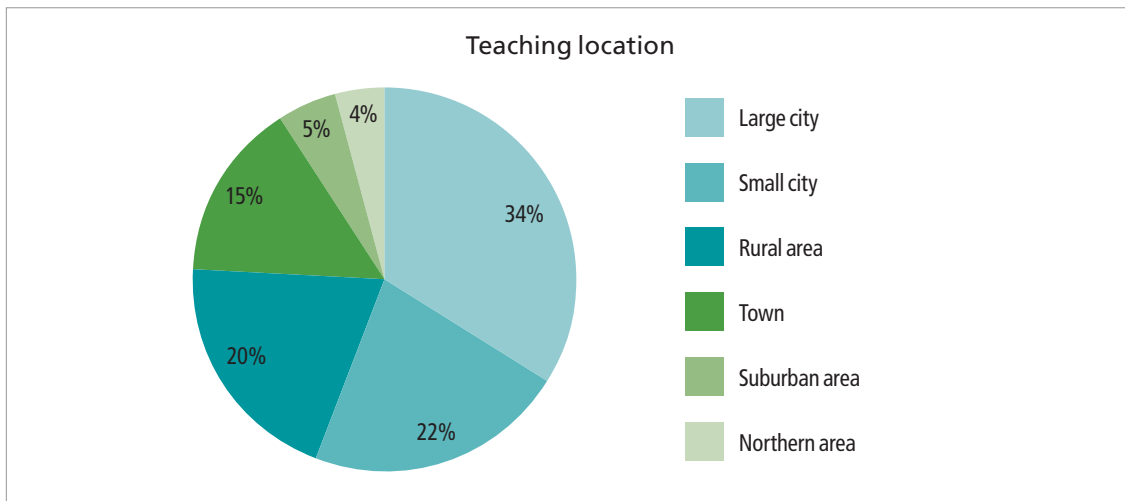


FIGURE 9. Where fall survey respondents were teaching in the 2016/17 school year

## PROFESSIONAL GROWTH PLANS AND THE TEACHING QUALITY STANDARD

The questions in this section of the survey focused on beginning teachers’ familiarity with the Teaching Quality Standard (TQS) and the link between the TQS and professional growth plans (PGPs) (Figure 10). As researchers expected that most respondents would be in their very early career, the fall survey only inquired into respondents’ familiarity with the TQS and PGPs; the spring survey then asked respondents to reflect on whether they were supported in their professional learning goals (Figure 11). Figure 10 signals high awareness and understanding related to the TQS and PGPs. In addition, Figure 11 indicates that respondents were positive about their professional growth experiences toward the end of the school year.



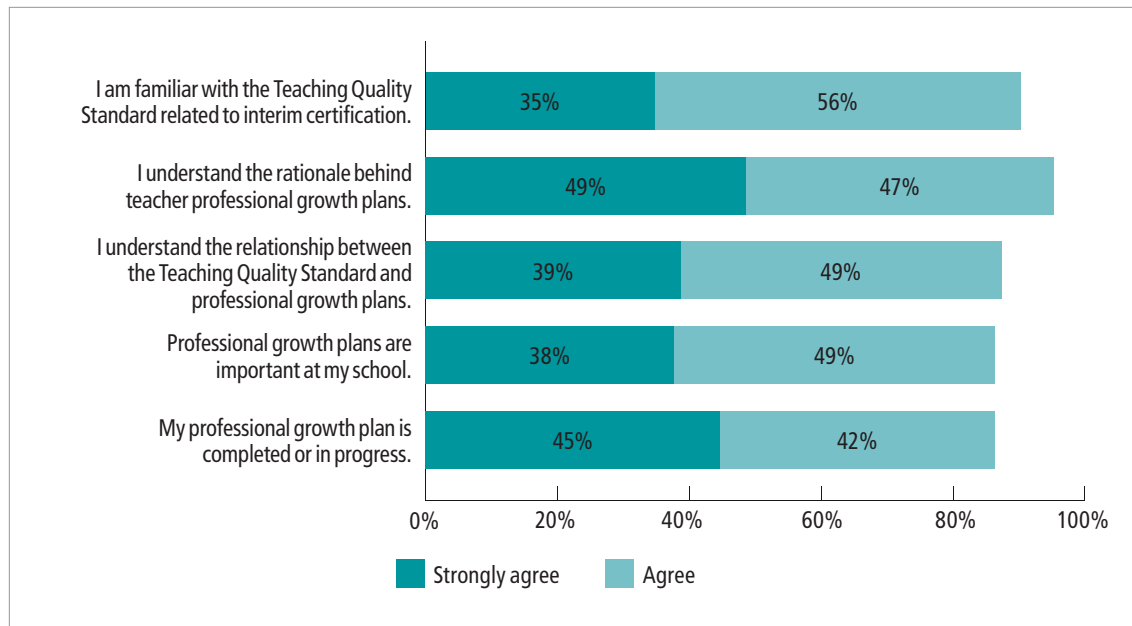


FIGURE 10. Professional growth plans and the Teaching Quality Standard, fall survey responses

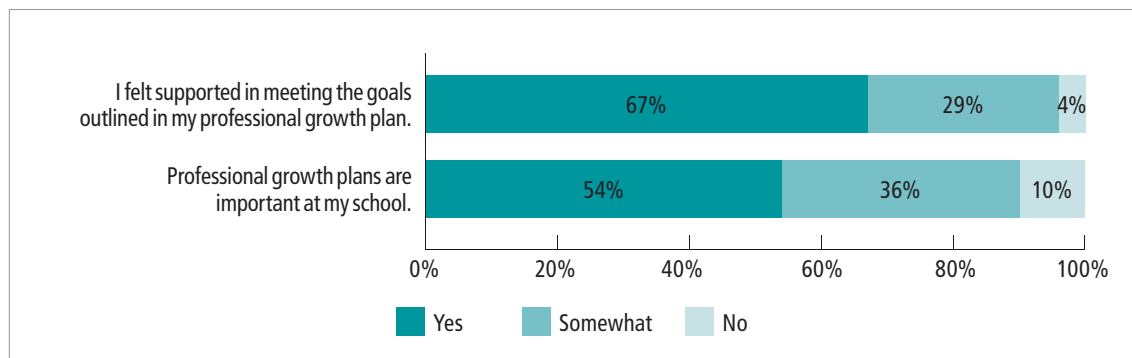


FIGURE 11. Respondents' impressions about professional growth planning at the end of the year, spring survey responses

## SOURCES OF SUPPORT

The “basic” needs of new teachers identified in the five-year longitudinal study include “a secure placement; access to teaching resources; access to unit and lesson plans; an orientation to the school; advice on classroom management; and affective support from colleagues” (ATA 2013, 46). Because these needs are multiple and foundational for pedagogical growth, induction supports also need to be multiple and multifaceted. The best induction programs will support basic needs and encourage beginning teachers to move toward professional and pedagogical growth and adopt a growth mindset (Ferguson-Patrick 2011; Timperley 2011).

The questions in this section of the surveys inquired into whether beginning teachers in Alberta were receiving multiple supports, and then asked them to reflect on what supports they found the most valuable. By asking these questions in both the fall and spring surveys, we determined which supports respondents experienced in a sustained way over the school year.

### Supports Experienced and Those Most Valued

The findings here were encouraging, supporting other research indicating that Alberta’s priority on new teacher induction is paying dividends for beginning teachers (Kutsyuruba and Walker 2016). Survey respondents confirmed that they experienced a variety of supports in their context and that these sources of support came from multiple places, including school districts, schools and colleagues (both beginning and experienced), and some supports that respondents found themselves. More than half of teachers surveyed experienced the supports indicated in Figure 12 below, while Figure 13 represents those supports experienced less commonly.

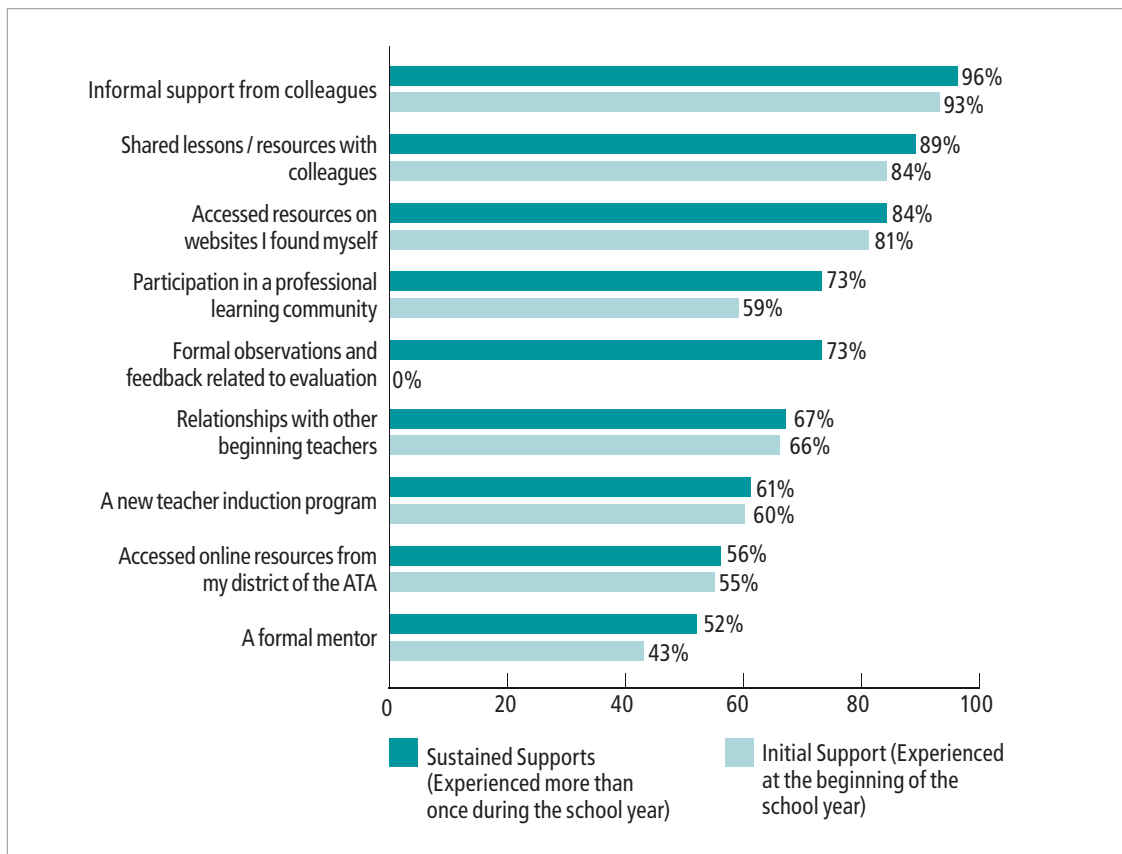


FIGURE 12. Supports most commonly experienced by teachers surveyed in the fall (initial supports) and the spring (sustained supports)

