

# Teaching in the Early Years of Practice: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study



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The Alberta  
Teachers' Association

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## Preface

This publication reports on the final year of a unique five-year longitudinal study of beginning teachers that the Alberta Teachers' Association embarked on in 2008. The study was designed to answer three questions:

1. Can the sources of attrition within the first five years of teaching be determined? Why do teachers leave and where do they go?
2. To what extent are mentorship programs and other induction practices being used in Alberta schools and how effective are they?
3. How do working conditions and school cultures affect early-career professional development?

J-C Couture, who oversees the Association's research projects, coordinated the study, which was undertaken by lead researcher Laura Servage and assistant researcher Jamie Beck, both doctoral candidates at the University of Alberta. As in previous years, data was collected by means of 15- to 30-minute telephone interviews with study participants. Of the 135 original participants, 89 took part in the final year-five interviews—a relatively modest attrition rate considering the extended period that the study covered. At the end of year five, the researchers were also able to determine the employment status of 125 of the original 135 participants. In addition to asking a number of standard questions designed to measure changes over time, the researchers introduced some new questions in the year-five interviews that were intended to explore certain themes that had emerged from the earlier data. In year five, the researchers supplemented data from the standard telephone interviews by organizing two focus groups and conducting extended telephone interviews with 10 participants. The focus groups and extended interviews invited participants to reflect on their five years of teaching and to discuss other factors that had shaped their professional identity.

In addition to tracking overall trends, the study offers a unique glimpse into the lived experiences of the early-career teachers who have shared their stories with the research team over the past five years. The study suggests that beginning teachers embark on teaching with enthusiasm and hope and look forward to a fruitful career that will enable them to make a positive impact on the lives of students. Although certain experiences dampened their expectations over the five years during which they were tracked, participants generally remained committed to the profession and to enhancing the lives of students. The study highlights the intense emotional and intellectual work involved in teaching and identifies the key factors that influence and shape the early years of practice. I hope that this study will encourage education partners to work together in supporting the early-career development of Alberta teachers.

*Gordon R Thomas*

*Executive Secretary*



# Executive Summary

## Purpose of the Study

Commissioned by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), this five-year longitudinal study of beginning teachers in Alberta schools was initially designed to answer two major questions: (1) Why do so many early-career teachers leave the profession? and (2) Where do such teachers go?

As it evolved, the study yielded insights into the following additional topics:

- The gap between the support that schools and school boards currently offer new teachers and the kind of support that new teachers would like to receive
- The specific ways in which the culture of a school can make new teachers feel either welcome or professionally isolated
- The qualities and behaviours that new teachers value in both informal and formal mentors
- The stages through which new teachers develop as they gain self-confidence, acquire skills and forge professional identities
- The factors that determine whether beginning teachers will either perpetuate the “trial by fire” that they may have experienced when they began teaching or break the pattern by choosing to nurture succeeding generations of beginning teachers
- The factors that enable most beginning teachers to secure stable continuing contracts and that launch others (a significant minority) on an unstable career trajectory
- The challenges that beginning teachers experience in maintaining a work–life balance

## Study Design

The study sample consisted of 135 beginning teachers who were drawn randomly from the approximately 850 teachers who participated in

a Beginning Teachers' Conference that the ATA organized in the fall of 2007. The sample was representative of the provincial teacher population in terms not only of gender (83 per cent of participants were female and 17 per cent were male) but also of geography (all convention areas were represented as well as urban, rural, remote and semirural settings). Although a number of participants dropped out over the course of the study, 89 of the original 135 teachers participated in all years of the study. Furthermore, the researchers were able to track 125 of the original 135 participants to determine if they had moved and whether they were employed.

Data for the study came from three sources:

1. *Telephone interviews*: Each year, the researchers conducted telephone interviews with participants. These 15- to 30-minute interviews included both closed- and open-response questions. Interviewers documented the responses using a standardized survey form.
2. *Focus groups*: In years four and five of the study, the researchers organized a total of five focus groups that involved 18 participants. These focus groups explored such emerging themes as career paths, early-career learning, professional identity and the kinds of support that participants had received from colleagues, administrators, school districts and the ATA.
3. *Individual extended interviews*: In year five, the researchers conducted extended individual interviews with 10 participants who were selected to represent the range of career trajectories that participants had experienced.

## Literature Review

In conjunction with the study, the researchers reviewed the literature on early-career attrition, the experiences of new teachers and the efficacy of various induction practices. This review yielded the following findings:

- Early-career attrition rates are difficult to measure.
- Among the major causes of early-career attrition

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are low salaries (an issue more evident in the United States than in Canada), inadequate preservice preparation (again, a greater concern in the United States than in Canada), difficult working conditions (particularly in under-resourced schools) and professional isolation.

- Effective induction programs include mentorship, collaboration with skilled colleagues and classroom-based observations that involve both formative and summative feedback.
- An effective way of lessening stress for beginning teachers is to reduce the volume and complexity of their assignments.
- The tone of a school, including the attitudes of experienced colleagues toward new teachers, is largely determined by the administration.
- The size and composition of the school staff play a major role in determining how much support is available to new teachers. New teachers benefit from having ready access to colleagues who teach the same grade and/or subjects.
- The notion that new teachers should “sink or swim” is deeply embedded in the teaching profession despite compelling evidence that such an approach drives some promising new teachers out of the profession altogether and negatively affects the careers of many who stay.

### Key Findings

#### *What It's Like to Be a New Teacher*

Study participants varied greatly not only in the amount of support that they received but also in the self-confidence, resourcefulness and persistence they themselves exhibited in their first years. Despite these differences, participants generally agreed that what they most wanted during their initial years of teaching were the following conditions:

- A stable teaching assignment that would give them a sense of community and enable them to build on their past learning experiences
- A safe environment in which colleagues would seek them out, offer support and answer their

questions

- A supportive administrator capable of communicating his or her expectations clearly
- Orientation to the school's norms, routines, rules and idiosyncrasies
- A manageable teaching assignment and reasonable limits on extracurricular expectations
- Ample formative feedback from colleagues and administrators
- Transparency in hiring criteria and hiring practices

During their first years of teaching, beginning teachers experience periods of intense overwork. By years four and five of the study, many participants were pulling back due to exhaustion and family commitments, leaving novice teachers to pick up the demands. The study suggests that some school boards and administrators may regard the energy and enthusiasm of new teachers as expendable resources rather than as enduring assets to the school community.

Even with excellent supports in place, new teachers need time and experience to grow professionally. Colleagues and administrators can help in this process by allowing new teachers the freedom to experiment, learn from mistakes and successes, and develop a unique and authentic professional identity.

#### *Supports Available at the School Level*

Generally, new teachers rely on their administrators to provide them with instructional leadership, help them with classroom-management issues and support them in dealing with parents. New teachers want to feel that they have the backing of their administrators who, as several participants observed, set the tone for how colleagues treat one another.

According to participants, mentorship initiatives in schools tend to be hit and miss. For one thing, not all mentors have the desire or the skills required to provide new teachers with the support they need.

Furthermore, some schools, especially small ones, do not have other teachers available to mentor who teach at the same grade level or in the same subject area as new teachers.

Nonetheless, mentorship is enormously important to new teachers. Participants who did not have mentors or whose assigned mentor did not work out did their best to forge informal mentoring relationships.

Beyond mentorship, among the simple but often-neglected site-based supports that new teachers want are a thorough orientation to the school, a clear explanation of what is expected of them and a designated staff member who can answer their questions and provide them with support.

### *Supports Available at the District Level*

Aware that supporting new teachers is important, many school boards in Alberta are offering mentorship programs and other district-level initiatives to orient new teachers and provide them with structured professional development to meet their needs and priorities.

Districts can best support new teachers by (1) offering them targeted professional development after the first four to six weeks of the school year on such topics as assessment practices, working with parents, and district policies and procedures; (2) providing mentors with support and training; (3) creating opportunities for new teachers to meet one another; and (4) arranging for new teachers to collaborate with more experienced teachers who share their areas of specialization.

### *Underemployment and Insecure Employment*

Approximately 10 per cent of participants, through no choice of their own, were still underemployed by the end of the study. A substantial minority of participants had difficulty obtaining continuing contracts, and a number remained insecurely employed. Participants who had become parents

during the course of the study and did not have a continuing contract to return to were especially at risk of remaining insecurely employed.

Many participants reported that their school board's hiring and evaluation practices lacked transparency. Because they could not get clear answers about what they needed to do to improve their chances of gaining a contract, a number of participants became frustrated and discouraged. Such discouragement can lead new teachers to leave the profession.

### *A Cycle of Overwork*

Some schools continue to subscribe to the notion that rookie teachers should be made to “pay their dues” by taking on difficult teaching assignments and doing more than their fair share of extracurricular work. In their first years, many participants were afraid to decline these requests because they felt that doing so might jeopardize their chances of securing a contract. By the last years of the study, however, some participants had become less willing to participate in extracurricular activities, arguing that, just as they had had to earn their position, so new teachers coming into the system should do the same. Thus the cycle was perpetuated.

### *Importance of Collaboration*

Although the culture of many schools has teachers working in isolation much of the time, most participants expressed the view that collaboration and reciprocity, because they are foundational to a teacher's professional growth, should be the norm. Many participants reported that they had made a point of supporting new teachers who had started after them, thereby establishing a “virtuous induction cycle” to counter the cycle of overwork noted above.

### *Challenges Facing Remote Schools*

Alberta Education (2010b; 2012) reports that rural and remote districts have difficulty attracting and retaining teachers. The current study suggests

that sparsely populated regions, where economies of scale are generally lacking, also have difficulty bringing teachers together for collaboration and mentorship. Participants from rural and remote areas appreciated the efforts that their districts made to organize professional development days at which they could meet other teachers in the district. In some cases, Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AIS) funding had been used to sponsor peer-coaching initiatives and other opportunities for beginning teachers to collaborate.

## Conclusions

Although some studies have reported attrition in the first five years of teaching to be as high as 50 per cent, the rate of attrition in the study group was considerably lower. However, a relatively low attrition rate does not mean that all is well. Rather, the study suggests that many schools not only have poor induction practices but also tend to overload new teachers with difficult assignments and extracurricular activities. Although teachers who experience these circumstances may remain in the profession, their early experiences may negatively affect their resilience and professional growth for years to come. Furthermore, questionable hiring practices may leave some qualified and motivated teachers languishing in substitute teaching and temporary contract positions for many years or cause them to leave the profession altogether.

The study also suggests that beginning teachers value collaboration and are working to ensure that collaborative professional development becomes the norm in their schools. According to participants, many schools and districts are recognizing the needs of beginning teachers and are working to implement and improve induction practices.

The study reinforces the importance of providing beginning teachers with an induction that is

comprehensive and that is integrated into ongoing, shared professional learning for all teachers. The culture of a school is extremely important. Attempting to implement induction initiatives in schools in which staff believe that beginning teachers should “sink or swim” is largely futile. What is needed is a broad-based induction initiative that provides professional development not just for novice teachers but also for administrators and mentors.

The research literature contains a wealth of information on how to establish induction programs for new teachers. This study affirms the validity of many of the suggested strategies.

## Future Directions

The study suggests that additional research and development is needed on the following topics:

- District-level initiatives to track and improve hiring and evaluation practices. Many good teachers fall through the cracks because they cannot get contracts, and too many new teachers are obtaining continuing contracts on the basis of very limited evaluation.
- The mobility and stability of early-career teachers. A large-scale study is needed.
- Strategies for sharing research and exemplary practices with respect to induction, both within and between districts.
- The unique challenges facing rural schools, schools in remote areas and schools serving high-needs populations.
- The development of staged professional learning models that recognize the unique learning needs of beginning teachers.

## Background

### Why Study Beginning Teachers?

The ATA has participated in Alberta Education's Teacher Workforce Planning Committee since 2007. One reason that the department established this committee was to examine concerns that many Albertans trained as teachers are either not entering or not staying in the teaching profession. To explore these concerns further, the ATA decided to embark on a beginning teachers study. The original intention of the study was to answer two key questions: (1) If new teachers are leaving the profession, where are they going? and (2) Why are they leaving?

The last few years have seen an increase in research on teachers' early professional years (Glassford and Salinitri 2007; Ingersoll and Smith 2004). A number of factors have contributed to the increased interest in this topic. First, the extensive retirement of senior teachers and administrators is producing a shortage of teachers and school leaders in some areas (Johnson, Harrison Berg and Donaldson 2005; Strong 2005; Whisnant, Elliot and Pynchon 2005).<sup>1</sup> Second, the United States and, to a lesser extent, Canada are experiencing high attrition rates among new teachers (Alberta Education 2012; Goddard and Foster 2001; Glassford and Salinitri 2007). Third, approximately three decades of school-improvement research and the more recent emphasis on accountability in public education have shone a spotlight on the quality and effectiveness of teachers (Ingersoll and Smith 2004). Indeed, some authors (OECD 2005; Whisnant, Elliot and Pynchon 2005) have argued that the most significant determinant of student learning is the effectiveness of the teacher.

Whisnant, Elliot and Pynchon (2005) cite compelling evidence that retaining beginning teachers results in a considerable cost benefit. For one thing, recruiting, hiring and training new teachers is an expensive undertaking. Furthermore, high turnover damages "stability, cohesion and morale" in a school community (Ingersoll and Smith 2004, 32). Johnson, Harrison Berg and Donaldson (2005) observe that students pay indirectly for high turnover and attrition, noting that students in schools with high staff turnover rates tend to be taught by a succession of novice teachers who lack the teaching skills and refinements that experience brings. The authors also note that losing new teachers affects the system as a whole by diminishing institutional memory, weakening collegial relationships and eroding leadership capacity.

Researchers have come up with at least three possible explanations as to why some new teachers leave the profession shortly after embarking on their career, whereas others carry on:

1. *Working conditions:* Many studies link attrition to difficult working conditions and weak or absent induction practices. Such studies often go on to examine local conditions and the policies they produce.
2. *Characteristics of teachers:* Some studies suggest that personal characteristics like resilience, efficacy, motivation, racial background and socioeconomic status have a role in determining whether a teacher perseveres or leaves the profession. Related studies suggest that the quality of preservice preparation has an impact on early-career attrition.
3. *Demographics and policy analysis:* Still other studies look at teacher attrition as a function of broader government and institutional policies, population demographics and labour-market conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Kardos and Johnson (2007) argue that school culture is a much more important factor than demographics in contributing to staff shortages. However, shortages tend to occur in schools in which teaching is more difficult (such as those having many high-needs students and those serving poorer communities). Schools in impoverished urban neighbourhoods and in isolated rural communities have difficulty attracting and retaining teachers.*

Researchers in the current study have kept an open mind with respect to these various approaches, being careful not to accept any one explanation as more valid than the others. In reality, beginning teachers probably leave the profession for a variety of complex and interrelated reasons: personal, interpersonal, institutional and political. Focusing on one explanation for early attrition—say, school culture and other immediate local conditions—can cause one to underestimate the impact of other factors such as systemic structural conditions. For example, attrition rates are consistently higher in schools that are geographically isolated and/or in which the student population consists mainly of poor, visible-minority students whose first language is other than English. At the same time, provincial and district policies and budgets determine not only teachers' working conditions, classroom composition (the proportion of English as an additional language [EAL] and students with special needs, in particular) and class size but also the curriculum and the extent to which standardized tests are used to assess student progress. Focusing solely on school culture or on the characteristics, skills and training of individual teachers, in other words, can blind one to the broader systemic factors that may also affect teacher-attrition rates.

## Teacher Supply, Demand and Attrition in Alberta

*The challenge will be to promote career opportunities in northern and rural communities, as competition for teaching positions in Alberta's metro regions is extremely high. As a result, graduates who wish to work as teachers need to be open to the possibility of moving to smaller, rural or northern communities.*

—Alberta Education 2012

When Alberta Education launched its teacher workforce planning strategy in 2010, it observed that the province's labour markets were being affected by such factors as an aging population, increasing urbanization, a shortage of skilled labour and an increasingly diverse population. Among the challenges affecting public education were a shortage of teachers in rural and remote school districts and the under-representation of First Nations and visible minorities in the teaching population. Additional concerns included (1) a decline in the number of male teachers; (2) the difficulty of attracting and retaining teachers in such fields as early childhood education, second language studies, and career and technology studies; and (3) an estimated attrition rate of 25 per cent among teachers within their first five years (Alberta Education 2012). To address the high attrition among new teachers, Alberta Education implemented a provincewide induction program, a major component of which is mentorship. Pilot induction programs are now under way in 11 northern school districts, and Alberta Education has been working with an advisory council on which the ATA is represented to develop a framework for the induction program.