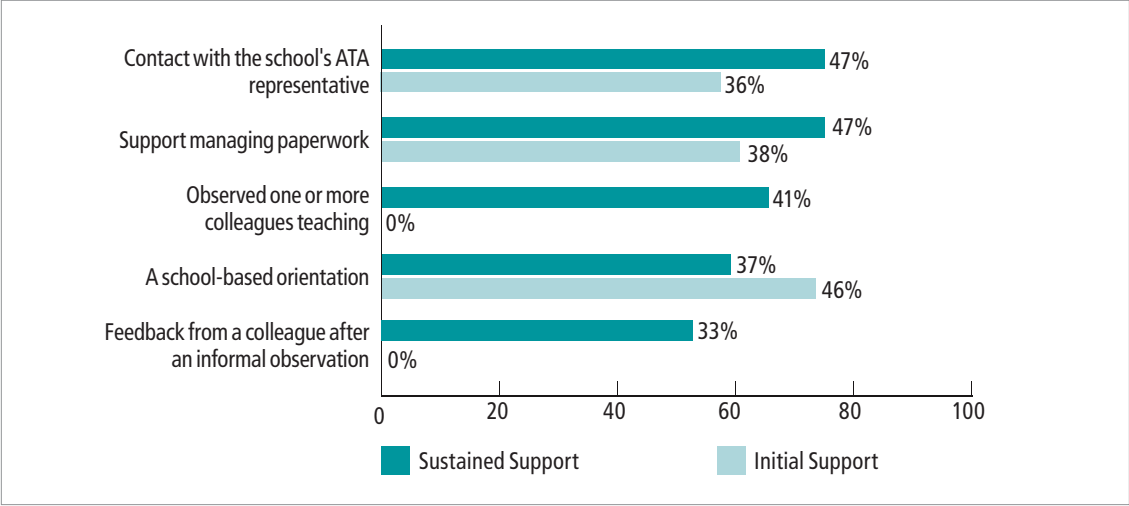


FIGURE 13. Supports less commonly experienced by fall (initial supports) and spring (sustained supports) survey respondents

The fall and spring surveys asked respondents to identify the three supports they found to be the most valuable. The most valued supports are reported in Figures 14 and 15. At both points in the school year, respondents said that the support they received from colleagues was of most value, either in the form of informal support or resource sharing. In the spring, formal observations and feedback related to evaluation became the third most valued support. Notably, the most valued supports identified relate to collegial relationships. Responses to questions about online sources of support and the part they played in induction experiences reinforce this theme, as well.

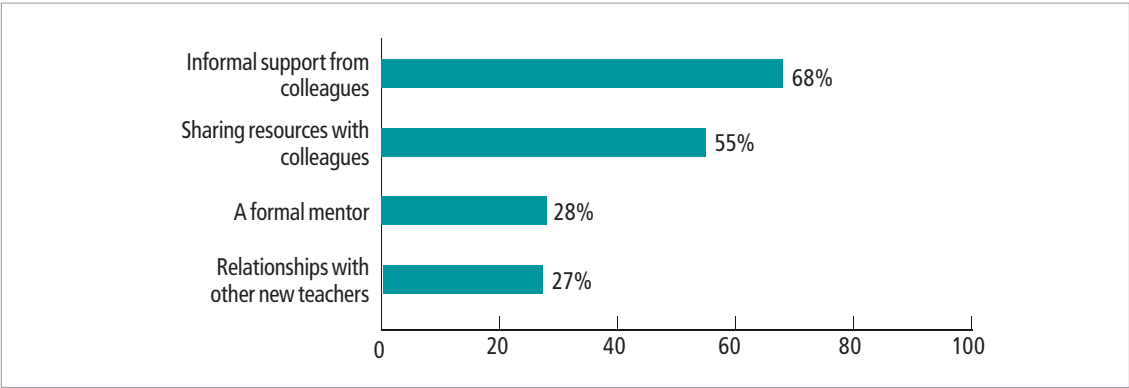


FIGURE 14. Supports most valued by fall survey respondents (beginning of school year)

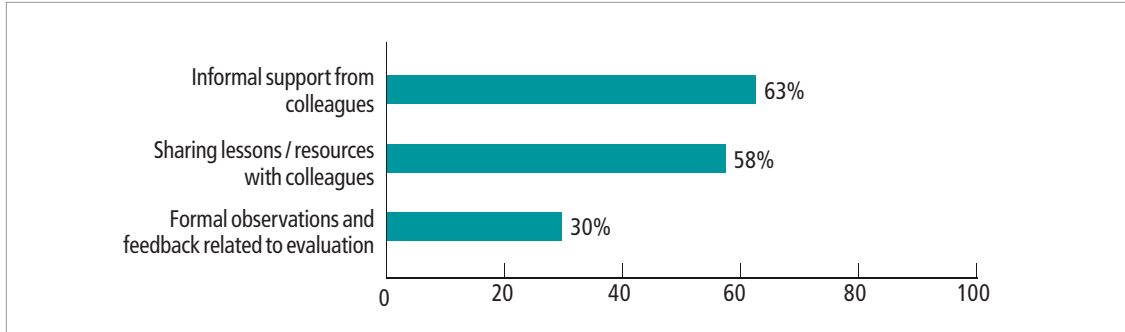


FIGURE 15. Supports most valued by spring survey respondents (end of school year)

### Online Supports

A large majority of respondents (92 per cent) said they accessed online supports to find resources and ideas, and 58 per cent of teachers used online resources to “increase professional competency.” Most agreed that online resources are more convenient and indicated that they are in the habit of looking online first for resources (Figures 16 and 17).

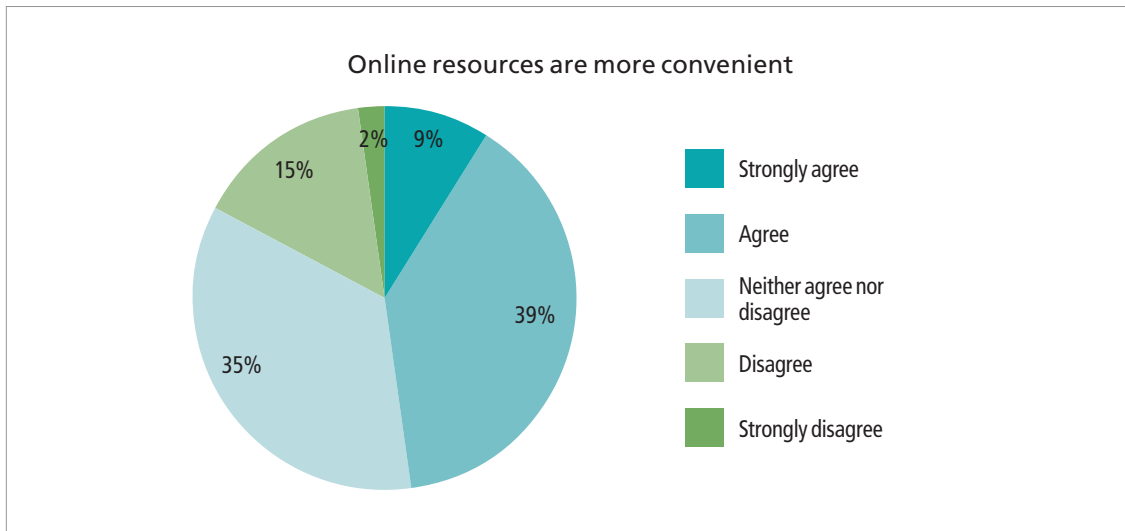


FIGURE 16. Percentage of respondents agreeing/disagreeing that “online resources are more convenient”

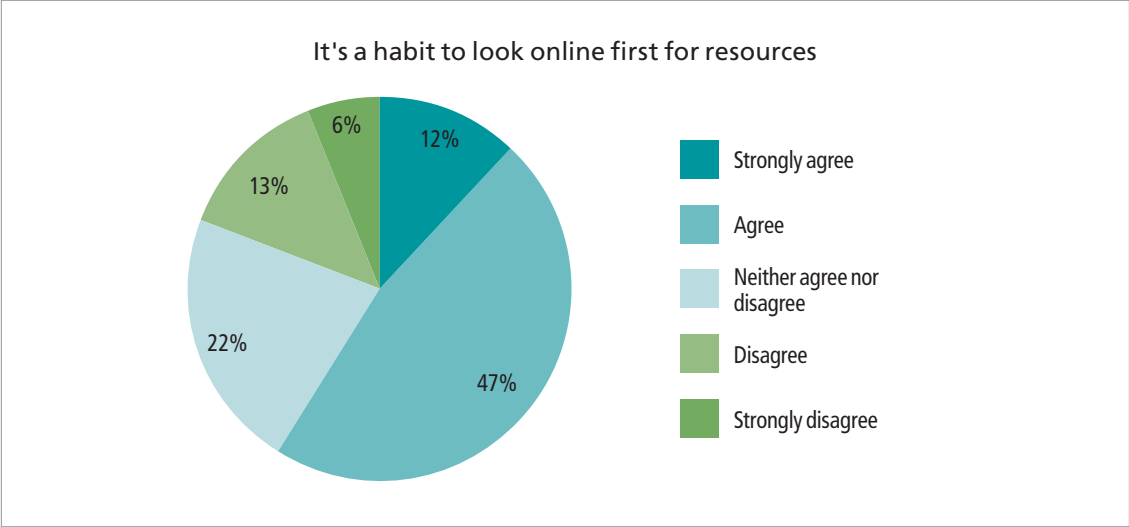


FIGURE 17. Percentage of respondents agreeing/disagreeing that "it's a habit to look online first"

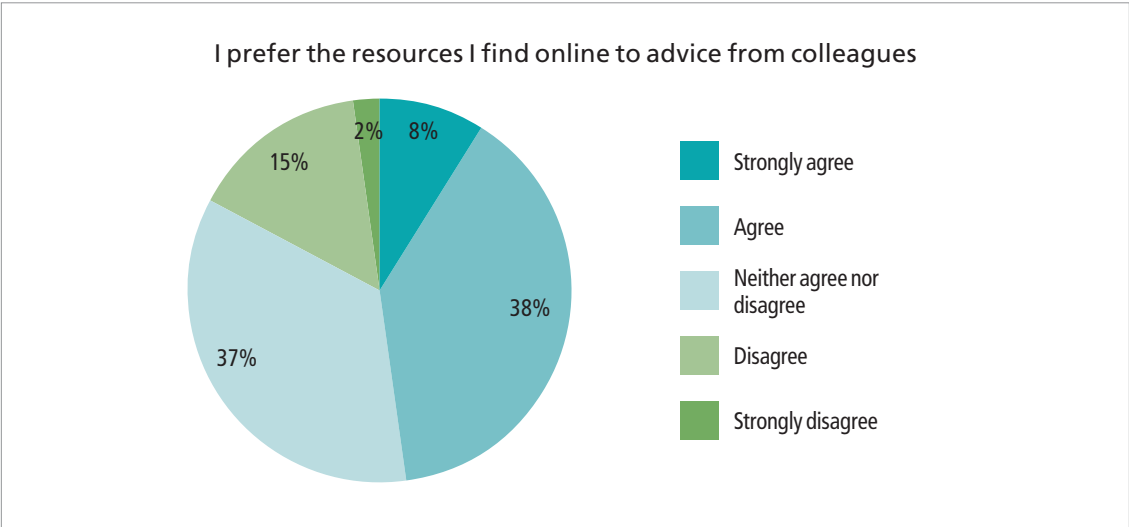


FIGURE 18. Percentage of respondents agreeing/disagreeing that "they prefer online resources to the advice received from colleagues"

As Figure 18 indicates, despite convenience and habits, respondents continued to place greater value on the in-person support of colleagues. With digital initiatives, including distance professional development, becoming more common, further investigation in this area was pursued in the spring survey.

The spring survey asked whether respondents would prioritize in-person supports or digital supports if they were responsible for funding decisions. Examples of in-person supports provided to respondents included more time for collaboration, an expanded new teacher mentorship program and more in-person professional development offerings. Digital supports were defined by these

examples: online courses/webinars to support professional learning; and developing, expanding and indexing digital teaching resources.

Overwhelmingly, respondents said they would prioritize in-person supports (Figure 19). Those who indicated they would prioritize digital supports (12 per cent) predominantly cited time or distance as the main reason online supports would be more valuable. Notably, time was also a reason given for why in-person supports were preferred. Instead of taking the time, on their own, to find answers to questions online, in-person supports were seen as offering immediate answers to questions—answers that need not be filtered or applied to a specific context.

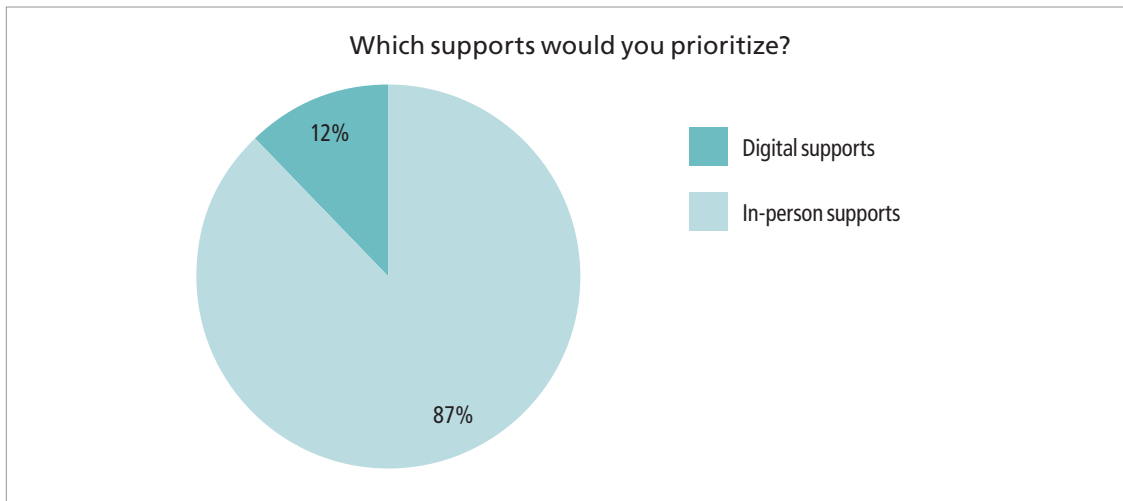


FIGURE 19. Supports beginning teachers would prioritize

In open-ended responses, in-person supports were described as preferable because of that human connection that reduces isolation. Collaboration and context-specific answers to their questions were desirable outcomes of in-person interactions. In-person supports were also valued for keeping respondents on track, both with site-specific needs like paperwork and with classroom pedagogy. This notion of wanting to be kept “on track” became a recurring theme in the study findings.

In short, and as one open response summarized, “Human interaction will always win out when it comes to support. There are already a ton of resources available online, but a person-to-person dialogue about what works and what doesn’t is much more effective, efficient and meaningful than an impersonal index of resources.”

### Supports from Administrators and More Experienced Colleagues

Another way we inquired into what these beginning teachers valued or needed in terms of supports was to ask what supports they would offer if they were (1) an administrator or (2) a more experienced teacher. Responses to these questions are summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Supports respondents would offer as an administrator or more experienced teacher

As an administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal mentorship programs</li> <li>• Help with site-specific needs: school tour, index of resources, opportunities to meet colleagues, help accessing required online accounts / websites, information about school culture and routines, and so on</li> <li>• School-based orientations</li> <li>• Informal check-ins</li> </ul>
As an experienced teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources: year/unit/lesson plans, videos, exemplars</li> <li>• Support: chats over coffee, casual debriefs, encouragement, reassurance</li> </ul>

Responses indicated that beginning teachers would appreciate resources and informal support from colleagues. Encouragement from colleagues was also described as contributing greatly to respondents' feelings of success in a later question, again reinforcing the finding that relational support is key to a positive induction experience.

Site-based needs emerged in relation to the supports administrators might provide. Respondents' concerns related to site-based needs are not surprising, given that less than half of them had had a school-based orientation at the time the fall survey was conducted in October of the school year (see "supports experienced" above). If in the role of an administrator, respondents indicated they would offer general check-ins to support new teachers, as well. Because "check-ins" were not always clearly defined, this became an area of inquiry in the spring survey.

### Check-Ins

*Check-in* was a term frequently used in the fall survey to describe a desired support. The spring survey aimed to determine respondents' definition of this term. Responses suggest that the term reflects beginning teachers' need to have frequent contact with more experienced colleagues to feel supported and to stay on track in terms of pedagogy and paperwork. Respondents highlighted the need for check-ins to occur within trusting relationships with colleagues, and for them to be nonevaluative. Figures 20 and 21 represent some of the features of check-ins identified by respondents. When asked how often check-ins should occur, most respondents said once or twice per month.

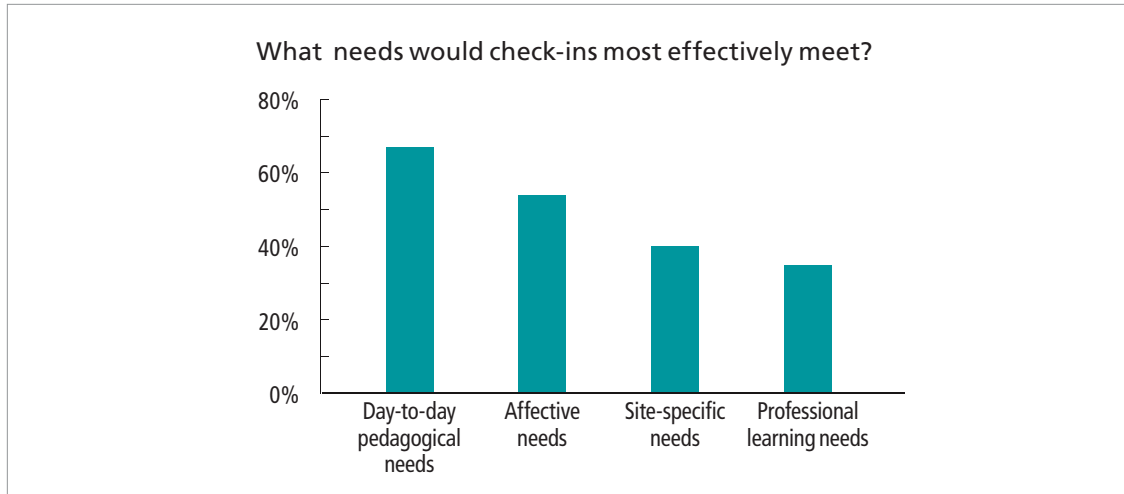


FIGURE 20. Needs that check-ins would most effectively meet

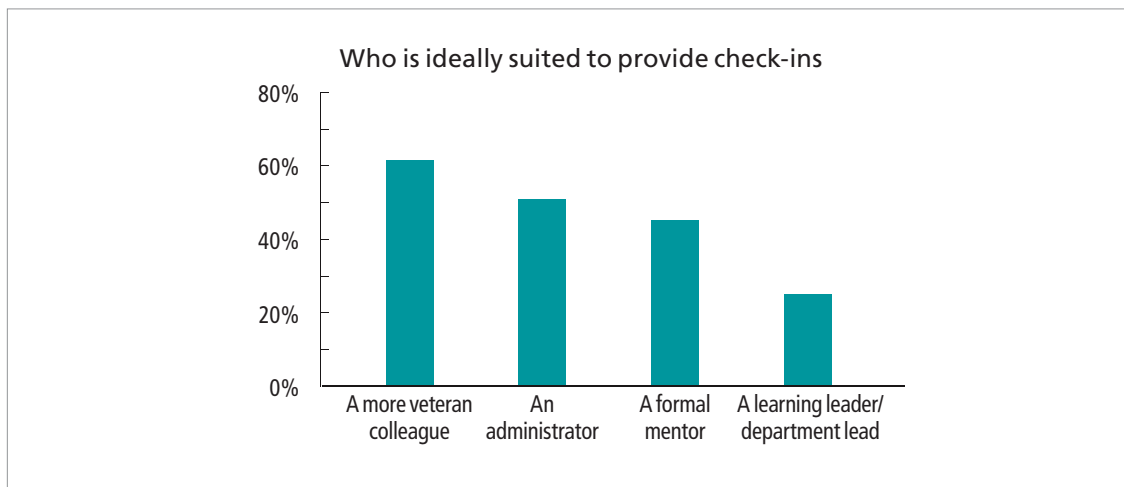


FIGURE 21. Ideal colleague to offer check-ins

In an open-response item, respondents described what made check-ins distinct from other kinds of supports. Check-ins were valued for the following reasons:

- They can be personalized and are therefore able to meet a new teacher’s needs in a holistic way (in contrast to formalized workshops).
- They can be a responsive, timely support.
- They function as an affective support that is nonevaluative and nonjudgmental.
- They have the potential to keep beginning teachers on track pedagogically, with opportunities for constructive feedback.



Respondents also indicated that the following were necessary or of value in relation to check-ins:

- A trusting relationship between the beginning teacher and the person checking in
- Regular and reliable meetings, with some preplanning
- Offer to check in from experienced teacher to beginning teacher

*“It is a little daunting seeking help, especially halfway into the year when you feel you should know this by now. It makes it easier having someone come to you on their schedule so you don't feel like you're wasting their time. It is also reassuring to have someone who is in the same environment as you provide support.” —Respondent*

While a few responses indicated some accountability might be needed to ensure the regularity of check-ins, many respondents noted that check-ins would be most effective when they are not mandatory and when the person checking in genuinely wants to do so.