## Characteristics of Beginning Teachers

New teachers consistently experience "praxis shock," the challenge of coping with classroom realities for which preservice training has not adequately prepared them (Goddard and Foster 2001). One of the goals of preservice education is to try to mitigate praxis shock (Anagnostopoulos, Smith and Basmadjian 2007). The teaching profession is not kind to novices: beginning teachers are expected to undertake the same responsibilities as veteran teachers while adapting to their new work environment (Casey and Childs 2007; McCormack, Gore and Thomas 2006).

Because many new teachers start their careers under temporary contracts, school administrators and staff may be reluctant to invest time, energy

and resources into what they consider transient staff members. New teachers tend to be on their “best behaviour” when working under temporary and probationary contracts. Study participants reported that, in order to increase their chances of obtaining a continuing contract, they had taken on unreasonable workloads, avoided asking for help and made sure that they did not “rock the boat.” These behaviours, coupled with weak, erratic or absent feedback structures, can create a situation in which new teachers are constantly off balance, unsure what colleagues, administrators, parents and students expect of them.

Identifying his or her strengths, weaknesses and philosophies is a significant focus of a beginning teacher’s learning (Clandinin and Connelly 1996; Goddard and Foster 2001; Hong 2010). The literature suggests that a teacher’s evolving professional identity gradually manifests itself in more or less effective practices and, ultimately, in the teacher’s effectiveness as a professional (Day and Gu 2010). Because identity work is neither visible nor urgent, it receives little explicit attention during teacher induction.

The findings of the study corroborate what the literature suggests: new teachers spend a great deal of time grappling with such major concerns as mastering classroom management and learning to communicate with parents (Melnick and Meister 2008). Participants reported spending the preponderance of their time as new teachers locating resources, planning lessons and building relationships with colleagues. Although a reduced workload would permit new teachers to reflect on and refine their learning, the reality is that they are usually assigned the same duties as experienced teachers. As a result, beginning teachers have what might be called survival or basic learning needs. The learning needs of beginning teachers are described in more detail later in the section entitled “A Hierarchy of Needs.”

Most induction programs are designed to elicit specific practice and behaviour outcomes from participants. Furthermore, they generally focus on the first year or two of practice and give little

attention to helping teachers develop ongoing professional habits (Levin 2003). However, the current study suggests that, while new teachers have professional development needs distinct from those of their more experienced colleagues, these needs should not be construed as constituting a distinct stage of professional learning. Indeed, as they gained experience, many study participants came to the conclusion that professional learning is an ongoing process.

## Effective Teacher Induction

*Induction is a system-wide, coherent, comprehensive training and support process that continues for two or three years and then seamlessly becomes part of the lifelong professional development program of the district to keep new teachers teaching and improving toward increasing their effectiveness.*

—Wong 2004

The extensive literature on effective induction practices sheds considerable light on the conditions that foster the professional growth of new teachers (Glassford and Salinitri 2007; Howe 2006). Experts agree that the best induction programs are multifaceted, offering supports in multiple ways and in multiple contexts. The literature also suggests—and this study confirms—that good induction programs contain the following components:

*Mentorship:* Although it is the cornerstone of an effective induction program, mentorship, in and of itself, is not sufficient to meet new teachers’ needs (Ingersoll and Smith 2004; Wong 2004). Mentorships are more likely to be successful when the mentor is genuinely committed to the relationship, when both parties teach the same grade or subject, and when the mentor and protégé have regular embedded professional development time to work together. Mentors also need support and professional

development to make them more effective in their roles.

*Collaboration with colleagues:* While not geared specifically to the inductee's needs, learning communities are often focused on planning lessons, identifying resources and developing teaching strategies—in short, on the “meat and potatoes” of what new teachers are trying to master. Learning communities expose new teachers to a variety of practice styles and teaching philosophies against which they can compare and evaluate their own evolving practice. Learning communities have the added advantage of establishing collaboration as a cultural norm of practice during a teacher's formative years (Carroll 2005). Communities also provide a structure for ongoing professional growth, allowing new teachers to change roles over time as they evolve from being apprentices to equal contributors.

*Classroom observations:* New teachers can learn a great deal from observing experienced colleagues (Anast-May et al 2007; O'Leary 2012). They also benefit from being observed. Administrators undertake formal evaluations for permanent certification and contract purposes. However, colleagues and mentors can also undertake classroom observations for the purpose of providing novice teachers with supportive formative feedback.

*Good classroom observation can lie at the heart of both understanding professional practice and improving its quality. When used insightfully,*

*observation can have a profound impact, which can lead to a more open climate, greater trust between colleagues and the development of strong professional relationships.*

**—O'Leary 2012**

*Manageable workloads:* New teachers need time to learn the curriculum, find resources and develop lesson plans. One recognized strategy for freeing up time is to limit beginning teachers' involvement in extracurricular activities. Another is to reduce their workload by ensuring that they are not given complex assignments involving many special needs students or split-level classes (Grossman and Thompson 2004). Reducing the complexity of new teachers' assignments helps them to focus on their learning and on the development of important foundational skills (Ingersoll 2001; Wilson et al 2004).

*Expanding networks:* Teachers who have no professional contacts outside their own school can become isolated. Professional isolation is especially problematic in small rural schools where a teacher may be the only person teaching a particular grade level or subject. Teachers can expand their horizons by accessing district-level supports, attending conferences, joining ATA specialist councils and becoming active in their ATA local. It is essential that teachers have opportunities to network and collaborate with colleagues from other schools and districts.

## Study Design

### Pilot Study

At the end of the 2006/07 school year, the ATA conducted a pilot study involving 100 teachers randomly selected from among the first-year teachers who had attended the ATA's Beginning Teachers' Conference in the fall of 2006. Each participant was contacted by telephone in the summer of 2007 and asked a series of open- and closed-response questions. The interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes, and participants' responses were recorded on the survey form. Many of the closed-response questions were drawn from among those that the ATA asks in its annual opinion survey of the general membership. The open-response questions probed such matters as the rewards, challenges and frustrations that participants had experienced in their first year of teaching as well as the kinds of support that they had received. The data was analyzed and the findings were published in an internal report.

### Longitudinal Study

Findings from the pilot study were taken into account in designing a five-year longitudinal study

of beginning teachers, which the ATA launched in 2008.

### Study Sample

The study sample consisted of 135 new teachers randomly selected from among approximately 850 teachers who had attended the ATA's Beginning Teachers' Conference in the fall of 2007. The majority of the participants were first-year teachers. A very small number were either teachers who had some previous experience and were returning to the profession after a long absence or early-career teachers who had moved to Alberta from another province. The sample was fairly representative of the general Alberta teaching population: 83 per cent of participants were female; 53 per cent were elementary specialists; 4 per cent were kindergarten or ECS teachers; and 43 per cent were either secondary teachers or were teaching a combination of grades. Participants from rural schools were more likely than their urban counterparts to have nonstandard teaching assignments. Participants from large urban centres were underrepresented in the sample, which, as Figure 1 shows, nevertheless contained teachers from all convention areas in the province.

*School setting:* In year one of the study, 32 per cent of the teachers (n=135) described their school

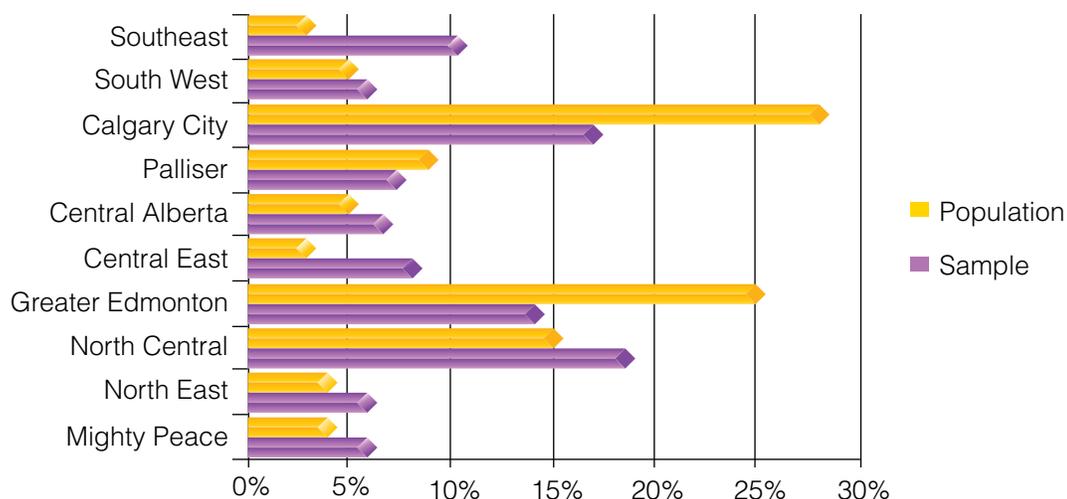


Figure 1: Sample by Teachers' Convention Area (Year One)

setting as “rural” and 52 per cent as “urban.” The remaining participants came from settings described variously as “satellite communities,” “towns” or “commuter communities.”

*University preparation:* The majority of respondents (49 per cent) had completed their degrees at the University of Alberta, 13 per cent at the University of Lethbridge, 13 per cent at the University of Calgary and 4 per cent at Concordia University College, in Edmonton. An additional 16 per cent had completed their degrees out of province. The remaining 5 per cent had completed their teacher preparation either at another Alberta institution or (in the case of 2 participants) in another country.

### Data Collection

Data for the longitudinal study came from three sources:

1. *Telephone interviews:* Beginning in the summer of 2008 and in each of the four successive summers, participants were contacted by telephone and asked a series of closed- and open-response questions. Responses to the interviews, which lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, were recorded by the interviewer on a standardized survey form.
2. *Focus groups:* In years four and five, the researchers organized a total of six focus groups involving 18 participants. The focus groups explored such emerging themes as career paths, early-career learning, professional identity and the kind of support that participants had received from colleagues, administrators, school districts and the ATA.

3. *Individual extended interviews:* In year five, the researchers conducted extended individual interviews with 10 participants who were selected to represent the range of career trajectories that participants had experienced.

The preponderance of the data came from the annual telephone interviews. Some questions were repeated each year to facilitate the identification of trends over time. Other questions were added or revised to elicit information about themes that emerged as the study progressed. The focus groups held in years four and five and the extended interviews held in year five were designed to affirm and supplement findings derived from the telephone interviews. The sources of data are summarized in Table 1.

### Data Analysis

Answers to the closed-response questions asked during the telephone interviews were compiled into basic descriptive statistics. NVivo data-analysis software was used to code responses to the open-response questions and to organize the codes into themes. Some themes were implicit in the questions asked. One question, for example, asked teachers to describe their relationships with colleagues. Another asked them to assess how changes had affected their practice. Other themes emerged as participants gained experience and were able to look back on their first years. During the course of the study, the researchers conducted an ongoing review of the literature on new teachers’ experiences in schools, induction practices, school leadership, the attrition of new teachers from the profession and

	Telephone Interviews	Focus Groups	Extended Interviews
Year One (2008)	135	—	—
Year Two (2009)	117	—	—
Year Three (2010)	106	—	—
Year Four (2011)	98	4 (13 participants)	—
Year Five (2012)	89	2 (5 participants)	10

Table 1: Data Sources

labour dynamics in the K to 12 education sector. The researchers reviewed the research literature on an ongoing basis to determine how the findings of the study to date compared with those of others in the field of new-teacher induction.

The focus groups and the extended individual interviews explored the following themes:

- The effectiveness of formal mentorship programs compared with other forms of collegial and administrative support
- The quality of the support that participants received in their first years of teaching
- The extent to which hiring practices affected participants' employment stability and the extent to which employment stability (or lack thereof) affected participants' early-career development
- The factors that shaped participants' emerging personal philosophy of professional learning
- The ways in which participants' induction experiences had shaped their practice

The focus group conversations and the extended interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo software. The focus groups and extended interviews enabled the researchers to gather information about the background and personality of the participants. This information, in turn, helped the researchers better understand how the major themes of the study had played out in the career trajectory of several participants.

A second researcher joined the study in year four. The researchers analysed the qualitative data independently and met frequently to compare insights and interpretations.

### *Sample Attrition*

Attrition is always a factor in a longitudinal study. The most reliable data came from a core of 82 teachers who were contacted in each of the five years. An additional 7 teachers missed one year but re-established contact in year five. The final

Subset	Description	Number
Contacted in All Years	Teachers in this group were contacted in each year of the study. The teachers chosen to participate in focus groups and in extended interviews were drawn from this pool.	82
Missed One Year	Teachers in this group missed being interviewed in one year of the study but were contacted in year five. Their data was included with that of the 82 continuous participants. The researchers felt that they could reliably discuss the career paths of these participants and the ways in which their thoughts and feelings about teaching had changed over the course of the study.	7
Dropped Out But Status Known	Teachers in this group dropped out of the study at various stages, either by moving or by not returning calls. The researchers used social media, school directories and other sources of public information to locate these teachers and confirm their teaching status. Individuals in this group are included in the demographic summary (n=125).	24
Left Profession	These participants left the profession at some point during the study.	6
Teaching Elsewhere	These teachers left Alberta to teach in another province or to teach overseas. They are included in the demographic summary (n=125).	6
Unable to Locate/Confirm	These participants were unaccounted for at the end of the study.	10

*Table 2: Contact with Participants Over the Course of the Study (n=135)*

report focuses on two subsamples, teachers who are parents and untenured teachers, both of which are drawn from the core group of 82 participants. The 18 participants who took part in the year-four and year-five focus groups and the 10 participants who took part in the extended interviews also came from this core group. Studying the core group shed light on how beginning teachers' perspectives and prospects changed over time.

An additional 24 teachers stopped participating in the interviews at some point in the study. Using email and staff lists, the researchers were able to determine where these individuals were teaching at the end of year five and ascertain the status of their employment contracts. The researchers were able to confirm that 6 teachers left the province to teach elsewhere and that 6 others left the profession. Despite their best efforts, the researchers were unable to locate the remaining 10 participants. The fact that the phone numbers and email addresses of some of the 10 participants were no longer valid suggests that a number of them had moved. Others simply did not return phone calls, even though they had not formally dropped out of the study. Some may be substitute teaching, others may be teaching on temporary contracts in other districts and others may have left the profession. A summary of the subsets is presented in Table 2.

The employment status of participants at the end of the study is summarized in Table 3.

Status	Number	Percentage of sample
Securely Employed	98	73%
Insecurely Employed/ Involuntarily Underemployed (FTE<.8 )	15	11%
Teaching or Intending to Teach Outside of Alberta	6	4%
Left the Profession	6	4%
Unknown	10	7%

**Table 3: Employment Status of Participants at Year Five (n=135)**

### Don — I Lucked Out!

Don is a Grade 6 teacher in a large urban elementary school. He has friends in the teaching profession who had rocky starts in their first years, so he counts himself as among those who “lucked out” by obtaining a secure position in a great school right from the start of his career. Don received a probationary contract in his second year. He has never changed schools and doesn't see himself changing in the future, a decision that he attributes to the fact that his school is a “real learning community.”

Because Don's school is large, he's always had the benefit of grade-level partners to work with. His school's administration team supports weekly collaboration sessions that, Don says, helped him access lesson plans, resources and ideas from colleagues. He was also able to use these sessions to find solutions to difficulties he was having with a student or parent.

Don attributes the positive climate he works in not only to “great colleagues” but also to his administration team. “I had really strong administration supporting the approach I was taking in the classroom. They supported me and wanted me to improve. So it never felt judgmental. I could talk to them, knowing that they're not just walking by thinking that I wasn't doing my job correctly. They understand that there are struggles.”

For Don, supporting the new teachers who have come after him is “just normal because we're trying to be a collaborative school and we share stuff.” Don also describes how he encourages new teachers to take risks and try new things, because the safe school culture he came into allowed him to do this when he was a novice.

Don's district didn't start offering a formal mentorship program until he was in his fourth year of teaching. He thinks it is great that the board is providing this support and says he would have liked to have had a mentor. But he's also grateful that, in the absence of a formal induction program, he came into a school that helped him to be successful and that keeps him fresh and enthusiastic as he moves into his sixth year of practice.

## Findings

### Working Conditions

*The demands on schools and teachers are becoming more complex. Society now expects schools to deal effectively with different languages and student backgrounds, to be sensitive to culture and gender issues, to promote tolerance and social cohesion, to respond effectively to disadvantaged students and students with learning or behavioural problems, to use new technologies, and to keep pace with rapidly developing fields of knowledge and approaches to student assessment.*

—OECD, 2005

At the end of each year of the study, participants were asked to evaluate their working conditions

with respect to nine indicators: class size, support for students with special needs, access to technology, access to resources, access to professional development, amount of preparation time, extracurricular expectations, relationships with students and relationships with parents. The results of this evaluation are shown in Figure 2. In ranking each indicator, participants used the following five-point scale: very negative (-2), somewhat negative (-1), neutral (0), somewhat positive (+1) and very positive (+2). Evaluations were averaged for each indicator in each year. Average ratings of 2 or more indicate a very positive evaluation, while ratings close to 0 indicate a neutral evaluation. Low averages resulted when a majority of participants ranked an indicator as “somewhat negative” or “very negative.” Participants who answered “not applicable” were factored out.

Like the teaching population at large, new teachers are concerned about class sizes and support for students with special needs (ATA 2009). However, participants gave the most negative rankings to preparation time and extracurricular expectations. In discussing working conditions, participants raised the following concerns:

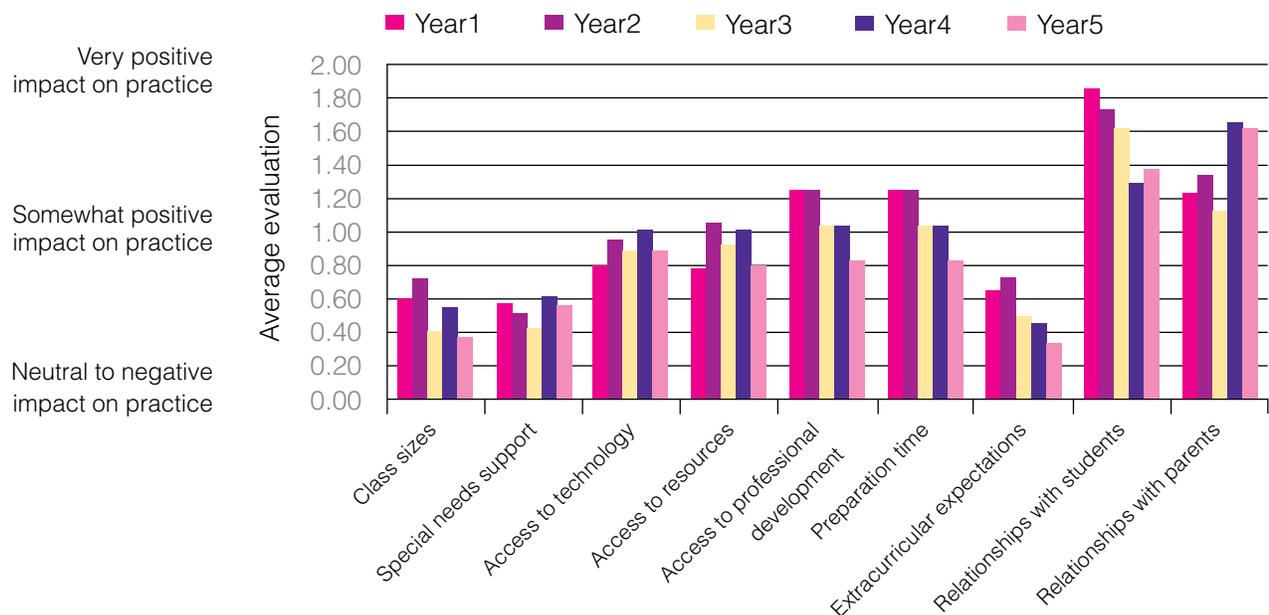


Figure 2: Working Conditions, Years One to Five (n= 82)

- Insufficient preparation to complete Individualized Program Plans (IPPs) for special needs students or to meet the diverse learning needs of students.
- Insufficient aide time to support special needs learners. (Participants praised the quality of the support they received but lamented the lack of it.)
- Being assigned to a high number of extracurricular activities in comparison with more veteran colleagues.
- Having to teach split classes or prepare for multiple classes (of particular concern to participants from small rural schools).
- Difficulties accessing professional development (again, a particular concern in small rural schools).
- Disparities in access to technology. Some participants taught in schools where laptops were the norm, while others had no whiteboards or computers or had to contend with outdated technology. Some participants complained about insufficient lab time.

### *Changes in Working Conditions Over Time*

The changes in conditions that participants noted from one year to the next may reflect actual changes in working conditions or a shift in teachers' perspectives as they gained experience. However, throughout the study, participants consistently cited class composition, lack of preparation time and extracurricular expectations as the greatest sources of stress.<sup>2</sup> Over time, participants' rating of their relationships with students declined somewhat, an indication, perhaps, that their initial idealism had begun to wane. Nevertheless, participants in year five continued to characterize their relationship with students as the primary source of their commitment

to teaching and of their job satisfaction. Over time, participants expressed greater satisfaction with their relationships with parents and the community. This trend likely reflects the fact that, toward the end of the study, participants felt more at home in their schools and had more confidence and skill in communicating with parents.

### *Working Conditions and Relationships*

At the end of year one and again at the end of year five, participants were asked to describe the greatest challenges and rewards that they had experienced. Their responses changed little over the five years, suggesting that new teachers experience rewards and challenges in much the same way as their more veteran colleagues.

Not surprisingly, participants described their relationships—whether with students, colleagues or administrators—as being extremely important. Indeed, some respondents suggested that relationships had the potential to make or break a semester, a year or even a career. The experiences of building relationships with students and seeing students grow academically enrich the professional and personal lives of teachers. As one teacher put it, “many amazing things happen on a day-to-day basis that make the job worthwhile.” Teachers who worked in the same school for a number of years, particularly in small rural schools, were especially enriched by relationships that they had developed with students and families over time. Being a role model, creating a positive space and “knowing that, for some students, school is the best six hours of their day” add to a teacher's professional satisfaction. Being a caregiver can also be taxing, especially in the case of students who have difficult home lives and for whom teachers can only do so much.

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<sup>2</sup> In their study of teachers in British Columbia, Naylor and White (2010) found that five of the top ten stressors that they had identified were directly related to classroom composition and lack of support for teaching students with special needs. Other stressors identified were relationships with colleagues and administrators, lack of resources, lack of professional autonomy and, for substitute teachers and early-career teachers, lack of job security.

*It's key to be in a supportive staff environment where people are working as a team instead of opposing one another. I've experienced both, and it really affects your day-to-day life.*

Participants also stressed the importance of developing supportive relationships with colleagues. Such relationships, according to participants, can mitigate the stress of working with demanding administrators and parents or with high-needs students. As one teacher noted, "I think that's why we all work so well together: we understand the challenges that we're all facing." Some participants who had changed schools during the course of the study were struck by the dramatic difference in the quality of collegial relationships that exists in one school as opposed to another, an observation that supports one of the major findings of this study: namely, that school cultures play a highly significant role in shaping teachers' feelings about the profession.

Relationships between teachers and administrators are also important. However, the study suggests that one-to-one relationships of this kind are probably more significant in smaller schools and play a bigger role during the first couple of years of a teacher's practice. Furthermore, once teachers obtain a continuous contract, they tend to be less anxious about their relationships with administrators. Administrators played a huge role in determining whether participants perceived their school as a positive place to work. Whether participants depicted the climate of their school as negative or positive was closely related to the extent to which they perceived work in the school as being fairly distributed among various members of staff. Participants who had good leaders described their entire school as positive, supportive, friendly, innovative and open. Participants who worked in schools where the leadership was weak or absent, by contrast, described the school climate as negative. To cope with a negative culture, they resorted to such strategies as withdrawing to their own classroom or forging supportive "subcultures" with grade-level partners, friends or department colleagues.

## **Attractiveness of Teaching as a Career**

In year one, participants were asked the following question: "Would you go into teaching again if you had to start your life over?" Ninety per cent of participants stated that they would. In year two and in each subsequent year, the following question was asked instead: "If you were able to start a new career tomorrow with the same salary and benefits, would you do so?" In year two, 67 per cent of participants stated that they would still choose to teach (18 per cent indicated that they were "not sure"); in year three, 59 per cent said they would still choose teaching; and in year four, 70 per cent said they would still teach. By year five, 53 per cent stated that they would continue to teach, while 20 per cent of the remaining participants stated that they would change jobs if they could. Given that many of the teachers who did not feel strongly committed to teaching had presumably already left the profession by this point, these five-year figures are concerning. The participants who wanted to change careers likely felt that they were being "pushed" out of the profession because it had lost its appeal rather than being "pulled" out of teaching because they had found a more attractive line of work.

Participants who still did not have a contract by year five were seriously questioning their career choice. Likewise, participants who had become parents expressed some ambivalence or regret about choosing teaching as a career. In general, participants became more concerned about the challenges of achieving a work-life balance as the study progressed. In the first years, participants expected to be overwhelmed and overworked. By year five, however, many participants felt that their workload, though somewhat more manageable, had not improved to the extent that they might have anticipated. In answering this question, many participants commented on the "24/7" nature of their profession and how much less stressful it would be to have a job that, rather than carrying over into the evening and weeks, simply ended when they left the workplace.

Beginning in year two and continuing through each remaining year of the study, participants were asked the following question: “Comparing this past year of teaching to previous years, would you say that your quality of life is better, worse or about the same?” The results of this question are summarized in Table 4.

Response	Year			
	Two	Three	Four	Five
Better	71%	57%	44%	49%
About the Same	20%	23%	36%	23%
Worse	5%	11%	13%	21%
N/A	4%	10%	7%	7%

*Table 4: Participants’ Perception of the Quality of Their Life, Years Two to Five (n=89)*

The comments accompanying the year-five responses to this question suggest that some participants were experiencing fatigue and beginning to question whether they could maintain the pace for an entire career. Some were worried about burnout. Others had become parents and were struggling to maintain a work–life balance. Although most participants continued to find working with students rewarding, some were questioning whether they could continue to meet what often seem like relentless expectations.

Each year, participants were asked two more questions designed to gauge their feelings about teaching as a career: “Do you see teaching as a lifelong career?” and “Is teaching a career that you would highly recommend to others?” As in the case of the question above concerning quality of life, participants were less positive and more ambivalent with each passing year. Responses to this question are summarized in Table 5.

The reasons that participants gave for their responses changed little over the course of the study. Those who did not regard teaching as a lifelong career stated that they might like to make a change for themselves at some point. As was the case in the question about quality of life, most

participants wanted to work in the field of education in some capacity but did not want the day-to-day stress of being a classroom teacher. Many who said they would recommend teaching to others qualified their response by noting that the other person would have to be someone who genuinely wanted to make a difference, who wanted to work with youth, who “knew what they were getting into” and who was “ready for the long hours and the workload.” Ironically, many participants, in answering other questions, talked about the impossibility of being fully prepared for all parts of the job.

Response	Year				
	One	Two	Three	Four	Five
Yes	85%	71%	57%	44%	49%
No	5%	20%	23%	36%	23%
Not Sure	11%	5%	11%	13%	21%
N/A	0%	4%	10%	7%	7%

*Table 5: Do You See Teaching as a Lifelong Career? (n=89)*

Consistent concerns throughout the study have been workload, work complexity and the “24/7” emotional labour of being a teacher. Participants who have remained committed to teaching have simply accepted these concerns as part of the job they love: helping students learn and forging positive relationships with students, colleagues and parents.

### *Development of a Professional Identity*

Each year, participants were asked to rate themselves on six measures of professional identity: confidence, preparedness, satisfaction, stress, efficacy and enthusiasm. Their responses to these questions are summarized in Figure 3.

Although participants’ confidence and preparedness varied somewhat from year to year depending on their teaching assignments and other circumstances, these measures generally increased over time. Stress levels, by contrast,

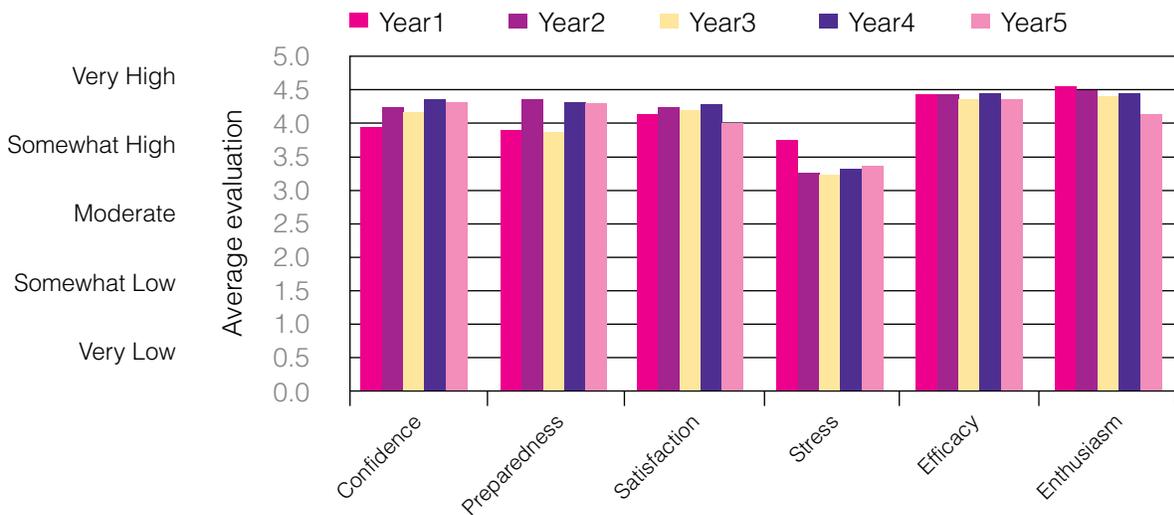


Figure 3: Professional Identity, Years One to Five (n=89)

declined somewhat over the course of the study. However, participants' comments suggest that what changed was not so much the *amount* of their stress but the *nature* of that stress. Year-one participants were more likely to cite uncertainty and lack of experience as contributing to their high level of stress. Throughout the study, however, participants continued to report working conditions and relationships as sources of stress.

Figure 3 suggests that participants' efficacy and enthusiasm also declined somewhat over time, a reflection, perhaps, that the idealism that had initially drawn them to the profession had begun to wane. Overall, however, participants' commitment to the profession did not significantly decline during their first five years of practice. The researchers also analyzed the responses of a number of individual participants to these questions during the course of the study and found little change.<sup>3</sup> Those who were

most ambivalent with respect to their confidence, sense of commitment, belief that they could make a difference and overall enthusiasm at the beginning of the study tended to report similar feelings at the end. On the other hand, participants who were more emphatic about teaching as a calling at the onset tended to retain this sensibility, although, by the end, they were somewhat more tempered in assessing their working conditions, successes, goals and challenges.

## The Role of Feedback in Teacher Growth

The importance to beginning teachers of receiving feedback emerged as an increasingly dominant theme as the study progressed. Based on discussions at the year-four focus groups, the

<sup>3</sup> Woolfolk Hoy (2008) reviewed a number of studies suggesting that, while teachers do bring varying personal characteristics and motivations to their work, their teaching environment plays a significant role in determining the extent to which these characteristics will manifest themselves. In a small study that controlled for individual teachers' dispositions in evaluating early-career burnout, Goddard, O'Brien and Goddard (2006) found that working conditions—specifically, the extent to which teachers were allowed to be innovative—played a bigger role than personality in predicting early-career burnout. The authors propose that future studies on burnout should also control for personality variables so that the effect of environmental factors can be isolated.

researchers incorporated the following question into the year-five telephone interviews: “As you reflect back on your career to date, how much feedback have you received in each of the following areas: classroom management, lesson planning, teaching strategies, evaluation and value to school community?” Responses to this question are summarized in Figure 4.