Initial descriptions of check-ins in the fall survey implied that check-ins were considered an informal support, mostly meeting affective needs. However, the spring survey findings revealed that many beginning teachers also have a desire to have help staying on track in terms of their pedagogy. It seems then, that it is not just support in terms of positivity that beginning teachers want, but also support in becoming better teachers.

## PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AND WELL-BEING

There is a growing body of research that links the personal, social, and emotional factors that contribute to well-being with teacher performance (Hellsten et al 2017; Le Cornu 2013; Rass 2012). Teacher performance has, in turn, been established as a key factor in all measures of student success (Wong 2004). Therefore, this study also included some questions that inquired into how confident, prepared and optimistic Alberta's beginning teachers were feeling, including perceptions of their school and district contexts as welcoming and supportive, and their own work-life balance.

### Conducive Environments

In terms of the support they found in their school contexts, an overwhelming majority of respondents told us they had positive collegial interactions, and that they had at least one colleague in whom they could confide (Figure 22).

However, most recognized that their colleagues had their own “full plates” and felt somewhat worried about asking for too much support. More than half worried that their colleagues had little time to help them and exactly half of respondents worried that their competence might be doubted if they asked for too much help. These factors must be considered as barriers preventing beginning teachers from getting support. Such barriers might be addressed by offering volunteer mentors

dedicated time to support beginning teachers, or by increasing the number of people in each beginner’s support network.

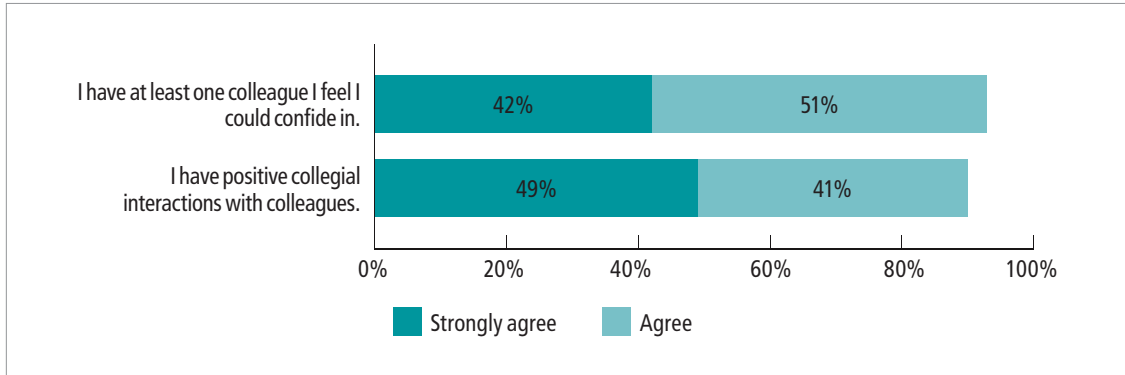


FIGURE 22. Support fall survey respondents found among colleagues

### Workload and Work–Life Balance

When asked about their initial experiences of the workload of teaching, most fall survey respondents said that they felt they had more work than they could comfortably handle. Many respondents also felt that their work schedule often conflicted with their personal life (Figure 23).

While issues of work–life balance are likely to be associated with entry into any profession, it is also significant that many respondents felt at least a little distracted from their classroom teaching by other professional responsibilities. Most also said they often felt as though they could be doing more for their students (Figure 23). Further, when asked if they felt comfortable saying “no” to things beyond the scope of their regular teaching load, responses were mixed, with 40 per cent indicating a lack of comfort (Figure 24).

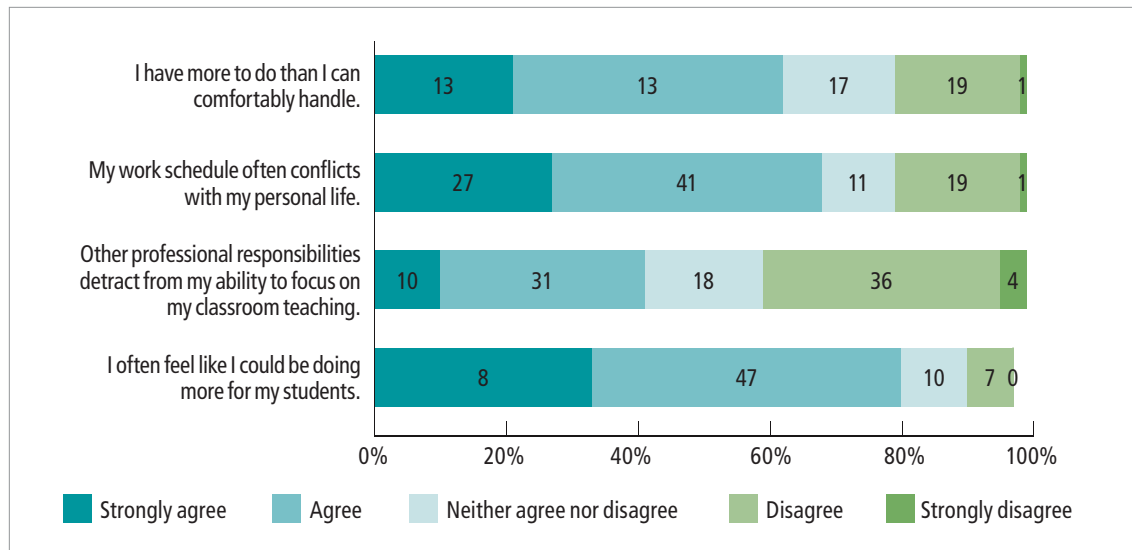


FIGURE 23. Workload and work–life balance

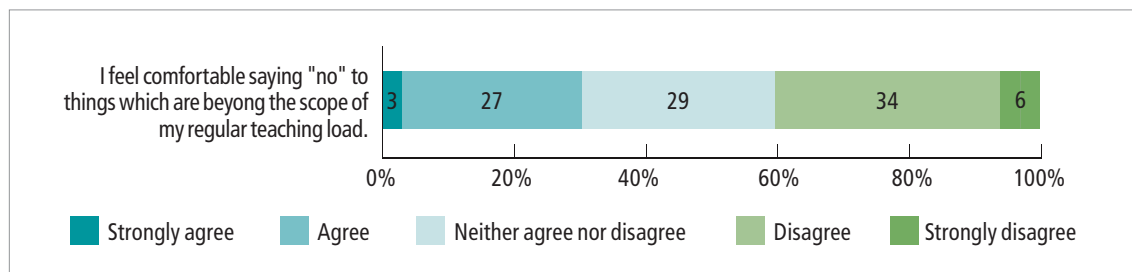


FIGURE 24. Comfort with saying “no”

The findings presented in the next section indicate that the respondents were still feeling quite confident and optimistic; however, responses indicate that beginning teachers experience guilt about not doing enough for students, which can become a chronic source of stress (Hargreaves 1994). In addition, early feelings of success are important for the retention of beginning teachers (Johnson and Birkeland 2003), and feeling that one has little control over their work tasks can erode feelings of efficacy (Duxbury and Higgins 2013).

### Efficacy and Optimism

The fall survey posed several questions that directly inquired into respondents' feelings of efficacy and optimism within the profession. Responses indicated that, at that point early in the school year, most respondents felt a high level of confidence and optimism (Figure 25). The spring survey revealed that teachers desired more help with specific students and specific teaching assignments. These results, taken together, suggest that teachers are confident in their own abilities, but require support and resources to manage their assignments and sustain confidence.

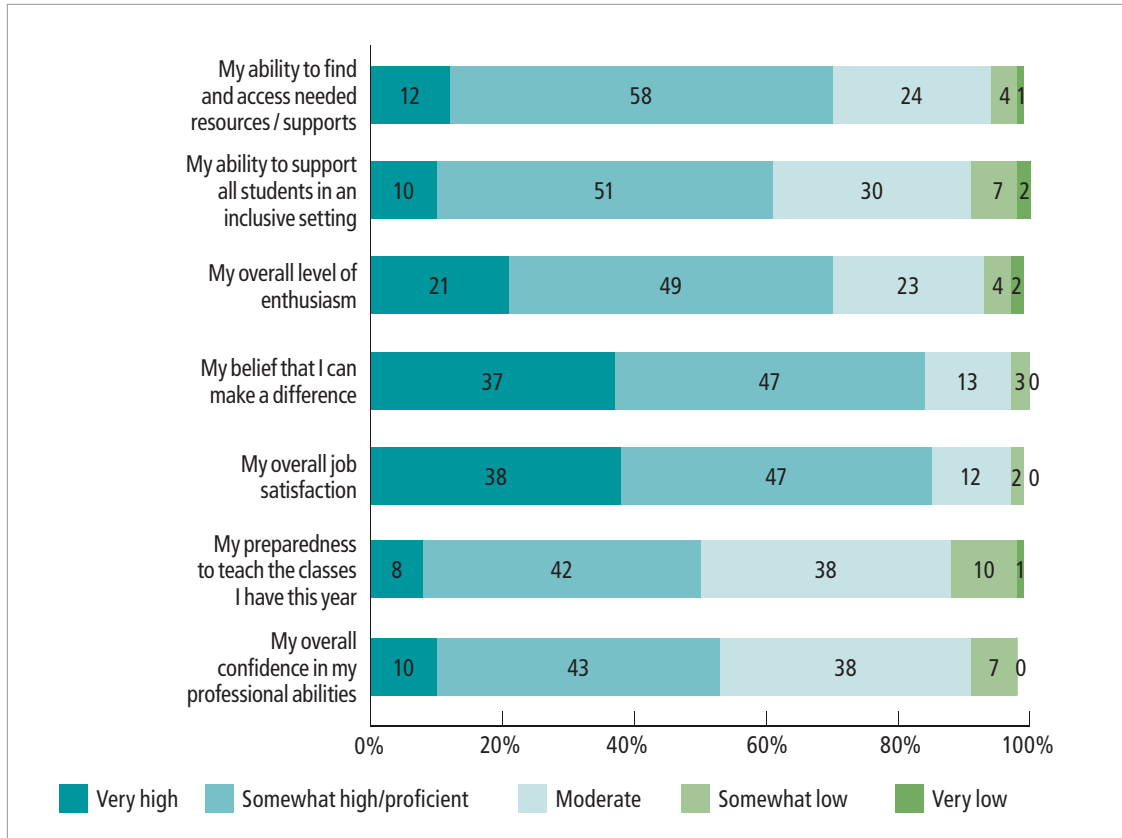


FIGURE 25. Feelings of confidence and optimism fall survey respondents had in relation to specific aspects of teaching

### Success in Teaching

The final set of questions in the fall survey, which included opportunities for open-ended responses, focused on how often and under what conditions beginning teachers were feeling successful. In an early and significant inquiry into beginning teacher retention, Johnson and Birkeland (2003) identified “feelings of success” as a being a key part of positive induction experiences. This finding was echoed in the ATA’s five-year longitudinal study (ATA 2013).