Participants reported receiving the most feedback in the area of classroom management, possibly because it constitutes an immediate need that is of concern to teachers at all grade levels. Feedback on other areas of practice such as lesson planning, teaching strategies and evaluation was less common. Teachers in small schools who had no grade-level partners or colleagues in their specialization areas tended to rely on administrators and district staff rather than colleagues for feedback. In retrospect, the question would have been improved had it asked participants to specify whether the feedback they received came from administrators or from colleagues. However, comments that participants made in conjunction with the question suggest that much of the feedback they received came informally from colleagues.

Year-five respondents observed that they had welcomed feedback in their first years of practice. Feedback helps new teachers understand how their feelings, experiences and practices compare with those of more experienced teachers. Feedback from

trusted colleagues and school leaders also helps new teachers gain self-confidence. Participants noted that, as they gained confidence and experience, they still appreciated receiving ongoing, informal feedback on their practices. As one teacher put it, “I wouldn’t want to be micromanaged. But it’s nice to have someone come in for observation and informal feedback, someone to bounce ideas off of and to get suggestions and ideas.” Participants also continued to appreciate regular visits from their administrators.

*Once someone points stuff out to me, I’m much more aware of it, and I can start applying it to other things. That makes things much better in the long run for lesson planning and for the students. Sometimes it’s hard to hear constructive feedback, but I want to hear it. Lay it down, be honest.*

### Feedback from Administrators

New teachers relied upon their administrators to evaluate their progress and to recommend them for future placements and permanent certification. In addition to undergoing these summative evaluations, participants valued receiving formative assessments, which helped them to learn and improve. Here’s how one participant described the value of the support he received from his

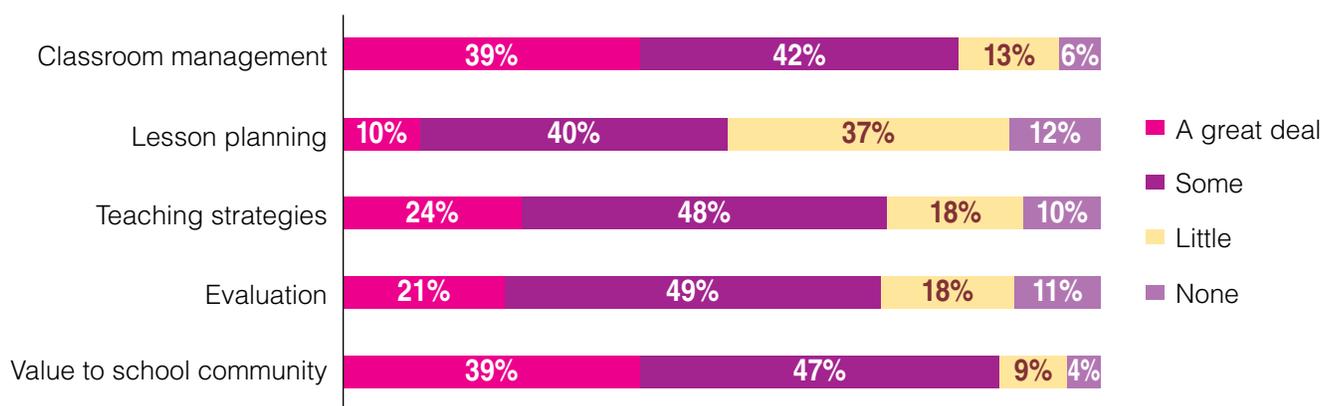


Figure 4: Amount of Feedback Received on Various Aspects of Practice (n=89)

administrator:

*He gives you positive feedback. He comes into the class constantly. He builds relationships with you and the staff. The support makes you more eager to come to school. You're willing to do more and to offer more.*

## Evaluations

According to participants, the quality and continuity of evaluations they received from administrators varied greatly. One teacher, for example, noted that the evaluations she received were worlds apart from those obtained by a colleague in a different school:

*I had four different administrators who didn't even know who I was. I wasn't accountable to anybody and I did whatever I wanted in my classroom. [My colleague] had a principal coming in every week seeing yearly plans and lesson plans.*

In the most egregious cases, the only feedback participants received were formal evaluations from administrators or district officials whom the teacher did not know. At the other extreme, some participants received comprehensive, ongoing support from administrators who went out of their way to forge relationships with new teachers by dropping in on their classes, performing informal evaluations and maintaining an open-door policy. Participants who enjoyed this kind of support found formal evaluations more meaningful and less threatening.<sup>4</sup> In the best cases, participants also received informal evaluations on their practices from mentors, coaches or colleagues who came into their classrooms. In short, the study suggests that feedback can range from a cursory, formal

evaluation, on the one hand, to an integral part of an ongoing trusting relationship, on the other.

### What Participants Said About Feedback

- Both formal and informal feedback is valuable. Informal feedback, which serves as formative assessment, can help new teachers feel more comfortable and prepared when it comes to formal evaluations.
- Feedback is most effective in the context of a trusting relationship with administrators and/or peers.
- Teachers want to know the things they are doing right as well as constructive, specific suggestions for how they can improve.
- Teachers are most in need of feedback during their first couple of years of practice.
- The amount and quality of feedback that new teachers receive vary considerably.
- Colleagues are an important source of informal feedback.

## The Importance of Setting Boundaries

According to the study, one of the most contentious issues for new teachers is participation in extracurricular activities. Many participants stated that, until they had secured a continuing contract, they complied with virtually every request made of them. The study also revealed that, before turning down a request from a colleague or administrator, a new teacher must learn to gauge ongoing social

<sup>4</sup> Some participants stated that they felt intimidated by the presence of an administrator in their classroom, an observation that supports Leana's (2011) contention that "losing face" in front of administrators can be a stressful prospect for novice teachers. Leana argues that school-improvement efforts should focus more on the expertise of teachers and less on the role of administrator as instructional leaders. Horng, Klasik and Loeb (2009) concur.

and power relationships in the school. Although a few participants reported that they had never been pressured to take on extracurricular assignments, most considered saying “no” a skill that new teachers have to learn. Even after five years, some participants did not feel safe saying “no.”

One participant stated that she had learned to say “no” from a veteran teacher who had taught her to identify “which things are options. I’ve said ‘no’ to some of these things because I know I’m doing enough in other areas and I don’t want to burn out.” Other participants, as well, stated that they had difficulty saying “no” until they felt confident that they were contributing positively to the culture of their school.

*This year is probably the first year I feel confident in saying “no” to requests. Realistically you have to say “no” to some things to maintain your sanity. I feel like I make a positive contribution to the school. Even if I say “no” to some things now, I know that people understand that I’m still pulling my weight in the school.*

Some participants stated that their ability to say “no” was contingent upon the relationship they had with the person making the demand: “I changed schools in my second year, and then the administration changed three times. With each new administration, I kept saying ‘yes.’ But now that I’ve worked with an administrator for a while, I feel like it’s safe to say ‘no.’” For participants who had started a family, learning to say “no” was a crucial step to achieving a work–life balance: “I learned how to say ‘no’ last year when my colleagues said it was okay for me to say ‘no’ and encouraged me not to do extra. Some of my colleagues were at my wedding last year, so now they say, ‘Your husband cooked dinner for you. Go home!’”

Some participants said that they felt hesitant to say “no” because they worried that doing so would jeopardize their chances of getting a permanent contract. Others characterized the inability to say “no” as personality trait. Still others noted that they felt external pressure to say “yes.” In some cases, several factors were at play:

*My school is very high pressure, very high stress. It’s not the healthiest [environment]. I feel like I’d be punished if I said “no.” My husband tells me part of that is my fault. But if I know someone needs help, I want to help. Also, I’m in an environment where “no” is really frowned upon.*

Finally, many participants reported that they had trouble saying “no” because they felt that, by doing so, they would be letting down the kids. Here are some typical comments:

*I have a really hard time saying “no” to the kids.*

*I’m very “Type A.” I have a hard time stepping back and watching something fall apart, especially if it’s for the kids.*

*I maybe don’t say “no” enough yet, perhaps because I care so much for the students. Somebody needs to feed them; somebody needs to meet their needs.*

*There are a lot of really worthwhile projects and you want them to go ahead. And they don’t if someone doesn’t step up to do them. Like a schoolwide literacy project.*

For many new teachers, learning when to say “no” to administrators and colleagues is a gradual process that involves understanding relationships and getting an overall sense of a school’s resources.

## Relating to Veteran Teachers

Each year, participants were asked to comment on how their relationships with veteran teachers had changed. Overall, the responses suggest that, as they gain experience, new teachers increasingly feel that they are on par with more veteran teachers and, as a result, start to engage in reciprocal helping relationships with them. By year five of the study, participants had begun to regard themselves as veteran teachers and were in a position to discuss

their relationships with beginning teachers:

*I think I have more voice now. Veterans accept more of what I say, probably because I have more experience and I've been at the same school for a while. You make your presence known and your views known.*

### **Gaining Acceptance as a Professional**

In a seminal study of workplace learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) theorized that an apprenticeship is not so much a matter of acquiring skills as it is a process of gradually moving from the edges to the centre of a community of practice. Lave and Wenger emphasize that this learning process is highly interactive and social in nature, involving subtle changes in the relationships between novices and veterans. Novices become increasingly legitimate members of a community of practice by working in collaboration with colleagues.<sup>5</sup>

The current study upholds Lave and Wenger's theory: most participants reported working through a processes by which they gradually become established in the profession and gained status in the workplace. Some participants reported a distinct shift in the way more experienced colleagues perceived them: "I feel like they don't see me as being at the bottom of the totem pole anymore. They are more confident in my ability to teach, and I have more voice now. At staff meetings, others are more open to things I ask or share." Other participants observed that the relationships that they had established early on with more-experienced colleagues had grown: "I think we've developed a friendship. It's easier for me to ask them for advice and help because they are more comfortable asking me for ideas now, too." This shift from being the

person in need to being perceived as an equal helped participants feel that they belonged to a professional community. As one teacher put it, "I still ask for advice, but I also have been giving it, so I feel like I'm contributing to the profession."

Some participants also described how their perceptions of themselves had changed. At the start, many participants felt "nervous about looking silly or worried about what others would think about their ideas," a worry that prevented them from sharing. By the end of the study, participants felt "more confident, less guarded and ready to bounce ideas around with other teachers as equals." As participants became less concerned with survival, they were able to develop deeper relationships with experienced teachers: "In the first years, it was about collecting as much 'stuff' as I could so I would have lesson plans. This year though, I took some professional development, and my questions have changed to 'What has your experience been? How did you teach this?' rather than 'I need a lesson plan.'"

Conversely, some participants came to see that they had been overconfident in their beginning years. What they needed to learn was the value of collaboration. As one participant noted, "I was really overzealous and really wanted to make all these changes, and didn't necessarily appreciate what some of the veteran teachers had to offer. I think I've learned to appreciate what a veteran teacher has to say."

*I've seen teachers who are not coming in with an open mind, so you have to approach those people differently than you would others. I've also seen some brand new teachers who are not open minded. People even at the age of 21 think they have all this life experience and all this teaching experience. But I've*

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5 See Wenger (1999) and Cuddapah and Clayton (2011) for more recent research on becoming accepted into a community of practice.

*also seen some who aren't teaching the next year. There has to be a willingness to learn.*

### **Developing Respect for Veteran Teachers**

As the study progressed, most participants displayed a deepening respect for veteran teachers and a greater inclination to identify with the veteran teachers' perspective. By year five of the study, participants were in the unique position of being fresh enough to vividly remember their experiences as beginners but, at the same time, sufficiently experienced to empathize more fully with longer-serving colleagues. Many participants reported that they "now realized that teaching is a rewarding but difficult profession and that veteran teachers have had to weather a lot."

When reflecting on their earlier relationships with experienced colleagues, some participants said that they now better appreciated why some of their colleagues were less generous than they would have liked: "Eventually you understand that sometimes when you share things people don't give them back or, worse, other people take credit for your work. That's really frustrating because being acknowledged for your work is really all you have sometimes." Although participants did not report a reluctance to share ideas and resources with newer teachers, one participant remarked that sometimes "you can see yourself heading in that direction, and you don't want to, but some days it's hard." To avoid this sort of negativity, some participants intentionally cultivated subcultures within the school, befriending and working with colleagues who shared their interests and philosophies: "Well I think there are those more negative teachers at our school, but the ones I hang out with, the ones I'm closest to, that's not their mentality." For some participants, the still-fresh memories of being new prevented them from giving in to negative attitudes or from withdrawing support for others. Memories of support that they had—or, in some cases, had not—received as beginners motivated them to reach out to their more junior colleagues: "When I got here, I was

well supported. I was given a binder of resources from other teachers. That's a lifesaver. Last year I did the same for three different teachers. I want to pay it forward." Other teachers are keeping the long term in mind as they support beginners: "In a really negative school, I think it would be hard to grow. Longevity is hard. You don't want to work in a place like that."

Throughout the course of the study, participants—to use Lave and Wenger's terms—appeared to move from the periphery to the centre of their learning communities and, in the process, to gain a sense of legitimacy and professional identity. The study also supports Kardos and Johnson's (2007) assertion that school cultures tend to fall into one of three categories: (1) "veteran oriented," (2) "novice oriented" or (3) "integrated." Kardos and Johnson argue that the staff complement tends to shape the overall culture of the school, especially with respect to how much authentic collaboration and innovation takes place. Schools with a preponderance of veteran teachers are more likely to have a culture in which teachers do not share their resources. Schools with many novice teachers may be innovative but lacking in the coherence that comes from having the wisdom and expertise of senior colleagues. Finally, schools with an "integrated" culture, according to Kardos and Johnson, benefit from the strengths of both new and experienced teachers and, in the process, facilitate learning for all staff.

### **Mastering the Art of Teaching**

The majority of year-one participants were overwhelmed and felt they needed help with "everything." Looking back on these experiences in later years, however, participants were more apt to recognize the limits of the kind of help that can be offered. As one participant put it, "there is only so much help [others] can give you. Things get missed; people are busy. My administrator and staff did try, but there is a learning curve that exists, regardless." Participants also acknowledged that

there were aspects of learning that they just had to “muddle through,” even when good support was offered. Observations such as these suggest that some aspects of early-career learning simply cannot be taught but must be experienced. To test this hypothesis, the researchers asked year-five participants the following question: “When you think back to your first years of practice, were there things you just had to figure out on your own? If so, what were they?”

Most participants agreed that such aspects of practice as classroom management, organizational strategies, and relationships with parents and students can be learned through experience only. However, participants indicated that there were other aspects of practice for which more support would have been beneficial. The fact that they had to figure these things out on their own was, they said, more the result of professional isolation than the inherent nature of the skill or capability to be mastered.

### *Developing a Style of Practice*

Overall, participants agreed that competencies in such areas as classroom management and lesson planning—competencies that contribute to what might be called a “style of practice”—had to be learned through trial and error:

*You have to figure out your own teaching style, that's the biggest thing. Seeing what other teachers do and reading things in books all helps, but in the end what you do is different than what other teachers do. The kids can tell if you're trying something that doesn't fit for you. They get a sense of who you are by how you run your classroom, so you have to do what works for you.*

Participants reported that their sense of professional identity evolved by trying different activities, experimenting with various approaches to assessment and trying out different classroom-management strategies. Participants adopted, rejected or modified approaches that they may have encountered in university or heard about from colleagues and mentors. Ultimately, teaching style

appears to involve two components: a sense of professional identity and a set of concrete practices through which that identity is expressed.

Participants also emphasized the importance of developing a communication style that reflected their personality but that was also effective in relating to students and parents. As one participant put it, a teacher cannot communicate “following someone else’s plan because everyone’s different and it’s part of your personality. How you make connections, how you reach students, that’s an individual thing.” Participants noted that, as in the case of communicating with students, relating to parents is a skill that “only comes with experience and being able to answer their questions and defend your practices.”

Asking participants what they had to figure out on their own provided useful information on the kinds of practices that can only be learned from experience. Beginning teachers need space to explore such matters as classroom routines, management and discipline, all of which are unique to the individual teacher. Although the learning process in these cases is largely one of trial and error, new teachers can benefit from the advice of more experienced colleagues, provided that these colleagues understand that certain things must be learned independently.