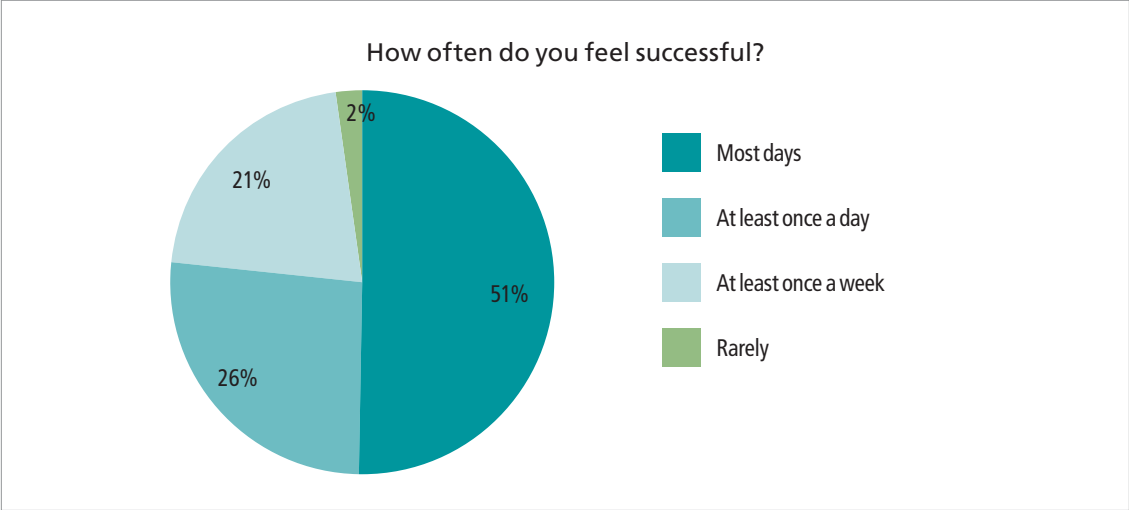


FIGURE 26. How often fall survey respondents felt successful in their teaching

Responses reflected in Figure 26 indicate that fall survey respondents were generally feeling successful. When asked to describe what contributed to those feelings of success in an open-ended response, the overwhelming majority spoke of positive relational or pedagogical moments with students. Additional factors contributing to success included feedback from colleagues and parents, and feeling “on top of things” in terms of workload (Figure 27).

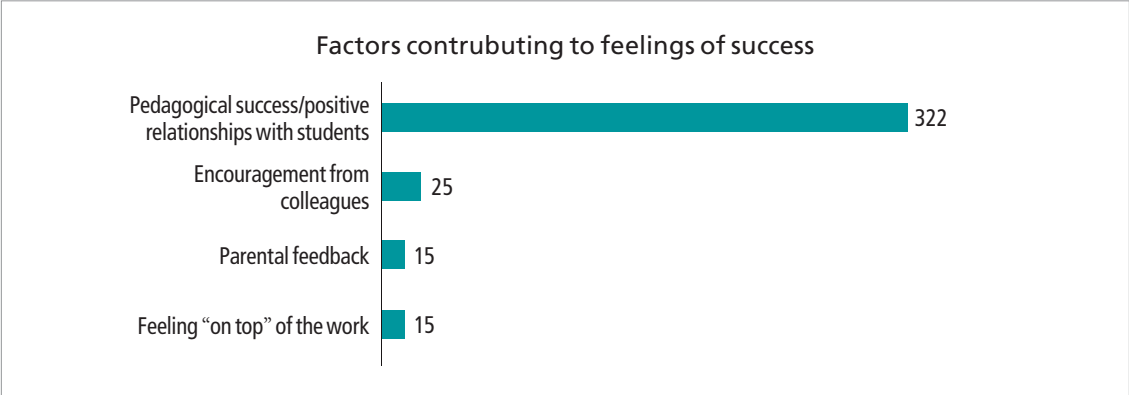


FIGURE 27. Factors contributing to feelings of success in teaching

Descriptions of pedagogical success in relation to students included the following:

- Positive student interactions or relationships: moments when students were happy, excited, enthusiastic, willing to take risks or enjoying learning
- Positive, direct student feedback
- Moments of student progress

- Productive classroom management and/or student engagement: students on task, engaged in on-topic conversation, little discipline required
- Students asking teachers for academic or affective support
- Success of a lesson and/or ability to ask clear questions or give clear instructions

Feelings of success also stemmed from the following:

- Informal feedback from colleagues and parents
- Collaborations with colleagues
- Student–parent engagement (ie, the student told their parent about a lesson or activity)
- Effective workload or task management
- Formal feedback following observations

### What Impedes Feeling Successful?

Respondents were also asked to describe times when they did not feel successful. Of the 325 responses, most described difficult relationships with students or pedagogical struggles (Figure 28). Many of these were the converse of the pedagogical successes described above, but overall there was more of an emphasis on planning when teachers described what made them feel unsuccessful. There was also more emphasis on not having a thorough knowledge of the curriculum.

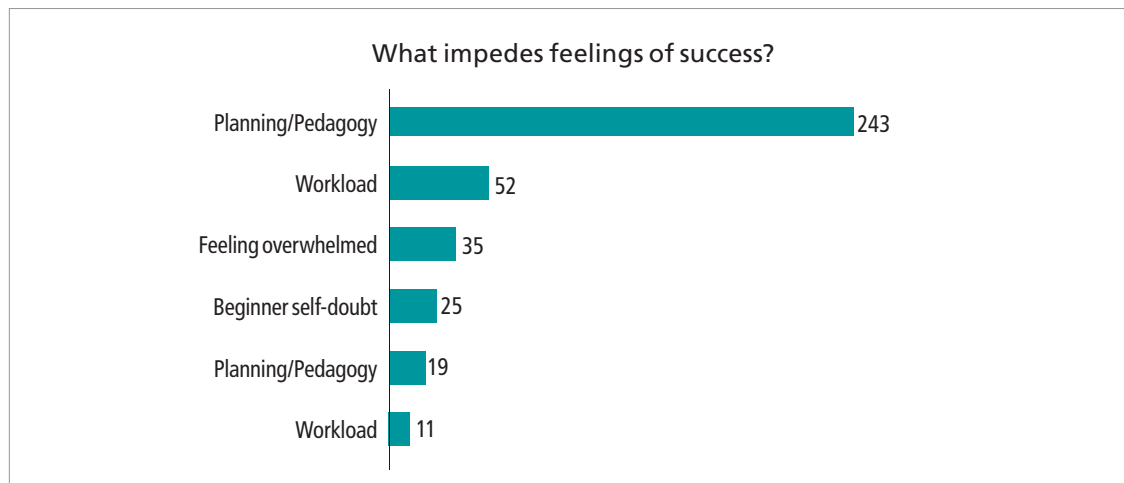


FIGURE 28. Factors that impede feelings of success

Other factors impeding feelings of success were the following:

- “Beginner self-doubt” (expressions of feeling a lack of confidence)
- Feeling overwhelmed by workload and demands (tasks going “above and beyond” classroom-related duties)
- Feeling stressed, exhausted

- Challenges in working collaboratively
- Negative interactions or interference from colleagues/administrators
- Insufficient resources

Comments related to stress and workload seemed distinct from beginner self-doubt because they were not specific to being novice but were more reminiscent of the kind of “teacher guilt” that Hargreaves (1994) describes as plaguing teachers at all levels.

The responses to the questions related to feelings of success helped determine a line of inquiry in spring follow-up survey, as the findings spoke to the multiplicity of both challenges and supports in teaching. They indicate that self-perception of pedagogical success or failure greatly influences how successful a beginning teacher feels. However, the number of comments related to colleague interaction and collaboration, as well as workload issues, indicates that these are also key areas to address. Perhaps, in the absence of pedagogical success, positive interactions with colleagues or a manageable workload might mitigate feelings of failure. The relationship between factors contributing to and impeding success is worth further consideration.

### Critical Induction Experiences

The final question of the two surveys offered respondents space to detail one or two critical experiences from the past school year. A “critical experience” was defined as one that had shaped their outlook on the profession, or that may affect their longer-term professional growth. Not surprisingly, responses to this open question varied greatly in both content and pragmatic aspects like length and detail. Nonetheless, some key themes emerged that largely reflected the findings shared thus far.

Respondents spoke a great deal about relationships with colleagues that provided resources and helped them persevere. Respondents also spoke about things that got in the way, like acclimating to a new town or a new school, and figuring out school-based idiosyncrasies. Workload featured as another theme, with many teachers feeling unable to keep up with demands. Finally, many spoke of relationships with students as a source of both joy and challenge.

Discussions about the context unique to each teacher were also common. Many teachers felt lucky to have support or a great school, while others perceived poor luck in being “the only X teacher at their school” or being at a school with more than a dozen other beginning teachers. The variations in circumstance confirmed the researchers’ interest in investigating the influence of context in shaping induction experiences.

Overall, the responses were not offered in detail rich enough for us to examine the interplay between individual teachers and their unique contexts as we had hoped. However, they did provide some initial insights into each teacher’s story. These insights, combined with the information each teacher provided in response to both the fall and spring surveys, created a solid foundation upon which to build a one-on-one interview protocol.

## Vignettes of Alberta’s Newest Teachers: Findings from Individual Telephone Interviews

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Respondents that completed both the fall and spring surveys were asked if they would be willing to engage in an individual telephone interview with a member of the study’s research team. After initial analysis of the spring surveys, which provided a sense of each teacher’s induction experiences, researchers selected potential interviewees that would offer a sense of the diversity of beginning teacher experiences in Alberta. Of the 24 selected for phone interviews, interviews with 19 beginning teachers were completed.

The 19 interviews we completed were with teachers in very different contexts that included urban centres, rural schools and remote schools. The teachers interviewed also experienced a diverse array of supports, from informal mentorship to no mentorship to multiple collaborative teaching relationships.

Interviewees were asked questions that stemmed directly from their individual survey responses. These responses gave us a sense of what supports that teacher had experienced and valued, what contributed to or got in the way of their feelings of success and what experiences had been “critical” for that teacher.

In each interview, the researcher asked some questions that were backward looking (eg, Why did you want to be a teacher? How has the reality of teaching been the same as or different from what you expected?). Several questions centred on the respondent’s experiences in the present year (and based on the surveys). Also included were a few forward-looking questions (eg, What do you think might be easier or harder about next year? What would you need to have an ideal year of teaching?). In some cases, participants also directly discussed their levels of optimism in terms of remaining and being successful in the teaching profession. These questions, oriented to past, present and imagined future, helped us gain a sense of how each teacher’s induction experiences might unfold over time, and gave us at least some initial insight into how multiple stressors and supports might come together to create each individual experience.

What follows are three representative vignettes that seek to deepen understanding of the significance of induction experiences. To preserve the uniqueness of each teacher’s experiences and to give a sense of how experiences differ, these narratives have been organized first according to timeline, and second according to categories that frame the participants’ induction struggles and supports. The resulting vignettes allow the reader to see where each story diverges.

While much of the text within the vignettes is verbatim from the surveys or phone interviews, each is edited for fluidity, and identifying details have been altered or removed. After each vignette, reflective analysis is offered to situate the individual narratives within the research as a whole. This analysis includes a discussion of how aspects of the individual’s story relate to others that we heard in the interviews.



## KARRI'S VIGNETTE: SIGNS OF GROWTH

### Starting Place

I always knew I wanted to help people; I thought I might go into social work or medicine. However, while travelling, I had an opportunity to see the impact of education from a fresh perspective. Sometimes, we take that impact a little bit for granted, but in some places, an education is really a ticket out of poverty, and to a better life. That was when the realization came for me: “this is where I am meant to be.” There’s nothing else I’d rather do.

### Context/Assignment

I started partway through last year on the sub list. Then, this fall I took a Grade 5 assignment in a small city. The school is medium sized, big enough for me to have grade level partners—they are also new teachers.

The school and the district have been really welcoming places. When I compare my experience to that of other beginning teachers I know, I notice the big difference is how comfortable I feel communicating when I need help. For me, I can ask anyone in my school or district. So, I’m not isolated like some of my beginning teacher colleagues. I’m so lucky—everyone in my school is so eager to help and check in: “How’s this student doing? Last year she struggled with ...” I feel accepted and valued; everyone is so vocal in their support.

### Stressors and Support Wishes

I had some stress around some of the little things. By *little*, I mean those things that seem unimportant, but spending time on them means I’m running around feeling stressed, and not spending time on my classroom. Things like when IPPs [individualized program plans] are due, when report cards are due, and what the procedure is for those. I don’t ever want to fail at teaching, because it is my calling. So I don’t like feeling inadequate when it’s, “Wait, IPPs are due in a week and I have no idea how to write one! Why don’t I know this?” It makes me feel unprepared, or like I’m not doing what I’m supposed to be doing. I think I put at least some of that pressure on myself. I’m a first-year teacher; I could cut myself more slack. But I do wish they offered some support around those things, like an orientation or something.

The other thing that has surprised me is all the emotions of teaching. In my Education program, it was easy to write “three things you would do to support a student who has a behaviour problem,” but when that student is in your classroom talking about how she didn’t have breakfast, and how mom hasn’t been home, it’s a whole different ball game. And that really impacts my ability to teach sometimes because I’m very emotionally invested in my students, so it’s hard to just move on and “teach.”

Another experience that stands out in my mind as being formative to my outlook on this career is a time when I had a student, who had previously demonstrated no behavioural issues, suddenly begin aggressive outbursts. I had used all the tools in my “behaviour tool box” and was definitely feeling overwhelmed.

### Survival Strategies

I simply said, “I need help,” with both the timelines and the student with the behaviour issue. My admin team members were instantly ready to help me, with both a nonjudgmental ear and several possible solutions. One of them came into my classroom to observe the student’s behaviour in an objective way. Then he assisted me in setting up and running a meeting with the parents, and coming up with a behaviour plan. The support I have had at my school is next to none.

In terms of the emotions, I know I need to balance work and home. I think I do a pretty good job of leaving things at school now. I spend a bit of time clearing my mind at the end of the day and then it’s done, emotionally at least. I still plan and mark, but I leave what happened emotionally, there.

I make a lot of use of online resources too. I was able to find things that worked for me. That’s a benefit we have being young and coming out of university right now. We also have each other—I still keep in touch with friends who are elementary teachers.

### Ineffective Supports

**School-based orientation.** I went in for a meet and greet at the end of June, it was just kind of “Here’s the school, here’s the teachers,” not really a formal orientation. So I still had lots of questions about different resources to use, where to find resources, what kind of procedures the school has. It’s a newer school so there was no handbook or anything. I didn’t know how to get a photocopy password, or if there were photocopy limits, those procedural things.

**Assigned mentor.** A Grade 5 teacher at the school was assigned as part of the district induction program, but she was way at the other end of the school. We were given two mentor days, and we used one to get together to do report cards—that helped! But, in the end, because I shared prep time with my grade level group and because there were no formal requirements for us to meet, I probably didn’t utilize my mentor as much as I could have.

### Effective Supports

**District orientation.** One day in August all the new teachers in the district got together at the Board office. We heard from the superintendent, some experienced teachers and some second-year teachers who told us what to expect. The superintendent made such an impression—I would not hesitate to call her for anything! They also talked about well-being and mental health, about what to expect after the anticipation of September—that dip in December, and how it picks back up after that. We also learned about the evaluation process—all the unknowns were taken out of it; and meeting all the other new teachers, it was nice to feel like you’re not alone. We got the sense, too, that it was a really great district.

**Administrative instructional support.** My [administrators] often came to see us and check in on us. For example, they came in when I was excited to show them something, to offer feedback on my formative assessment, which was a school priority, or to just see what the students were doing. If

they knew a student was having a bad day, they would hang out in the hallway and connect with the student. I was never doing anything alone. Because they were in there so much, evaluations hardly felt like anything.

### Effective Supports That Enabled Professional Growth

**Support for communicating with parents.** When that one student's behaviour was escalating, I worried the parents would blame me because this behaviour had just started. My admin team led the parent meeting and I got to hear the way they approached things, which was, "This is what we're seeing and we want to work together to make things better." It was really well received by the parents and I feel more comfortable leading a meeting like that next time. It was a really great experience, from what could have been a really bad experience.

**Observations.** Our district offered all teachers collaboration days, and for one of those I went to another school to check out one of their new programs. I mentioned hearing something about it to my admin and they set up an observation for a few of us. We observed teachers at the school and then talked to them at the end of the day. Then my colleagues and I went back to our school to try to implement some of what we had seen.

**Getting to share "my thing."** Math is kind of my thing; I was really proud of how I developed my math program. Another [more experienced] teacher who wanted some new ideas for her math class came in to observe, and I showed her how I had set things up. She was skeptical, like "Okay, new teacher, I'm not sure if this will work." But she still tried my approach and said, "You've got something here!" It felt really good; it was validating to have other teachers confirm that this is something I am good at. Seeing teachers who have 10 years of experience ask to observe someone else helped me realize that teaching is a lifelong learning journey.

**Literacy training.** I had some training in September on how to start the literacy program my district uses; then there was a refresher in April. As part of that, someone also came into my classroom and taught my students so I could see the literacy program modelled with *my* students. It was really a successful strategy for me.

### Looking Ahead

If anything, my biggest worry is that I think I have a false sense of confidence. I knew my students really well and at the end of the year, and I felt really good about how my classroom was going. To build that again will be the next challenge!

## PERSPECTIVES ON KARRI’S VIGNETTE

### A Focus on Professional Learning

Karri’s story is exceptionally positive in many ways, but mostly because it is so focused on professional learning and growth. Throughout Karri’s first year she had multiple people observe her teaching; she had multiple opportunities to observe others, including one opportunity to observe another educator work with her own students. All of these observations unfolded in environments of trust. Karri felt free to express questions and concerns, and in response she had many “critical friends” to support her (Hendricks 2013).

Karri’s story was not unique in this aspect. We heard from other beginning teachers who spoke of many experiences of observing others, being observed and working with instructional coaches. In one instance, a teacher expressed how, without the availability of a learning coach to work with her on guided reading, she felt she would have like tried to figure it out on her own—a process she had begun and with which she was struggling. These stories support Russell’s (2015) contention that instructional coaching can be an effective support for teachers in their induction years.

### The Two-Way Street of Professional Learning

In addition to being able to express doubt and receive support, Karri was also able to offer her expertise. The opportunity to enact and share one’s “thing” was revealed in this study as a significant experience. For others like Karri, getting to offer expertise that was well received by encouraging colleagues contributed greatly to feelings of success. On the other hand, being denied opportunities to share or even enact expertise was a great source of struggle and confusion for other teachers in this study. In one case, a respondent relayed her feelings of frustration when, after being asked to move her classroom into rows and reduce the amount of “noise” during class time, she struggled to engage her students in ways that reflected her strengths as a student-centred pedagogue. The ability to enact and share expertise, like the ability to share areas for growth, is reflective of the very positive district and school culture in which Karri found herself.

### When Site-Based Needs Get in the Way

It is important to note that, even though her experience was mostly positive, Karri was still among the more than 60 per cent of respondents who did not have an effective school-based orientation. As she recounts, this resulted in struggles with paperwork, photocopying and other site-based challenges. These site-based challenges are significant for two reasons. First, many teachers told us that they take time and energy away from more student-focused work, which in turn distracts from the work of professional learning and growth. Second, as Karri describes, confusion in terms of site based procedures and protocol contributes to feelings of failure. This was especially noticeable in conversations that researchers had with teachers about report cards.

Report cards represent a high-stakes task for beginning teachers. In several other interviews, participants relayed stories of how—without effective school-based orientations or supports—the reporting process can be fraught with challenges. In one instance, a teacher described being “given a due date and nothing else” in relation to reporting requirements. She described the ensuing process:

The first challenge was knowing where to begin. When should I start working on them? How do you go about it? How do you write comments? I found the comments difficult. I did end up asking other teachers my questions, but I got a lot of conflicting advice. It would have been amazing to have a quick little lesson, or a workshop, or a comment bank, or any kind of support. It was very stressful and there was a lot of pressure. Especially because while you are trying to write report cards you are still teaching every day—I did feel like all the paperwork interfered with my teaching; I still wanted to have a good lesson plan every day. It was just really hard to keep up, and my principal came and did a surprise evaluation the day after report cards were due—that was hard, too.

As the focus of induction supports shifts from “retaining” teachers to supporting the positive professional growth of teachers, stakeholders need to ask if the experiences that beginning teachers are having contribute to or detract from positive professional growth. Vague or ambiguous instructions for high-stakes tasks, like report cards or teacher evaluations, contribute little to positive professional growth. To return to Karri’s story, her evaluations were a seamless part of the supports available to support her professional growth, rather than something meant to test her or catch her off guard.

## BROOKE’S VIGNETTE: TREADING WATER

### Starting Place

I became a teacher because I was pretty frustrated by my own schooling experiences. I thought, I can either do something about it, or be part of the problem. I had a lot of ideas about the kind of teacher I was going to be; I wanted to do better in terms of the issues I faced when I was a student.

I trained for secondary humanities and found things came easily. I aced my practicums! Of course, I was going in early, staying a little later—which is to be expected when you are still in university. I was also working full-time and doing all this other stuff. I was pretty optimistic; I was excited to get my first job and to have the autonomy to make my own decisions.