*New teachers need independence too. You're giving them feedback but your feedback isn't necessarily what's right or wrong for them, so you still have to let teachers do what is right for them in the classroom.*

For other aspects of practice—assessing and reporting student progress, comprehending school and district jargon, and understanding school rules and routines—leaving new teachers to figure things out on their own is an unnecessary source of stress and confusion. Many of these matters could be explained through school orientations and by employing good communication practices. Above all, colleagues need to display patience and understanding when a new teacher unknowingly breaches a school norm.

## Learning to Set Priorities

*We're fragile—handle with care. Give new teachers time to come into their own. It takes a few years to find a balance between work and life and between how you teach and what you do and what you participate in.*

According to participants, another aspect of teaching that can be learned only through experience is that of achieving a work–life balance. Although much of a beginning teacher's heavy workload is imposed, many participants noted that new teachers' need to prove themselves contributes to the burden. Some suggested that personality plays a role, making it “hard to let things go in the beginning.” Another participant remarked that she felt “stressed out because the job is overwhelming, and then you're putting even more expectations on yourself.” Some participants reported that more-experienced teachers tried to reassure them by offering advice such as “just breathe and take it easy” or “don't work so hard because no one's going to name a school after you.” Such advice, however, caused some participants to feel confused or belittled. One participant noted that, after being the recipient of these kinds of remarks, she later found herself repeating them to a new teacher that she was mentoring:

*I remember people telling me when I started, “You don't have to do it all, you don't have to mark it all.” I tried to do too much. Now, looking back, I see that I could have mellowed a bit and it wouldn't have mattered as much as I thought at the time. I worked closely with a new teacher last year and I was telling her the exact same things. She replied, “Everyone keeps saying to relax and I can't relax!” So, I think you have to experience some of those things yourself.*

Clearly, an important stage for new teachers is to learn the limits of their time and energy and then to establish priorities. In the beginning, everything seems to be a priority.

## Learning Organizational and Time-Management Skills

Beginning teachers also need to learn organization and time-management skills that are necessary to navigate such unanticipated aspects of practice as setting up a classroom and handling administrative duties. One participant observed that, in preservice programs, “they don't tell you how much time you will spend on paperwork. You're buried under it: communication between home and school, fieldtrip forms, IPPs, homework. All that is part of the job you need to learn to manage.”

Organizational challenges were exacerbated by what one participant described as the “hidden curriculum within the school.” What she was referring to is the challenge of locating such things as photocopiers, text books and other resources and of becoming familiar with the school's norms and routines. One participant recalled that she was unacquainted with the routines for such functions as student supervision, lunch-hour activities, intramurals, dances, submitting Teacher Professional Growth Plans and posting teacher bios online:

*Not knowing is chaotic. You make a lesson or unit plan, then you find out that your class is taking swimming lessons for three weeks, and somehow you should have known. It's really stressful.*

These unwelcome surprises contribute to the stress that teachers face in the first months at a new school. However, other participants reported that, thanks to regular communication, they were spared this kind of distress: “At my first school, I had to figure out everything—when things were due, what expectations were and so on. At my next school, all of those things were readily available. Email schedules were sent out at the beginning of the year, and reminders were sent in advance, so you knew what was happening.” Another participant commented that “some of these things I had to just figure out, but there were others where people could have helped.”

## What New Teachers Value Most

By their fifth year, participants had clearly gained some perspective on their first years of practice and on the sources of stress that they had encountered as beginners. To tap into these insights, the researchers asked fifth-year participants the following question: “As you reflect back on your beginning years as a teacher, what would you like others (school administrators, policy advisors, school districts) to know about your experiences and/or those of your colleagues? Ideally, what would you like to see change or continue for beginning teachers?”

Recalling the difficulty and uncertainty that they had experienced in their first years, nearly all participants mentioned that new teachers need more support. Although most participants seemed reconciled to the fact that being a beginning teacher will always be challenging, they also stressed that more could be done to ease the transition to full practitioner.

*There needs to be support for beginning teachers: more follow-up, more building confidence and definitely more following up on evaluations. In the first few years after graduation, [new teachers] have so much energy and they're excited and positive and working really hard to get that next contract. And sometimes when the principal switches or something happens, a ball is dropped for that beginning teacher, sometimes not just once but several times, and then that teacher starts to feel devalued. So, that's why you get so many teachers leaving.*

In addition to the general observation that new teachers need more support, participants had the following specific suggestions for what that support should entail:

*Stability:* Participants reiterated the importance of providing new teachers with stability in the first years. One way of improving stability is to ensure that hiring practices are transparent. Even participants who had experienced a straightforward path and obtained a continuing contract still offered anecdotes from colleagues who had not been so lucky.

*Understanding:* Beginning teachers need colleagues and administrators who are patient, willing to help and capable of understanding that beginning teachers will make mistakes as they learn.

*Mentorship:* Beginning teachers want high-quality mentorship for at least the first two years of practice. Teachers who had experienced excellent mentorship, whether formally or informally, felt that all new teachers ought to have this support. Even participants who had not had positive experiences with their mentors supported the concept of mentorship in principle, and those who had not had mentors stated that they wished they had.

*Learning from colleagues:* Participants valued all opportunities to collaborate with colleagues during the school day, not just those embedded in formal mentorship programs.

*Encouragement:* Because beginning teachers are hard on themselves, they need to be reassured that they are on the right track and encouraged to keep learning and asking questions.

*Orientation:* Schools should provide new teachers with a clear orientation and identify a “go-to” person who will welcome the new teacher’s questions.

*Professional development:* Participants concurred that the ATA’s Beginning Teachers’ Conference was an especially important resource for teachers who did not have much support in their schools. They also mentioned the importance of collaboration opportunities at the district level.

## Synthesis and Analysis: Key Themes

This section of the report identifies the key themes that emerged from the full five years of data collected. An analysis of the data reveals how participants' thinking, priorities and assessment of the profession evolved as they progressed from being novices to established early-career teachers.

### Achieving a Work–Life Balance

During the course of the study, a number of participants took time off work to start families. Not surprisingly, the issue of work–life balance became increasingly prominent as the study progressed. In year two, approximately 35 per cent of participants who had not left the profession and were not yet on any form of maternity leave reported that they planned to interrupt their teaching careers to start a family. By the end of year three, 13 participants in the sample (12 per cent) were home with infants. By the end of year five, 34 per cent of the 89 participants interviewed had had children over the course of the study or were expecting in year six. Thirty per cent still had plans to start a family. Participants who now had children were clearly rethinking the issue of work–life balance. Many female participants who did not have a continuing contract were unable to find a position when they began applying for jobs after their children were born. With these observations in mind, the researchers asked year-four and year-five participants who had had children over the course of the study (or were expecting to have children)<sup>6</sup>

the following question: “How has parenting (or the prospect of parenting) affected your teaching career and your feelings about work–life balance?”

New mothers who were still on maternity leave were anxious about leaving their children. One participant stated that she was “worried about ripping off my students. But I also worry about not being at home and not being able to do what I need to do as a parent.” Parents who had returned to work found themselves forced to rethink their work habits by, for instance, “being as productive as possible at work.” Another participant who described herself as a perfectionist said that she’d been forced to “be less nit-picky.” Participants who had had children also became more anxious about extracurricular commitments. Some year-five participants with children said that they were struggling to set better boundaries around their home time than they had had in place during their first years of teaching. Here’s how one participant responded to the question about saying “no”:

*The first couple of years, you’re still willing to do whatever you’re asked to, just because you don’t have any experience and you’re still wanting to make a good impression and you don’t want to burn any bridges. Now I’m willing to say “no” because I’ve got other priorities in my life that take precedence over work, which would be a six-month-old, and my wife and my dog. And you see that work isn’t the end-all and be-all of everything.*

#### Some Reflections on Achieving a Work–Life Balance

- I feel much more strongly that work–life balance is more important, and I’m going to make it a priority to leave the school and let

<sup>6</sup> This question was not asked of participants who had school-aged children when they began teaching, of parents who did not take leaves nor of male participants. Although male teachers constituted only about 15 per cent of the sample, most of them had children. As a result, they should, in retrospect, likely have been asked the questions about parenting. Although none of the male participants had taken parental leave, many talked about the importance of limiting their involvement in extracurricular activities so that they would have more time for their partners and children.

some things go when I need to. I feel like it's going to be difficult to do that due to the cuts and the high expectations with respect to extracurricular activities and so on. And it's hard to say "no" in terms of things you want to do with the students. I know I'm a "yes" person, but this year I'm going to talk to my administrator about it and put it in my Teacher Professional Growth Plan, but I think it will still be really hard.

- You have to think about your personal life too. You get married, you have kids and stuff, you kind of have to change it a bit, find a balance. I think that's going to change once you have a family of your own to look out for, too.
- I can say "no" and a lot has to do with my family. If I can't make something or can't take on more activities, I know my family comes first. But it's a hard thing because you don't want to be looked down upon as someone who's not contributing or not doing your part. I do worry about that, especially going back with two kids.

Participants were also asked whether they had considered reducing their FTE or employing other strategies to improve their work–life balance. The majority of new parents had considered working part time. Although participants still very much wanted to teach, they also wanted to find happiness in both their working and home lives. Participants saw part-time work and/or job sharing as potential strategies for reconciling competing work–home priorities and ensuring that they were able to offer their "best self" to students, colleagues and family members. Participants, however, reported that they were rarely offered part-time continuing contracts.<sup>7</sup>

*I'm finding with the beginning of school coming up I'm missing the excitement of going back to work in September, and I missed the end-of-year activities. I volunteered at the end of last school year! I'm thrilled I'm home but still thinking about what I'm missing at school.*

Teachers without contracts are faced with a dilemma: to go ahead and have children with no guarantee of returning to a job, or to delay starting a family. Although the sample was small, the findings suggest that teachers who start families before securing continuing contracts risk being permanently marginalized. None of the mothers in the sample who fell into this category had been offered more than temporary contracts after having children. Some were substitute teaching, a difficult option unless a teacher has unusually flexible childcare arrangements. Most were drifting out of the profession, even though they still wanted to teach.

Difficulties they had experienced in achieving a work–life balance led some participants to observe that new and preservice teachers have no grasp of the demands of the profession:

*I really don't think [preservice teachers] understand the job. We had a student teacher in the school last year and it was 5 PM. I was still working, and she was surprised. There are rumours that you will have long hours and you put your time in, but I don't think you know first-hand until you do it. The first year you think that it will "get better," and then it doesn't.*

Presumably, summer holidays, secure work and benefits make teaching an attractive choice for women, which may explain why the teaching force is

7 As Young and Grieve (1996) note, Alberta's Education Act gives school administrators "unusual latitude ... concerning part-time employment contracts." In a later work, Young and Brooks (2004) state that administrators tend to hold clear "pro" or "anti" perspectives with respect to part-time work that are reflected in their hiring practices.

8 See Wylie (2000) for more on the relationship between the feminization of teaching and perceived benefits of the profession in terms of achieving a work–life balance. The literature contains surprisingly little on work–life balance and family planning for teachers.

predominantly female.<sup>8</sup> However, the study suggests that teachers who are drawn to the profession at least in part because they believe it is compatible with the demands of family life may change their minds once they become aware of the actual workload involved and the difficulty of attaining a work–life balance. The situation may improve somewhat once a teacher’s children reach school age. However, the study suggests that beginning teachers who have infants and preschoolers face many challenges.

## Value of Preservice Preparation

*There’s such a learning curve from “university reality” to what you find in the classroom. It’s hard to be prepared, to organize your classroom, to be prepared for planning, to manage the paperwork. Even when you do your internships, [the classroom teachers] have their discipline and routines set up, and you don’t realize how much work that takes, and all the behind-the-scenes stuff you have to do.*

Although the impact of preservice preparation was not foremost on the minds of participants after their first year of teaching, participants raised the issue sporadically in subsequent years. Participants suggested that more practica were needed and that preservice experiences should include the critical first weeks before and after the beginning of the school year. Participants also noted that their preservice learning and practica had not prepared them for the complexity of a teacher’s

workday. The OECD (2005, 10) observes that “the stages of initial teacher education, induction and professional development need to be much better interconnected.” The current study suggests that the theory-to-practice gap has not yet been bridged in Alberta.

In discussing their preservice learning, participants most frequently mentioned feeling unprepared with respect to the following tasks:

- Evaluating students, particularly when teaching out of one’s area of specialization.
- Communicating and working effectively with parents.
- Supporting special needs students and working with education assistants and specialists.
- Preparing individualized program plans.
- Organizing and time management. Teachers were unprepared for the amount of paperwork and administration involved.
- Setting up their classroom and planning for the school year.

## Employment Stability

This study was undertaken, in part, to determine the accuracy of the widespread perception that attrition rates among beginning teachers are very high. By and large, the study has not confirmed the high attrition rates cited in some studies.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Table 3 shows, only a very small percentage of the sample left teaching because they were dissatisfied with the profession.

Effectively tracking teacher attrition and mobility rates in the province requires large-scale studies. That said, the findings from this admittedly small sample contradict the perception that young teachers are leaving the profession in droves due to

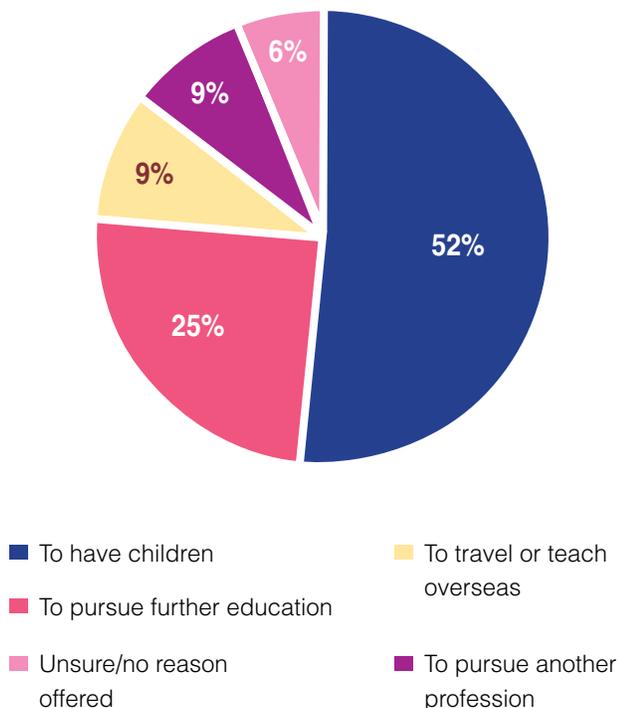
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<sup>9</sup> Alberta Education (2012, 14) estimates an attrition rate of up to 25 per cent within the first four years of teaching. In making this calculation, the department defines a teacher who has “left the system” as one who “is no longer actively employed with a school jurisdiction in Alberta and has not been for a full five years. The individual may have quit teaching, moved to another province or country to teach, or moved into a different career field.”

difficult working conditions. What the study showed, instead, is that young teachers tend to “tough out” the first years—which are indeed difficult—and then breathe a sigh of relief once they have obtained a continuing contract. Although difficult working conditions do not appear to be pushing teachers out of the profession in the short term, the study raises concerns about the effect of working conditions on the long-term well-being and resilience of teachers. Focusing on attrition may also be leading policymakers to ignore a related and potentially more pressing problem: the inability of teachers who want secure employment to obtain it due to labour market mismatches and less-than-transparent hiring practices.

### Leaves of Absence

In the first year of the study, only 40 per cent of the 135 participants saw themselves as “definitely”



*Figure 5: Reasons Year-One Participants Cited for Leaving Within Five Years*

teaching in five years’ time. However, as Figure 5 shows, most participants anticipated that their leaves would be temporary.

The data from subsequent years reveals that most temporary leaves were related to parenting. None of the teachers in the study took leave to pursue further education, and only 2 of the 89 participants remaining in year five had taken leaves to travel or teach overseas. Between 5 and 10 per cent of respondents have taken stress or medical leaves over the course of the study.

### Do Feelings About Career Choice Persist?

The study revealed that participants who started out feeling ambivalent or somewhat negative about their career choice tended to continue feeling that way. Furthermore, teachers who started out feeling very positive and committed were, by year five, beginning to feel worn down.