### Context/Assignment

The job I ended up with was definitely a bit more than I could chew! I was hired in a rural K–12 school on a temporary contract. The first year I had an elementary split class; the next year, a dog’s breakfast of 18 different Grade 7–12 humanities classes. As an example, in one class I had 18 students in five different sections of humanities, some in Grade 7, some in Grade 8. It was a lot, but I do think it’s a reality for a lot of rural schools. My second year, I was on another temporary contract, again Grades

7–12. There are only nine teachers at the school, which is why we all teach a lot of different things, and four of us are new. That made the principal’s job really hard! She is a teaching principal too, so she is spread pretty thin.

### Stressors

The split classes are tough—it means at least twice the prep each day. I found I had to alternate: half the class does something online or a worksheet while I teach the other half. Marking is also harder in this system. The district’s reporting system means you link your documents and reporting to the grade level outcomes every couple of weeks, so there’s no way to mix things up for a split class.

I was in the school at 7 in the morning and I left around 7 in the evening every day. I was always tired, and people were telling me, “That’s pretty normal for a first year.” But it felt pretty unacceptable to me. I started to feel a bit trapped, and I knew I was not alone in that. The bitterness across the school is pervasive; everyone’s feeling overworked and overwhelmed. The expectations from everywhere—parents, district, the students, yourself—they’re just crippling. And the unreasonable workload, split classes, inadequate prep time, inadequate collaboration time, extra extracurricular expectations, unrealistic teaching expectations given the time and resources and environment. People tell me, “You must find work–life balance,” as if the stress is my fault, but the situation is impossible.

### Survival Strategies

I was hired in August on a phone interview, so had never seen the inside of the school. I felt I needed to see the space, so I tracked down the school secretary and asked if I could come into the school. While there, I found another staff member in the building who agreed to give me a tour. That was kind of my orientation.

The new teachers at my school sort of banded together. We would text each other when one of us got information—“Heads up, parent–teacher interviews are coming up; other teachers are starting to prepare.” Or, when someone agreed to show one of us how to do something, they would invite the other two.

It seems physically impossible to meet the demands, so I have learned what actually needs to get done and what the expectations seem to be. Trying to do everything during an evaluative year was really hard; my coworkers were telling me they didn’t envy me, because they couldn’t keep up either.

### Ineffective Supports

**Mentorship.** I was given the name of someone to reach out to and she was able to give me access to her online course materials, and that was about it. It was called a formal mentorship program, but there was no structured support, nothing expected or planned or any official form or feedback. No real resources to make actual mentorship happen.

**Division Orientation.** Not until December did our division invite us to an orientation, and then I think the invitation was in response to all the questions they were getting about the district reporting program. So we got some professional development on that program, in December. It was too little too late; we had already had our first set of parent–teacher interviews and sent out our first progress reports.

### Support Wishes

I do wish my evaluation had been more helpful. My principal was too overwhelmed; she came into the classroom and sent some comments afterwards, but I really wanted to say, “Yes, please show me. Please come into my classroom and work with me to make that lesson plan better, or tell me how to reach that kid.”

I feel like we get some support for our stress, like the Beginning Teachers' Conference prepared us for it, but I wish someone was doing more than treat the symptom of the system. I wish the division recognized or even knew how much time we were putting in. It would be great if they could avoid giving split classes to new teachers, and to have a dedicated admin team and some classroom aides. Things like that would really help.

### Looking Ahead

I need to be working, so I will last as long as I can. But I just don't see how you can manage this kind of workload. I think the turning point for me will be when I can't find any more happiness, when I lose faith to the point of it affecting other areas of my life. Next year I'm going to focus on taking care of myself a bit more, because I can see the day where I become that teacher I hated in school, and I became a teacher to avoid that. I didn't want to be that teacher with the bathroom rule or the late policy, or the teacher who never had assignments marked on time. But I don't see how I can get my marking done any faster. I could last as a teacher if I became more apathetic, [if] I could just treat it like a job, but I don't want to be that person. It feels like those are the only choices, though—lower your expectations or get eaten by the system.

## PERSPECTIVES ON BROOKE'S VIGNETTE

Brooke's teaching assignment would be challenging for any teacher, but for a new teacher to have to multiply their planning by two or more is a significant barrier to professional growth. In the interview, Brooke did not identify an effective support or speak about professional learning. Though Brooke does seem resourceful (it is not every teacher who would find their way into the school in the summer, for example), she is struggling in a difficult context without supports. Though Karri and Brooke entered the profession with a similar idealism, their contexts and the supports they found within their contexts caused significant divergence in their stories.

## Workload and Work–Life Balance

Workload issues appeared equally significant in both the surveys and the phone interviews. In one interview, the participant described the too-heavy workload as the reason to leave teaching:

At this point I’m looking at one more year, and then I’ll make a change. I love working with the kids, collaborating with other teachers, but I don’t love the 13- or 14-hour days. I know for some people, they don’t mind if it’s their whole life. But for me, I wanted to have a job where I could make a difference, but still have other relationships and other things in my life. We’re told “Take time for yourself, enjoy your weekend,” but I have not been given strategies to make that happen. I find that taking that Sunday off just means you’re falling behind in your work, and that’s stressful in a different way because you don’t feel prepared for Monday.

Issues with the workload of teaching have been found to significantly contribute to teachers’ feelings of stress or dissatisfaction with and even attrition from the profession (Beck 2018; Howes and Goodman-Delahunty 2015; Van Droogenbroeck, Spruyt and Vanroelen 2014). Even experienced teachers, such as those participating in a pilot study on teacher workload conducted by the ATA (2012b), can have difficulties saying no and in reading cues about how much work is “enough.” According to a national study on workload by Duxbury and Higgins (2013, 20), teachers in Alberta typically spend 60.8 hours per week on work-related activities. Because of their heavy workload, teachers are more likely than others to report high levels of perceived stress and depressed mood and, compared to those in other occupations, report very high levels of work–life conflict (Duxbury and Higgins 2013, 35–37). Workload issues can be exacerbated for new teachers, and participants in this study indicate being offered little guidance or support for managing this workload. In cases like Brooke’s, a “dog’s breakfast” assignment seemed to pile on to an already challenging aspect of the profession.

It is significant that Brooke still articulates the need for pedagogical support that served some of her peers so well. She desires that critical friend who will show her how to do better in the classroom, to better support her students. She hopes for someone to make changes to her context that would enable her to better use existing skills. This reflects findings from the fall and spring surveys that beginning teachers desire to do well, to be kept “on track” toward greater pedagogical success.

Looking forward, Brooke sees the path that leads her to becoming “that teacher” she never wanted to be. This supports research reviewed earlier that tells us that negative induction experiences can hinder a teacher’s pedagogical growth (Anderson 2009; Feiman-Nemser 2010; Glassford and Salinitri 2007).

## AOIFE’S VIGNETTE: A UNIQUE SITUATION

### Starting Place

I have always wanted to work with kids. I completed a master’s degree in childhood studies and children’s rights, and was considering a few different paths after that. I decided on education because



I felt I might be able to do more in terms of social justice and related themes; I thought I could have more of an impact on the lives of the students.

I am originally from a smaller urban city, but am teaching in a colony school for my first three years of teaching as part of a bursary program I applied for during my Bachelor of Education. I had one other job offer, but it included teaching physical education, which I didn't feel qualified for. Originally, I was looking forward to teaching all the grade levels in this one-room schoolhouse.

### Context/Assignment

I am officially teaching K–9 at this new colony school. The students themselves are great and I enjoy working with them! However, the ability range is really more K–6, and the students have quite a range of English language abilities. For some, English is completely new. And, even though my background is fairly conservative, this is still a really different culture.

The school has been open for one year, but they did not have a full-time teacher last year, so there was nothing here in terms of resources or consistent systems of any kind when I arrived. The budget is very small and as a new teacher I'm not even sure what would be most helpful in terms of textbooks or something like that.

### Stressors and Support Wishes

One thing from my MA I wanted to work through as a teacher was about the power adults have over children. I wanted to set up a classroom that was very child centred, where the children were involved in setting up the classroom. It's a little bit tougher to do that here, as compared to at my practicum school. So, these things did not materialize the way I envisioned. From a rights perspective, you try to do what's in best interest of the child, and in this case, I am not always sure it's in the best interest of the children to have this independence instilled. So I've had to pick my battles, as they say.

A big struggle I have faced is how to do justice to the curriculum with all the different grade levels in the room. Math and language arts are a bit more straightforward, but science and social [studies] are harder.

Something that would have been helpful would have been for me to be connected with another elementary school. It would have been great for someone to introduce me with a, "This person might come in and use the photocopier, etc," but the politics of who belongs to which principal gets muddy sometimes, so you have to ask for help through the right channels. But that would be my wish, for another person in my shoes.

Though I am not sure what's usually available, I do wish there was a school counsellor or even someone else who knew the students. At the beginning of the year, I was just trying to keep my head above water, to plan for each day and try to do some learning. I felt really torn between teaching the curriculum and teaching life; I don't know if other teachers experience that. Anyway, I was eventually able to get some fidget bands, but beyond that, I didn't really know where to or how to seek out help in those first couple of months.

## Survival Strategies

I turned to online resources a lot. Because I didn’t have a counsellor or any other support people, I would some research a lot of my own stuff. In one instance, I was searching “is this a seizure” or something like that—trying different things to see what worked! I also relied on online stuff to learning things like how to teach more mental math. Videos and things like that were helpful.

## Ineffective Supports

**Formal Mentorship.** In my interview I requested to be paired with a mentor; I really wanted some practical support to complement the more theoretical university courses. The district agreed, but in a colony school it’s easy to be isolated—nobody really knows what to do with you. I was connected with another teacher, but he never reached out. When I reached out to him, he didn’t know who I was, so nothing ever came of it. I know my situation is a bit unique, but I still think that a formal mentorship program should be in place for all beginning teachers—one where the mentor is highly interested in being a mentor and where they have experience in the position the new teacher is going into.

**Professional Development.** My principal did try to include me in professional development being offered at her school, but much of it just wasn’t applicable. The rest of the education world is moving to more tech and less paper, and we just can’t on a colony—I’m not really allowed to use that stuff.

**Formal Evaluation.** I wanted to have more help in my classroom, but because of time and distance, I only had one formal observation for evaluation.

## Effective Supports

**Informal support from colleagues.** My principal was able to connect me with a teacher from another colony, and that teacher was already connected with a second colony teacher. Connecting with them was invaluable! From them I learned about this thing called *cycling*, which is when you do one grade level a year, and then the students each get all the curriculum over the years. I learned how that worked, and was also given some hands-on phonics stuff. This saved me hours of doing research! It was also great to have the emotional support. Being able to call someone and say, “Do you know what just happened?” and to hear them say, “Yeah, that happens.” It was a big support.

## Looking Ahead

Overall, it was a good year. I’m sure every first year teacher has that sink-or-swim feeling. You go in thinking you’re going to make everything the best it can be for the kids, and then some days everything falls apart. Had I not had my two colleagues and the possibility to text or call them, I don’t think I would consider staying in the teaching profession.

I think by the time fall comes I’ll be ready to head back, but at the end of the year, I’m definitely tired. But I think most teachers are; I heard the same from others—I’m not the only one.