- In year two, 63 teachers stated that they loved teaching and would not make a career change. By year five, 47 of these teachers remained positive and committed to teaching, 10 had grown more ambivalent and 6 had changed their minds and would not teach again.
- In year two, 17 teachers said that they were ambivalent about their career choice. By year five, 7 of these teachers remained ambivalent, 6 wished they had chosen a different path and 4 had settled and were now committed to teaching
- In year two, nine teachers said they would change careers if they felt they could. By year five, one of these teachers had changed her mind and now felt positive about teaching as a career, one was more ambivalent and seven still wished that they had chosen a different career path.
- The teachers who had become more positive about the profession over time almost invariably attributed their increased enthusiasm to the fact that they had moved from a school that provided them with little support

to one in which they felt well supported by administrators and colleagues.

- As they gained experience, participants became aware that such work-related conditions as class composition, relationships with colleagues and amount of parental support could affect their feelings about teaching from year to year or even from week to week.

### Mobility

Although Alberta Education has expressed concerns about teacher shortages in the province, most participants in the current study report that the labour market for teachers is quite tight. Many say they feel “lucky” to have a job and most have friends and colleagues who were unable to secure positions.

By the end of year three, about 75 per cent of participants were securely employed and their mobility was reasonably low.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, about 15 per cent of participants had still not obtained contracts. Throughout the five-year study, 72 per cent of participants remained in the same division (a low mobility), while 10 per cent were teaching in another division that was within driving distance. Most of the participants in the latter category had changed districts in order to secure a contract or to substitute teach (sometimes in more than one district). An additional 4 per cent of participants had moved elsewhere in the province, and 4 per cent were teaching in another province or country. The location in year five of 125 of the original 135 participants is summarized in Figure 6.

Although relatively few participants changed districts, many of them moved to different schools within a district, particularly during their first three years when they were less likely to have a continuing

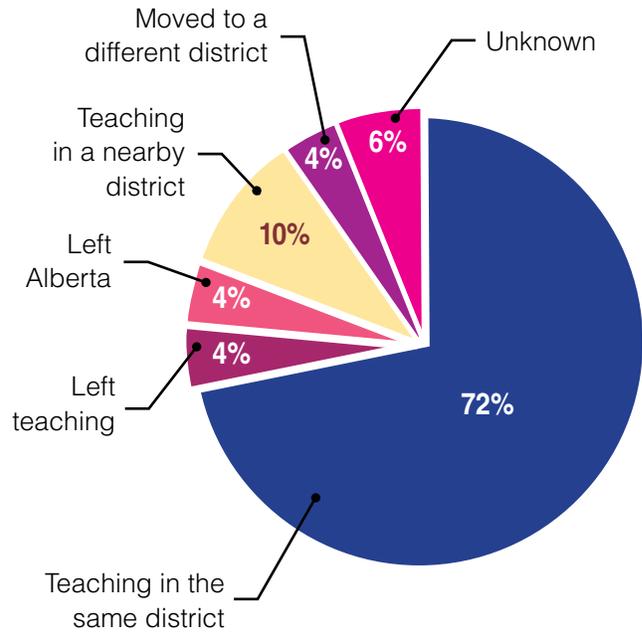


Figure 6: District Changes by Year Five (n=125)

contract. Changing schools frequently can make a new teacher’s learning more difficult and contribute to career dissatisfaction.

### Amber — Time for a Change

Amber didn’t picture herself working in a rural school. “I grew up in the city. There were over 2,000 kids at my high school!” But Amber was concerned that she wouldn’t get a job in her home city. After a year of substitute teaching, she applied to a northern school district and was offered a probationary contract before the end of her first year. Amber found herself in a Grade 7 to 12 school with only 130 students, a stark contrast to the big-city schools in which she had grown up.

Amber found she loved her school even though it served a very high-needs population. Staff had a strong sense of community. “I think partly because

<sup>10</sup> From year one to year three, more than 90 per cent of the participants remained in the same school district, and more than 70 per cent taught in the same school. As the study progressed, the proportion of participants having secure employment increased.

the needs were so great, we were united, trying to be there for the students.” Amber never felt at loss for a sympathetic ear in her staffroom, but with only seven staff in the building, each teaching his or her own subject areas, she didn’t have anyone on site who could help her with curriculum or resources. “I called my sister’s husband a lot because he was a science teacher, too,” she says. “I don’t think I would have survived the first year without that!” Amber described how her district also “did what it could,” sending a coach to her classroom four times a year. Professional development at the district office was “good but it was always hard, because you can’t always get substitutes, and you know you’re going to be driving home for two hours in the dark of winter.”

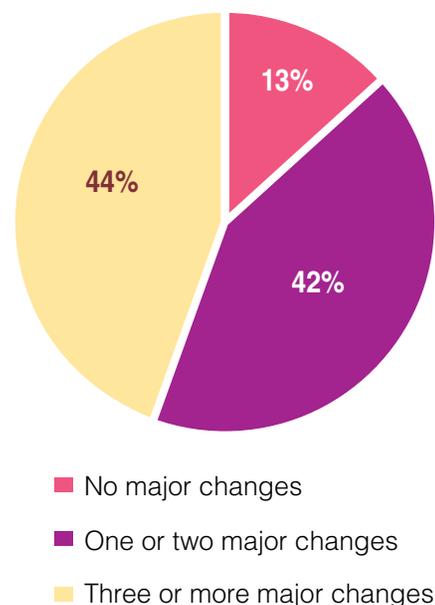
After five years in the same school, Amber applied for a transfer to a school in the nearest small city in her district, which is about an hour and a half from where she teaches now. It’s hard to leave. “I know my administrator is disappointed,” she says. She’s now one of the more senior members on staff, and she knows that others have come to count on her experience. She feels sad and guilty about leaving the little school and the staff and students to whom she is close. But Amber is tired. “You’re alone, you know? You’re still professionally alone even if the staff are good friends.” She’s thinking ahead, too. Amber would like to meet someone and eventually start a family. She thinks that settling in town will position her better for these personal goals.

### *Impact of Employment Instability on Professional Growth*

*Although I was coming in with a new course, I didn’t have to worry about how to set it up. I was able to take the “bones” of a different course I’d taught and apply it to my new course. If I had bounced around, I would never have gotten deep enough into teaching to learn how to make it effective. If you’re doing “year one” all the time, you don’t develop those skills.*

By year five of the study, most participants appeared to have settled into their school communities and found stable foundations for their future practice. Throughout the study, many participants reported that they had changed schools frequently. Such teachers consistently reported finding their early years more difficult than did colleagues who had enjoyed more stable circumstances. Participants who had moved around a lot nevertheless tended to make the best of it, stating that they had learned from their experiences and had become adaptable. At the same time, most of these participants stated that, given the choice, they would have preferred greater stability. The teachers who adapted best to changing teaching assignments appeared to be those who had taught the same subjects or grades more than once in the past and who, as a result, had refined their skills and practices. Participants also noted that certain basics of practice such as classroom management and organizational skills are transferable and become easier with time.

The extent to which participants experienced major changes during the course of the study is summarized in Figure 7. Although the term “major



*Figure 7: Portion of Participants Who Experienced Major Changes (Year Five)*

changes” was left somewhat open-ended, most participants interpreted it to mean a change in school and/or a significant change in teaching assignments—changes that participants described as having the most detrimental effect on their early-career learning.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than refining their teaching practice, participants who changed schools several times during their first years spent considerable time and energy learning new school routines and building new relationships. Teachers who encountered a lot of change also experienced more difficulty developing a sense of identity and belonging. New teaching assignments meant learning the curriculum and planning from scratch. Participants were almost unanimous in describing the experience as akin to “being a first-year teacher all over again.” They also missed the anticipated satisfaction of improving their lesson plans and strategies. One participant, who had taught a different grade in each of four years, described the experience as follows:

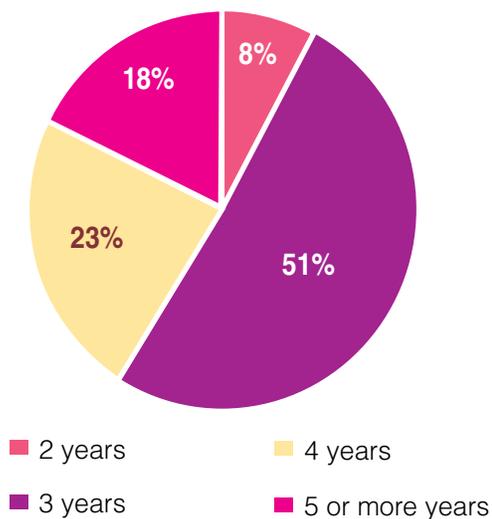
*Changes in assignments mean you never get a chance to get better. And a big part of teaching is reflecting. When you don't get to teach [a class] again, you can't build on that. Next year I have the same assignment, so I'm really looking forward to that.*

The sooner a new teacher is established, the more quickly he or she can begin contributing to the larger school community. Participants who experienced continuity in their school placements and teaching assignments also observed that such stability helped them master their practice and develop satisfying relationships with colleagues, students and parents. Cherubini (2007) notes that teachers who feel that they belong to a community

are less likely to leave the profession. Such teachers are also better equipped to support teachers who come after them.

Having a secure position, however, can be a drawback if the teacher feels compelled to remain in a particular school or to retain a specific assignment. By years four and five, some participants who had obtained continuing contracts and gained two to four years of experience in a relatively stable teaching assignment wanted to move to a different school or take on a new assignment. Some of these participants were unhappy in their present situations, whereas others simply wanted a new challenge.

At the end of year five, participants were asked the following question: “In your opinion, how many consecutive years in a teaching assignment does a teacher need to achieve proficiency?” The responses to this question are summarized in Figure 8.



**Figure 8: Perception of Years Required to Become Proficient (Year Five)**

<sup>11</sup> Because the researchers were interested primarily in the impact of change on new teachers, they gave participants considerable latitude in deciding what constituted a “major change.” Secondary teachers had the most difficulty in determining whether a change should be considered “major.” Some had received an entirely new teaching assignment whereas others had been assigned a couple of different courses. Some elementary teachers, especially those with nonstandard or part-time assignments (such as K to 6 physical education and Grade 4 math and science), experienced major changes during the course of one year. Depending on their experience, participants might or might not consider a split-grade assignment a major change.

### Sarah — Still Committed to Teaching, Still Waiting

Sarah loves teaching, and her enthusiasm has been evident in each year-end interview. In a year-five extended interview, Sarah revealed that the path by which she had entered the profession was a familiar one: playing school as a child, imagining herself as a teacher and getting involved with youth from an early age. Sarah did well in university, where she specialized in two desirable subjects: drama and French. Like most teachers, Sarah expected that she might have to accept temporary contracts and substitute teaching for a while in order to get her foot in the door. But, after two years and still no sign of a contract, she started to worry.

Sarah has received excellent evaluations from her administrators and is sought out as a substitute teacher in her community. By the end of year five, she had yet to obtain a continuing contract. She has watched new graduates obtain continuous contracts right out of university. Meanwhile, colleagues and parents tell her that this makes no sense and that she's a great teacher. She had been interviewed for four jobs and found out through colleagues that at least one of these interviews was a sham. In other words, the successful candidate was already a shoo-in for

the position.

Although she has been unable to access consistent professional development—her district offers no professional development for substitutes—Sarah seeks out as much learning as she can on her own. She keeps abreast of new initiatives like the Daily Five and differentiated instruction and wants to be in a position to collaborate fully when she joins a new staff.

Despite many setbacks, Sarah is still passionate: “It’s the students, the parents, the new teaching ideas.” She lights up when she describes the relationships she has forged in the many schools in which she has worked. But her voice shakes a bit when she talks about the future. She once saw herself becoming an established teacher and then moving into administration. She is now questioning her career choice and has told others that teaching is a career best avoided because of the job instability. She wonders, “How long should I wait to get a job?”

### Difficulty Attaining a Continuing Contract

By the end of year five, 15 of the 125 participants whose employment status was known had not yet obtained secure contracts. This finding confirms two

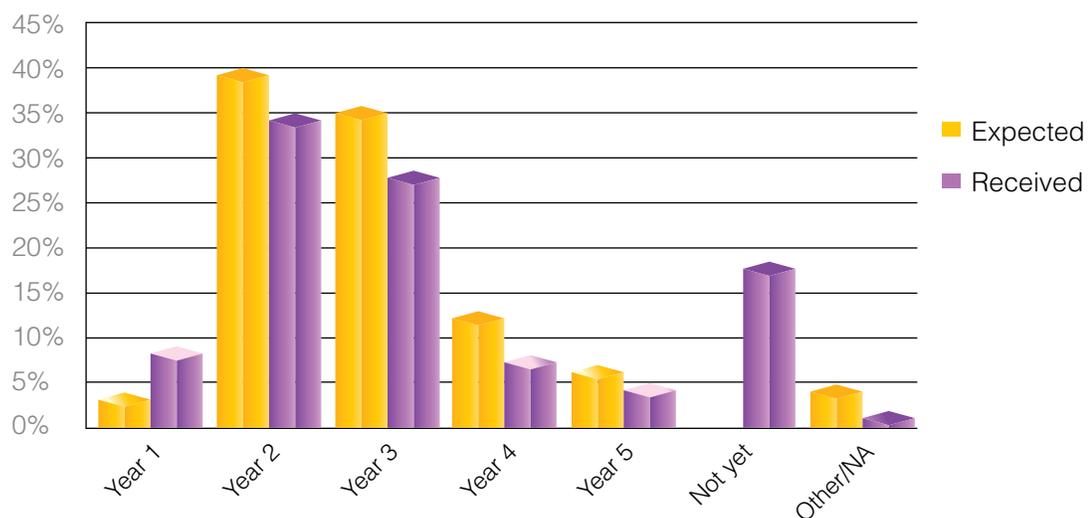


Figure 9: Year Continuing Contract Received Compared with Year Expected (Year Four)

recent studies (ATA 2010; ATA 2011) that found that, while up to half of substitute teachers would like to secure a permanent contract, most end up “floating” involuntarily for years in a system of temporary contracts and substitute teaching. At the end of year four, participants were asked in which year they expected to receive a continuing contract and in which year they had actually achieved this goal. The responses, which are summarized in Figure 9, suggest that teachers had reasonably realistic expectations: they were prepared to wait two or three years before obtaining a continuing contract and settling in one school. A significant minority, however, continued to be shut out of secure employment.

*Sometimes I think it's just the luck of the draw. Some people have had the easiest time in the world: they got out of school, had one interview, got the job and have been at that school. And it's like this perfect experience. And you think, “Why didn't that happen to me? Like what happened? Do I have the worst luck in the world? Is it politics? Do I not know enough people?” I'm not really sure.*

Participants who failed to obtain a probationary or continuing contract within the first couple of years of practice expressed mounting frustration with hiring and evaluation practices that they perceived to be neither transparent nor systematic. Participants who did not achieve secure employment experienced one or more of the following situations:

- Being shuffled from one school to another and from one assignment to another
- Planning for an assignment on the basis of a contract that did not materialize
- Witnessing recent university graduates in their district receiving probationary contracts in their first year
- Being conscious of a hidden system of rules and relationships from which they were excluded
- Failing to receive a probationary or continuing contract despite receiving positive feedback and positive formal evaluations

By years four and five, untenured teachers in the study were profoundly demoralized. What they perceived to be opaque or arbitrary hiring practices kept them chronically off balance. Unable to determine who actually makes hiring decisions, they often ended up trying to please everyone.<sup>12</sup>

In their review of district hiring practices, Ralph et al (1998) conclude that, while abundant research exists on the qualities that are valued in teachers, few studies have looked specifically at the criteria actually used in making hiring decisions. Harris et al (2010) concur that the factors involved in hiring new personnel “are rarely considered” (228) in the literature. The authors conclude that “to design effective policies (eg, certification and hiring processes), we need to know more about how principals make these decisions and to what degree the conventional wisdom reflects reality” (243).

### **Arlene — With Two Children, I Won't Return to Teaching**

New mothers are especially apt to be marginalized when it comes to obtaining permanent contracts. A possible reason—for which the study provides no direct evidence—is that those doing the hiring perceive new graduates to be “less encumbered” than recent graduates.

The employment history of Arlene illustrates the difficulty that new teachers with children may experience in obtaining secure employment. In year one, Arlene substitute taught from September to April and then received a half-time temporary contract for May and June. In year two, she received a temporary, quarter-time

<sup>12</sup> *The Government of Ontario recently introduced into collective bargaining proposals to limit the amount of time that retired teachers can teach and to render hiring practices more transparent. In making the proposal, the minister of education stated, “Issues with respect to the lack of transparency and the lack of openness and the lack of clarity on hiring practices is something I have heard about in my conversations across the province” (Talaga 2012).*

AISI-funded contract; in year three, she substitute taught and had a six-month, full-time temporary contract; in year four she substitute taught and had a two-month, full-time temporary contract; and in year five she stayed home with a new baby and then returned to substitute teaching. In year six she planned to substitute teach.

Here's how Arlene summed up her career to date: "I would have liked to have had a full-time contract right from the start, but it never happened. I've applied for literally hundreds of positions, and I've not been offered a job. I'm fed up, but at this stage, with two young children, I wouldn't return."

## Effective Induction Practices

Effective teacher induction practices can help school divisions retain and nurture promising young teachers. The Association, through its extensive collaboration with forward-thinking school authorities, has recognized this basic reality for a number of years. Such practices include mentorship programs, ample opportunities for collaboration, early orientation, classroom observations, reduced workload with respect to preparing for different classes and minimal involvement in extracurricular activities (Wayne, Youngs and Fleischman 2005). Effective induction practices are amply documented in the literature. The challenge is not identifying good induction practices but determining the funding and policy structures that will best promote them.

### Importance of a Multifaceted Approach

*Successful teacher induction programs ... include opportunities for experts and neophytes to learn together in a supportive environment promoting time for collaboration, reflection and a gradual acculturation into the profession of teaching.*

—Howe (2006)

Studies on new teacher induction generally suggest that the most effective induction programs are multifaceted (Wong 2004), a description that implies that the program consists of discrete components each designed to support the new teacher in some way. The current study, however, suggests that what new teachers find most beneficial is a holistic web of support. Most induction programs, for example, advocate that new teachers should have more preparation periods and that their involvement in extracurricular activities should be limited. Such practices, however, are unlikely to be implemented effectively unless the administrator and school staff support them. As one participant noted, "I don't know how we could do that without making the other teachers jealous." Induction, in other words, should be thought of not so much as a set of discrete components but as a philosophy about (1) the role of new teachers and (2) the relationships that exist between novices, veterans and contemporaries. The effectiveness of induction practices ultimately depends on the climate of the school in which they operate.

Not surprisingly, the study revealed that participants who had received broad-based support were the most positive about their induction experiences. Here's how one participant described the induction that she received during her first year of practice:

*I think I was pretty lucky in that we had mentoring teachers for the first year. I also set myself up with a couple of people on staff who have been mentors. I also had one lady, a retired principal, who came in and visited me a few times, which was really good. We also had four mentoring professional development sessions throughout the year that touched on assessment, descriptive feedback and so on. They were fantastic. We got to network with other teachers around the division and got new ideas to bring into the classroom in regard to classroom management and lesson planning. I enjoyed getting to know the district office people because you never really*

*interact with them. We've been put in cohort groups on our staff. Members of the cohort come into the classroom and give us some critiques and descriptive feedback.*

## Most Effective Induction Practices

*Intentional learning communities invite participants to contribute to and gain access to “just in time” learning (solving immediate problems of practice) as well as grapple with problems in greater depth and complexity.*

—Lieberman (1996)

The induction that participants received to ease the challenges of their first year ranged from organized collaboration and mentorship, on the one hand, to little or no targeted professional development or support, on the other. The best induction programs were comprehensive, including not just mentorship but other opportunities for the new teacher to participate in site- or district-based learning communities led by teachers.<sup>13</sup> The study suggests that the most effective induction programs incorporate the following practices:

*Mentorship:* Willing, capable and readily available mentors topped the list of what participants cited as the most valuable induction supports. Only half of participants had access to a formal mentor and only half of these participants, in turn, found

their mentoring programs valuable. The majority of participants forged close relationships with one or more teachers whom they referred to as “informal mentors.” According to participants, the most important criteria for successful mentoring relationships—whether formal or informal—were availability, willingness and expertise in the new teacher’s subject or grade level.<sup>14</sup>

*Teacher-led learning communities or communities of practice:* Many participants who did not have formal mentorships were still positive about their induction experiences, provided that they had regular opportunities to collaborate with grade and/or subject area partners. Elementary teachers who had grade-level partners in their school frequently observed that regular grade-level collaborations were central to their learning and sense of being supported in their first years.<sup>15</sup>

*I'd like to see more collaborative work being done with new teachers and experienced teachers not only outside the classroom but also involving classroom visits. I wish new teachers were given more time to do that. I was apparently given a mentor teacher but, unless time is set aside, it's not going to happen. We're all busy with teaching. [My mentor] had a young family and I understood that.*

*School orientations:* School orientations were critical for easing stress and making new teachers feel welcome. Nevertheless, the study suggests that school orientations are among the most neglected components of induction. Ironically, they are likely among the least difficult and most cost-effective components to implement.

13 See Howe (2006) and Ingersoll and Smith (2004) for additional information on effective induction programs with multiple elements.

14 Ample research supports the importance of having mentors who are committed and who are matched to a new teacher's subject and/or grade level. Feiman-Nemser (2001a) has shown how professional development specifically aimed at improving mentors' abilities to coach and reflect on practice can improve the quality of mentoring. Others—notably Carroll (2005), De Lima (2003) and Wayne, Youngs and Fleischman (2005)—argue that a poor mentor, far from being neutral, can actually harm a new teacher by reinforcing practices that contribute to professional isolation or a negative school culture.

15 Participants experienced a wide range of collaborative practices. The most effective was collaboration led by teachers and scheduled on professional development days or embedded into weekly school schedules.

*Improved teaching assignments:* New teachers have the most difficulty learning and managing their workloads when they (1) experience frequent changes in grade level and/or subject area in their first years; (2) are assigned many different grades and/or courses to teach, each of which requires learning a new curriculum and preparing lessons from scratch; and/or (3) are assigned courses or grades that involve standardized tests. Although contrary to everything that is known about supporting early-career learning, the practice of assigning new teachers the most difficult teaching assignments persists in many schools. The study suggests that changing the perception that new teachers must “pay their dues” will require a concerted effort on the part of school administrators and department heads who may need to challenge veteran teachers who feel that they have earned the right to receive less-arduous assignments.

*Limiting extracurricular activities:* Participants reported that they enjoy extracurricular work, which they see as vital to gaining a sense of belonging in their new school community. Some schools, unfortunately, take advantage of the willingness of new teachers to contribute. Because they lack job security, many new teachers feel compelled to say “yes” to every request. The best strategy appears to be to encourage new teachers to participate in extracurricular activities while, at the same time, putting explicit limits on the time they are expected to contribute. Without such limits, new teachers will almost certainly overextend themselves. Participants observed that administrators played a critical role in determining extracurricular workloads.

*More formative feedback:* Although most participants welcomed more formative feedback on their classroom practices, many received only the evaluations needed for them to secure permanent certification and a continuing contract. The task

of providing formative feedback need not fall to the administrator only: teachers can observe each other’s classes informally, and trained peer coaches can offer more structured feedback. The study suggests that classroom observations and formative feedback are underutilized as aspects of induction. Only a handful of participants had opportunities, in their first year, to observe other classrooms or to be observed. Asked at the end of year five how induction programs could be improved, many participants suggested that more emphasis should be placed on classroom observation as a learning strategy.<sup>16</sup>

*Empathy, understanding and generosity:* Some aspects of induction simply can’t be programmed but are nevertheless critical in ensuring that new teachers have a positive entry into the profession. One such intangible quality is what participants described as “support from administrators and colleagues.” Support involves honouring an individual’s teaching style and practices. Indeed, the current literature on induction emphasizes the importance of training mentors to identify the unique needs and qualities of the teachers they are mentoring. Perhaps the most effective thing that teachers and administrators can do is to affirm the unique qualities of beginning teachers. Those who are timid will gain confidence over time, while those who are overzealous will learn the value of collaboration.

*Professional growth happens more on a personal level in interactions with other teachers than it does in a big group where you’re playing a passive role.*

Although formal mentorship programs and professional development are important aspects of induction, year-one participants perceived informal support from colleagues to be the most

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16 Van Es and Sherin (2004, 572) observe that “current programs of teacher education often do not focus on helping teachers learn to interpret classroom interactions. Instead, they focus on helping teachers learn to act, often providing them with instruction concerning new pedagogical techniques and new activities that they can use .... Although these techniques and activities are certainly important resources for new teachers, they do not necessarily ensure that teachers will learn to interpret classroom interactions in ways that allow for flexibility in their approach to teaching.”

beneficial form of assistance (see Figure 10). Participants who lacked access to formal induction opportunities nevertheless felt well supported when they could work with knowledgeable and welcoming colleagues.

### School-Level Support

*The biggest things are the opportunities to get together with other beginning teachers and with teachers at the same grade level. My administrator has been very supportive in this regard. I had no problem calling in a substitute when I needed extra professional development. If things hadn't been as positive as they have been for me, I wouldn't still be at the same school.*

The study suggests that administrators and the school culture have a profound impact on new teachers' experiences. Participants worked in schools that ranged from being highly supportive and collaborative to extremely isolating. A school

environment is shaped by three key factors:

*The administration:* The school administration sets the tone of the school's culture and establishes norms with respect to how new teachers are welcomed and supported in the school.

*The size and composition of the school:* Even if a small rural school is welcoming, friendly and supportive, new teachers can still be professionally isolated. Because of their size, rural schools are less likely than urban schools to have grade-level partners or subject area colleagues on whom new teachers can call for advice and resources. Schools in larger centres are more likely to cater to specific grades or subjects, a situation that facilitates the provision of both informal support and embedded collaboration opportunities.

*Access to a mentorship program:* Mentorship programs can be formal or informal. What mattered most to participants was that their mentor was committed to the relationship and willing to reach out to them. Participants used the term "informal mentorship" to describe everything from regular coffee meetings with colleagues to e-mail contact with veteran teachers, relationships with administrators, conversations with colleagues at

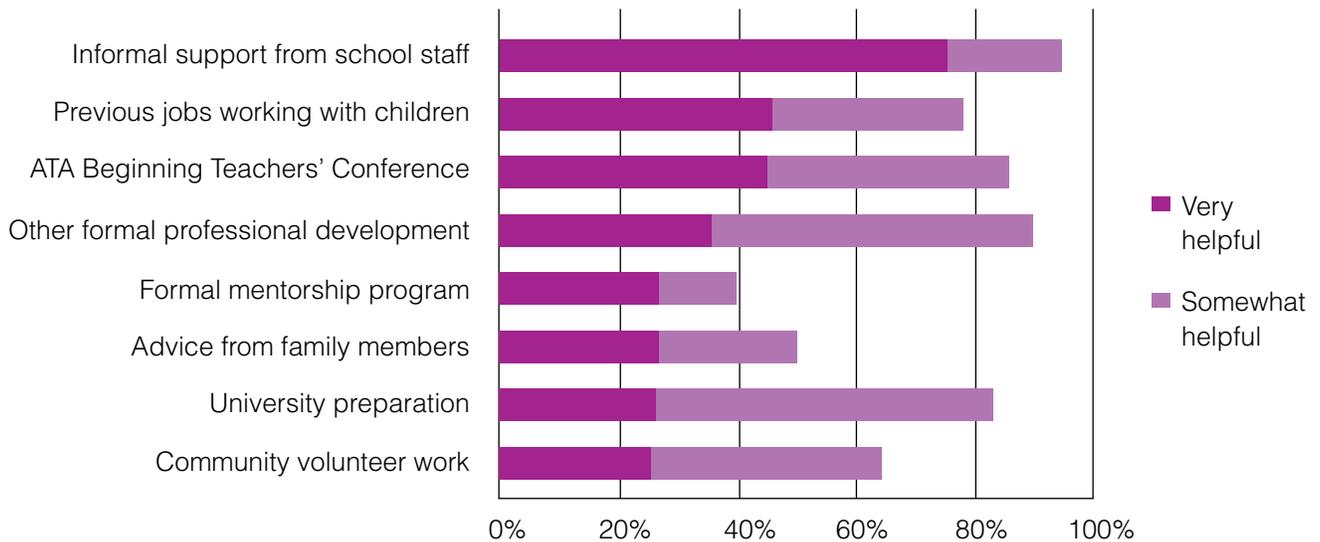


Figure 10: Year-One Ranking of Supports (n=135)

department meetings and grade-level teaching partners.

The kind of school-based initiatives that participants found most helpful included school orientations, offers of support and resources from colleagues, reasonable expectations with respect to participation in extracurricular activities, administrator visits and open-door policies, and embedded opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, either in a learning community setting or in one-on-one mentorship programs.<sup>17</sup>

The beginning of the school year is a critical period for which many new teachers are ill-prepared. “One problem going in,” said a participant, “is that people don’t realize how much you don’t know. There is so much to know, and people either take for granted that you know it or hit you with it all at once.” This situation is exacerbated when new teachers are hired on very short notice—sometimes only a couple of days before or after classes begin. School-specific orientations are thus an important component of an induction program (Algozzine et al 2007; Johnson, Harrison and Donaldson 2005).

The importance of giving new teachers additional support in their first few days or weeks of teaching was a theme that surfaced repeatedly throughout the study. As part of their school orientation, according to participants, new teachers should receive (1) information on administrative expectations and school rules and procedures, (2) help in completing paperwork associated with their employment and (3) a thorough tour of the school and its facilities. New teachers should also have opportunities to meet with a mentor or veteran colleague before classes begin to receive advice on setting up their classroom, discuss the curriculum and identify lesson-planning resources.

Year-four participants were asked to rate the value of various forms of professional development on their teaching career to date. Their responses, summarized in Figure 11, reinforce the research literature on this topic: namely, that effective induction involves opportunities for new teachers to engage with colleagues in different settings, including one-on-one mentoring relationships, in-school professional learning communities and off-site collaboration networks.<sup>18</sup>

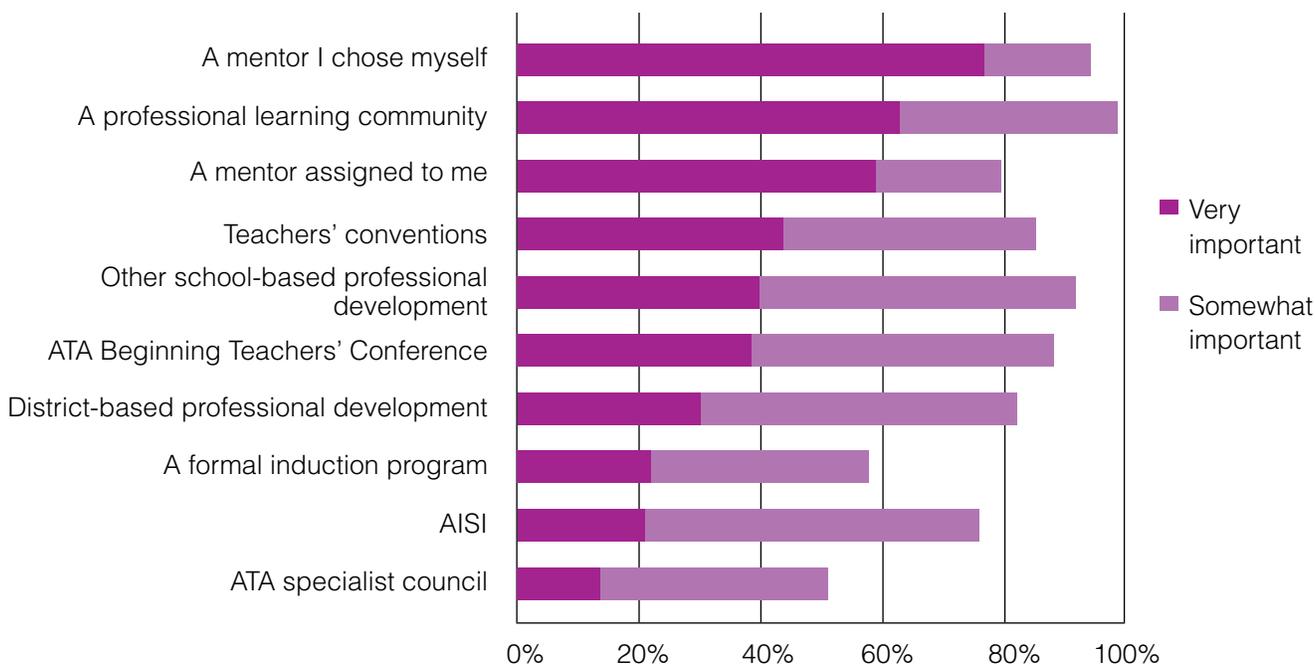
### *District-Level Support*

*A really positive thing this past couple of years has been to have a professional learning community and to have time to go to that. Because our district is so big, all of our kindergarten teachers have trouble getting together. I had been teaching kindergarten for a full year before finally getting to talk to someone else in our district who taught kindergarten. And it has been so nice in the last couple of years. We’re working on a website to share information and resources electronically.*

According to participants, the foundations of effective first-year professional development were site-based mentorships, feedback from administrators and collaboration with grade level/subject area partners. Teachers who did not have such opportunities at the school level valued the chance to participate in district-based collaboration

17 *Other newcomers—substitute teachers, teachers on temporary contract and teachers transferring from another school—also benefit from effective orientation practices and supportive administrators and colleagues. Like new teachers, substitute teachers can suffer from professional isolation, poor school orientations and inconsistent evaluation practices—conditions that are symptomatic of deeper organizational issues at the school and district levels (ATA 2010; Wilson et al 2004).*

18 *Ingersoll and Smith (2004) found that the most effective induction practices involve “having a mentor from the same field, having common planning time with other teachers in the same subject, having regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers and being part of an external network of teachers” (35).*



*Figure 11: Most Valuable Professional Development to Date (Year Four)*

days. Regardless of the opportunities in their schools, participants appreciated opportunities to network with and learn from colleagues outside their own schools. The Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISi) appears to have played an important role in facilitating district-level collegial learning. Although participants tended to rank AISi as only a “somewhat important” source of professional development, they nevertheless recognized its value in providing a structure, focus and funding for collaboration.