## PERSPECTIVES ON AOIFE'S VIGNETTE

### Context Is Key

Aoife is in a unique situation, but this research argues that every beginning teacher enters a unique situation, with a unique set of skills. What is highlighted in Aoife's narrative is the need for a consideration of context when offering induction supports for beginning teachers. In Aoife's case, just considering her context reveals the need for

- resources appropriate for the context,
- someone to share knowledge about the students,
- regular contact with other teachers and
- an increased number of observations and feedback.

For a teacher as isolated as Aoife, additional effort is needed to bridge the physical distance. In Aoife's case, providing additional digital resources might be one solution.

Aoife's story, along with those of Karri and Brooke, reinforces the need for formal mentorship programs to be more intentionally created and thoughtfully supported. As noted earlier, research indicates that, for mentorship relationships to be effective, care must be taken in matching skilled and eager mentors with compatible protégés (Hellsten et al 2009), and these mentor-protégé relationships must be "prioritized, especially with release time to facilitate the relationships" (Rass 2012, 159). For Karri, the fact that her formal mentorship pairing was not supported by a formal structure meant little, as she had a plethora of other supports. For Aoife, who had very few options for collegial support, her mentor's unresponsiveness had a much more significant impact.

## CLOSING PERSPECTIVES ON THE THREE VIGNETTES

This research was initiated with the assumption that induction experiences unfold in a space where an individual teacher meets a unique and multifaceted context in which they develop their professional identity (Flores 2006). Each interview built on earlier survey responses to try to get a deeper sense of each individual's experiences. However, despite these three points of contact, this study did not have the scope required to develop deep understandings of each individual's capacities, skills or full narrative history. In spite of this limitation, asking backward- and forward-looking questions offered insight into why each person had made their way to teaching and where they were going.

After only one or two years of teaching, respondents were demonstrating different combinations of survival strategies versus more growth-oriented professional learning strategies. This only confirms research indicating that the induction years are a critical time in a teacher's career (Feiman-Nemser 2010). Though personal and individual factors do play a role in shaping induction experiences (Kirincic 2017; Walker et al 2017), providing effective supports to beginning teachers and creating cultures in which all beginning teachers can flourish is vital.

These narratives demonstrate the importance of this work and bid those who play a role in induction experiences to be more cognizant of all the factors that come together to shape an induction experience.

## Affirmations and New Insights: Moving Forward to Support Beginning Teachers in Alberta Schools

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Though the initial goals for this study included examining how supports for beginning teachers have changed in Alberta since the ATA’s longitudinal study (2013) was undertaken, the primary goal was to gain insight into how to support the positive professional growth of beginning teachers. This inquiry affirmed findings from previous research, including the ATA’s longitudinal study, regarding beginning teachers’ struggles and effective supports. However, it also led to new insights that can help school and district leaders and policy-makers refine their beginning teacher supports. These key insights are framed below as recommendations.

### ENSURE THAT SITE-BASED SUPPORTS ARE RELIABLE, EFFECTIVE AND RESPONSIVE

This study confirmed past research indicating that most beginning teachers in Alberta are not being offered vital site-based supports. Even for teachers who showed signs of professional growth in their induction years, unmet site-based needs were a stressor. Less than half of survey respondents had a school-based orientation or support with managing paperwork. It is vital that schools and districts create opportunities for beginning teachers to acclimate to their new environments. This would decrease stress and, more important, would increase the amount of time and energy new teachers have to focus on their core task of becoming better teachers.

Both the pan-Canadian study (Kutsyruba and Walker 2016) and the ATA’s longitudinal study identified the process of orientation as a struggle for beginning teachers. Three key components found to be essential to orientation include information on administrative expectations and school rules and procedures, help in completing paperwork associated with their employment, and a thorough tour of the school and its facilities (ATA 2013, 41). Whether orientation-related resources come in a binder or are provided by a site-based mentor, they are a key part of any induction program (ATA 2015).

Participants in this study also identified a need for mentorship in areas of paperwork and assessment. Teachers need to know the norms of their school and to receive procedural support with these tasks.

### PRIORITIZE INFORMAL MENTORSHIP

The current study affirms that the in-person support of colleagues continues to be the most valued source of support for beginning teachers. In every survey, and in the one-on-one interviews, it was clear that there was no real substitute for the support and resources that come from colleagues who

know the community, the school and the students with whom a teacher works. Schools and districts should take steps to increase the effectiveness of informal mentorship by offering teachers protected time and space to work together, and by encouraging the development of positive school cultures.

The current study confirms findings from the pan-Canadian study that informal mentorship was by far the most valued support (see Figure 2). Additional sources for professional learning in the pan-Canadian study included other teachers, observations, collaborations and resource sharing. In year four of the ATA's longitudinal study, participants identified three key supports: a self-selected mentor, a professional learning community and an assigned mentor (ATA 2013, 42). In addition, many participants stated that "regular grade-level collaborations were central to their learning and sense of being supported" (ATA 2013, 38). Therefore, dedicated time for all teachers to collaborate, such as in professional learning communities, will support beginning teachers.

As an additional strategy, participants in the current study suggested check-ins, which were described as a personalized, timely and responsive support that would enable beginning teachers to stay on track pedagogically, allow them to ask questions as needed and receive affective supports. For check-ins to be successful, participants suggested that they be nonevaluative, be completed by someone with a sincere interest in offering support, and happen reliably and with some preparation.

## PROVIDE MANAGEABLE ASSIGNMENTS

Workload was mentioned often in both the surveys and the telephone interviews in the current study as a source of stress and struggle. Teachers in this study reported having split classes and extracurricular assignments, even as they are orienting themselves to their school environments. In the vignette of Brooke's case, the workload was so significant that she can envision becoming exactly the kind of teacher she does not want to be. School and district leaders can support beginning teachers by offering manageable assignments.

The longitudinal study and the pan-Canadian study emphasize workload as a source of struggle for beginning teachers. Beginning teachers surveyed in the pan-Canadian study described the intensity and pace of teaching as having a negative impact on their home and social life, as causing fatigue, as "all consuming" and "too intense" (Kutsyuruba and Walker, 2016). The ATA longitudinal study emphasized the need for new teachers to receive stable and manageable assignments so that they can focus more on professional growth. This current study reinforces this point.

## SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THROUGH OBSERVATIONS, FEEDBACK AND INSTRUCTIONAL COACHING

Some teachers in the current study had opportunities to engage with other teachers by observing or being observed, or by working with instructional coaches. When present, these supports were described as highly effective for supporting the professional growth of beginning teachers.

Instructional coaches were an effective support, not only because of their focus on pedagogy, but also because they often allowed teachers to observe someone else working with their current students. This context-responsive support was one of the most effective for supporting professional growth. Schools and districts can increase the availability of instructional coaches, and create more spaces for observations and feedback to occur to support all teachers—but particularly those in their early years of practice. This finding reflects other research indicating the need for professional learning in the early years of practice to remain focused on pedagogy (Anderson 2009; Feiman-Nemser 2001; Ferguson-Patrick 2011; Glassford and Salinitri 2007; Johnson and Birkeland 2003; Timperley 2011), as well as research indicating that instructional coaching can be an effective induction support (Russell 2015).

Along with the ATA’s longitudinal study, however, this study finds that observations and feedback were underutilized as a source of support. Given that every beginning teacher must engage in a formal evaluation process, the reason for this is unclear. Formal evaluations were valued by participants in this study (see Figure 15), indicating that evaluations have the potential to be an effective induction support. When they were not seen as an effective support, it was because the expectations were unclear, because they were sporadic, because they were a “surprise” meant to catch teachers unaware or because no meaningful feedback was given after the fact. When evaluations were effective, it was because they were structured with teacher professional growth in mind and expectations, motivations and timelines of evaluations were communicated. Evaluations were also more effective if observers had time to offer meaningful feedback and clear suggestions for improvements.

Throughout the study, it was clear that—even with the stressors associated with the early years of practice—teachers want to do well, and getting meaningful feedback is an important part of feeling successful.

## ENCOURAGE BEGINNING TEACHERS TO SHARE THEIR STRENGTHS

A new insight stemming from the responses relates to the extent to which a beginning teacher’s expertise is embraced by their colleagues. Participants’ feelings of success were sometimes linked to their ability to meaningfully contribute their strengths to a school community. When ideas and strategies they offered were well received by veteran colleagues—as in Karri’s vignette above—the experience deepened their understanding of career-long growth, and nurtured feelings of efficacy and belonging.

The reverse was also true. When beginning teachers were discouraged from contributing expertise to others, it was often described as a negative—if not devastating—experience. Part of encouraging beginning teachers to grow professionally was to encourage them to share and build on their strengths.

## ENSURE THAT INDUCTION SUPPORTS ARE RESPONSIVE TO CONTEXTS

The current study affirms that every beginning teacher is unique, entering a unique context. In speaking with teachers in this study, especially in the one-on-one interviews, there was a clear sense that they are, for the most part, unaware of what is or is not “normal” in their experiences. Experienced teachers and leaders have the insights required to predict what a beginning teacher will need. For example, a more experienced teacher might have been able to predict the isolation Aoife felt (see vignette above), as a new teacher entering a new colony school. A beginning teacher should not be required to first design and then find their own induction supports.

This finding reflects other Canadian research indicating the need for induction programs to be consistently prioritized through policy and funding, but to also be flexible in terms of supports provided at the individual or local level (Davies and Hales 2017). Since there are currently multiple sources for various induction supports for Alberta’s teachers (by district, school, grade-level group), the individual teacher’s circumstance should be considered when offering supports. The focus in this first design should not be merely reducing stress, but increasing positive professional growth.

## ESTABLISH FEEDBACK MECHANISMS TO REFINE INDUCTION SUPPORTS

The design of the current study provided a final key insight into improving supports for teachers in their induction years; researchers need to actively seek detailed feedback on induction experiences. Such feedback can provide insight into the gaps in and the efficacy of existing supports. For example, the results from the spring survey show 43 per cent of respondents indicating they had been matched with a formal mentor. Karri, Brooke and Aoife could each count themselves among this 43 per cent. However, they, like others we spoke to, did not benefit from their formal mentorship because little tangible support resulted from their matches. Stakeholders, then, must move beyond merely “counting” supports to really identifying what supports beginning teachers themselves “count” as valuable.

Research indicates the importance of feedback mechanisms as a key part of any induction program (Kirincic 2017; Rass 2012). In highlighting the highly contextual nature of induction experiences, the current study underscores the need for feedback to be sought at local levels as well. It is vital that beginning teachers be offered opportunities to provide meaningful and detailed feedback on their induction experiences so that induction supports are as responsive as possible.

Effective supports to bolster Alberta teachers’ induction experiences can only serve to benefit the profession and the status of education in the province. Sustained attention to and review of induction supports will help ensure that Alberta teachers continue to provide their students with a great education.

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