Asked in year four to evaluate the supports they received in their first years, participants ranked district-coordinated induction programs as among the least valuable forms of early professional learning.<sup>19</sup> Participants balanced the time they spent in district-hosted induction sessions against the time they spent planning for a substitute teacher (to say nothing of the related costs). Participants

found these sessions particularly unhelpful when they felt as though they were being “talked at” about materials they could easily have accessed online or found in their schools. Participants also noted that some district inservices were redundant because they covered material that new teachers had already learned in university.

What participants valued most were district-level initiatives that gave them time and space to work with colleagues and/or mentors and to develop relationships. New teachers felt comfortable calling or emailing these new-found colleagues at other schools to ask questions, seek advice or exchange resources and ideas. A number of rural participants reported that their districts were working hard to facilitate such out-of-school collaboration opportunities.

<sup>19</sup> *New teachers in a recent Ontario study of teacher induction (Cherubini 2007) had very similar comments about induction inservices. The ATA advocates that all professional development initiatives, including mentorship programs, should be continually updated to take into account feedback from participants.*

### District Support

- District-level initiatives can provide teacher-led collaboration opportunities when new teachers do not have access to such opportunities in their own schools.
- Districts can play a critical role by training and supporting mentors.
- In rural districts, district office staff played a bigger role than in urban districts in making new teachers feel welcome and valued.
- District orientations held at the beginning of a school year may overwhelm new teachers who already have a great deal to learn in their first weeks in a new school.

### Conferences and Off-Site Professional Development

*Now that I've taught a little bit longer, I value professional development more. At first I was overwhelmed. Now it is easier to choose. I can make better-educated decisions about what professional development will be valuable to me. Before I would just go to generic sessions I found interesting. Now I know what I need help with.*

Participants' priorities with respect to professional development shifted significantly after the first year of the study. In their first year, participants spent most of their time and energy mastering basic skills and becoming oriented to their new school environments. During preservice education, teachers tend to receive little information about the structure and purpose of ongoing professional development. Most participants said that they had felt overwhelmed and uncertain in their first year and, as a result, were unable to make effective use of what they had learned from their professional development opportunities.

In years two and three, participants were asked how their perspectives on or priorities for

professional development had changed. The responses indicated that participants had begun to take ownership for their professional development as evidenced by the fact that they now placed more value on professional development that was directly related to their classroom practices. As one participant put it, "I know better what professional development to look for. When you are new, you will go to everything. Now I know better what I need and what I'm lacking." By year two, participants were more selective and more focused with respect to their professional development goals. Participants often stated that a specific curriculum area or teaching strategy was now guiding their choice of professional development sessions.

### ATA Supports for Beginning Teachers

*The ATA Beginning Teachers' Conference:* This conference has stood the test of time. Eighty-six per cent of participants in year one reported finding the conference somewhat or very helpful. The conference was especially important for teachers who were not receiving much site-based or district support. In year five, many participants recalled the conference as a valuable contribution to their early professional growth. They felt that the sessions were generally relevant and that the opportunity to meet other new teachers helped build their morale.

*Specialist councils:* The study suggests that the involvement of new teachers in ATA specialist councils is limited. By year two, only one third of participants had been involved in a specialist council. Most participants who were aware of councils but had not joined said that they were not opposed to joining but simply "hadn't got around to it." Many participants were not aware of the existence of councils. Participants who did join councils reported that the experience greatly enhanced their sense of professionalism and expanded their collegial networks outside of their own schools and districts. Councils were of particular value to teachers from more isolated areas.

*Engagement in the ATA as an organization:*

The study did not focus on the extent to which participants became engaged in the ATA. From participants' comments, however, the following inferences can be drawn:

- ATA school representatives are the primary source of information for new teachers. Knowledgeable representatives can orient new teachers to ATA resources—professional development funding, specialist councils, information about district contracts—about which they might otherwise be unaware.
- The knowledge, ability and availability of school representatives vary considerably.
- Although confident that the ATA is available to answer questions about contracts or problems with colleagues, teachers are unlikely to seek information until they need it.
- Information that the ATA provides in e-mails appears to have a fairly low penetration rate.
- Overall, teachers in their first years of practice are not well informed about the supports and services available from the ATA, particularly with respect to professional development.
- Most teachers feel that membership in the ATA enhances their sense of professionalism.

### Ongoing Professional Development

Each year, participants were asked to rate their professional development priorities for the coming year. As they gained experience, participants tended to place less emphasis on their Teacher Professional Growth Plan (TPGP), an indication, perhaps, that they were taking more ownership of their planning. Participants did not find the tasks of setting learning goals and planning related professional development activities to be onerous and some said they “would do these things on their own, anyway.” More significantly, participants tended to consider the time spent writing TPGP goals to be wasted if their progress and achievements were not evaluated in any meaningful way. A number of participants

stated that they received little or no feedback or evaluation with respect to their TPGPs.

Few participants enrolled in graduate studies over the course of the study, a finding that is not terribly surprising given that they are still at an early point in their careers. Some participants stated that, though interested in pursuing graduate studies and leadership positions, they would delay doing so until they had started a family. Some participants who were pursuing graduate studies were doing so through cohort programs.

During the course of the study, participants' focus on online or distance collaboration opportunities declined, an indication, perhaps, that, with experience, they had become aware of alternative professional development opportunities.

### A Hierarchy of Needs

*Often, it seems, we ignore or forget Maslow's hierarchy and focus solely on the growth rather than the deficiency needs of teachers. About to begin a new and to some their first job, beset by personal doubt and debt, sometimes far from home, beginning teachers are at a low psychological ebb. In providing a supportive family atmosphere, a “home away from home” as it were, school administrators can allay many fears and assist the new teacher in the settling down process.*

—Goddard and Foster (2001, 359)

In the first year of the study, participants expressed a strong desire for more mentorship and collaboration. In most cases, however, the focus of this support was to meet urgent, immediate needs such as navigating the small but time-consuming frustrations of adapting to the school environment (knowing what paperwork to fill out when or how to use the photocopier) or finding resources for

their classrooms. In other words, first-year teachers tended to be in “survival mode” and, as a result, had little time to reflect on and refine their needs.

### *Basic Survival Needs*

*I focus now more on how to be a better teacher, how to get the curriculum across, rather than just on how to stand in front of the class without panicking!*

Among the basics that teachers must focus on in their first year are classroom management, curriculum learning and lesson planning (Feiman-Nemser 2001b; Grossman and Thompson 2004). The current study suggests that beginning teachers’ “survival needs” are best addressed by ensuring that new teachers have ample opportunities to collaborate with colleagues teaching the same subjects and/or grades. Whether in a one-on-one mentoring relationship or as part of a larger collaborative initiative, beginning teachers need access to the ideas and resources of veterans teaching in their areas.

Other ways of helping new teachers survive include reducing the number of courses for which they need to prepare, placing clear limits on the extent to which they are expected to participate in extracurricular activities and providing them with as much preparation time as possible. McCann, Johannessen and Ricca (2005, 31) advocate that “school leaders should be guided by a general principle: For the new teacher, keep the workload as manageable as possible.”

### *Affective Needs*

New teachers want to feel that they belong, that they are competent and that they have legitimacy in their role as teachers. Schools can help address these needs by ensuring that new teachers have support when they are experiencing bouts of uncertainty or self-doubt and that they have opportunities to participate in creative, higher-order work. Although the majority of participants entered positive, welcoming schools, others felt very

isolated, especially during their first year or two of practice.

Fortunately, many of the affective needs that beginning teachers experience can be addressed through the same system of support as is used to meet survival needs. For example, when a veteran teacher shares a unit plan and takes the time to walk the new teacher through that plan, he or she is meeting both the basic and the affective needs of the new teacher. In other words, the new teacher, in being provided with resources, is receiving not only practical, basic support but also affective support in that the encounter offers an opportunity to build a relationship with a caring veteran colleague. Leithwood and McAdie (2007) emphasize that, by providing a sense of mission, purpose and meaning, the school culture also plays an important role in meeting the affective needs of new teachers. Here’s how one participant described the sense of frustration that can overwhelm new teachers:

*One of the most difficult things when I started was all these continuous changes at the district level. You’re trying to just get by as a beginning teacher, and then they introduce Daily Five and then instructional intelligence. Then they jump to a focus on technology, and we redo all our assessment. They say it takes three to five years to properly implement the curriculum and to have a good grasp of it, to get proficient. Well, that’s no different when you’re implementing Tribes or Seven Habits or any of those things. It’s very frustrating.*

### *Becoming Lifelong Learners*

Beyond surviving from day to day in the classroom and experiencing the comfort, acceptance and confidence that comes from having solid affective supports, new teachers need activities that encourage them to consider themselves as professionals and as lifelong learners. To achieve this goal, the induction of beginning teachers must become part of a more holistic and pervasive emphasis on continuous professional development.

Induction programs often fail to make the deliberate transition from offering first-year survival strategies to focusing on professional development that helps teachers build and sustain good practice. Making this transition is especially difficult when induction—say, a mentoring initiative—is simply bolted onto existing school cultures and practices.

In the long run, professional development for beginning teachers, whatever its source, should be implemented with a view to developing strong teaching skills. As Wang, Odell and Schwille (2008) note and as several participants pointed out, comprehensive induction programs should include opportunities to observe other teachers and to be observed. Feiman-Nemser (2001a, 8) emphasizes the importance of ensuring that mentors are equipped to teach novices how to take “an inquiring stance. They [mentors] cultivate skills and habits that enable novices to learn in and from their practice ... and ... create opportunities and conditions that support meaningful teacher learning in the service of student learning.”<sup>20</sup>

Rieg, Paquette and Chen (2007) propose that recognizing the sources of stress and learning to manage stress effectively are important skills that new teachers need to develop. The authors also note that higher-order forms of professional development can help bring about this kind of critical self-awareness.

### A Hierarchy of Professional Learning Needs<sup>21</sup>

#### Basic Foundations

In their first two years, participants were looking for the following basics:

- A secure placement
- Access to teaching resources

- Access to lesson and unit plans
- An orientation to the school
- Advice on classroom organization
- Affective support from colleagues

Beginning teachers who do not receive these basics tend to become stuck and frustrated and may have difficulty moving on to the important work of becoming *better* teachers.

#### Long-Term Professional Growth

Once teachers’ basic needs have been met, they can begin engaging in long-term professional growth, which results in the higher-order skills listed below. Although seemingly “soft” and difficult to quantify, higher-order skills, once mastered, epitomize excellence in teaching.

- 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
- Reflecting on and refining teaching practice

Beginning teachers who are required to participate fully in multiple-school or district-based initiatives may be asked to engage in in-depth professional learning activities before they are ready to do so. Although these professional development activities are valuable in themselves, new teachers are unlikely to get much out of them because teachers at this stage are still focused on day-to-day survival. Indeed, many participants observed that they didn’t have a good sense of their own needs in the first year.

20 The ATA offers many workshops designed to equip mentors to better address the needs of beginning teachers.

21 Feiman-Nemser (2001b) concurs that teachers’ learning needs are hierarchical. “Developmental” learning is distinct from “inductional” learning and is best undertaken only after the early-career teacher has developed a professional identity, become acclimatized to the school community, mastered the curriculum and begun developing a repertoire of effective teaching strategies and lesson plans.

## Navigating School Politics

A central task of new teachers is to learn to navigate the micropolitics<sup>22</sup> of their school and school district (Achinstein 2006; Kelchtermans and Ballet 2002). The current study suggests that a teacher's political literacy develops over time. This evolution became evident in years four and five of the study when participants were asked to identify the supports currently available to new teachers in their schools. Because participants discussed their relationships with veteran colleagues as well as with beginning teachers who had joined staff after them, their answers shed considerable light on the social relations that develop as teachers learn their "place" within a school, relative to their colleagues. The researchers were especially interested in identifying the types of collegial interactions that either helped or hindered teachers in developing a sense of legitimacy and belonging in their school. They also examined how the belief, prevalent in some schools, that novice teachers must "pay their dues" is perpetuated.

### Status Hierarchies in Schools

*I had a lot of comments like, "I slept in my classroom the first year, that's how it goes. If you can make it through that, then you're a teacher." I can't believe they actually say stuff like that. They made fun of my eagerness, and it was like they wanted me to have a hard time in my first years.*

Ingersoll and Smith (2004, 28) observe that the teaching profession is notorious for "cannibalizing its young." New teachers are often given the most difficult teaching assignments and are expected to carry their share—or, in some cases, more than their share—of extracurricular activities (Cherubini 2007). Under such survival conditions, the quality of teachers' professional development in these early years is often mediocre: "Not infrequently," write Glassford and Salinitri (2007, 2), new teachers are "socialized to a mediocrity that 'works' in limited ways but shuts the door on continuous learning." Although these are strong statements, they are consistent with the observations of some participants to the effect that they were "taken advantage of," made to feel that they were "at the bottom of the totem pole" and intimidated into complying with any request. Teachers who feel isolated and unhappy in their schools usually accept the status quo until they obtain a continuing contract, then apply to leave the school.

Of course, not all participants felt victimized. Some received abundant support and praised the understanding and generosity of colleagues who offered them advice and resources. The study also suggests that, in some cases, veteran teachers may be unhelpful not out of any sense of malice but simply because they fail to recognize new teachers' needs. One participant, for example, after observing that her administrator was now "doing a better job of recognizing new teachers' needs," suggested that, in previous years, he and his senior colleagues may have simply lost touch with what it is like to be a beginning teacher.

The year-four interviews suggested that a new teacher's sense of identity and belongingness can

22 The term micropolitics refers to the processes by which individuals and small groups compete or cooperate to gain power. Meyer and Macmillan (2011) define micropolitics in education as "the formal and informal use of legitimate and illegitimate power by the principal and teachers to further individual or group goals, with such goals based on values, beliefs, needs and ideologies. Shifts in balances of power can be created through collaborative efforts and may shift with time and circumstance" (3). Kelchtermans and Ballet (2002) observe that an important aspect of new teachers' professional learning is becoming micropolitically "literate" by discovering how to "read" the situations in which they work and developing strategies for "effectively influencing the situation, either proactively or reactively" (117).

be shaped by his or her interactions with veteran teachers. In terms of knowledge and experience, new and veteran teachers occupy different positions in the school's hierarchy and, as a result, the interactions between them can be complex. In general, these interactions are of three kinds.

### *Asking for Help*

*I know I could have gone to anyone and no one would have rejected me. I just wasn't comfortable doing that. I guess maybe it's my own fault for not stepping up and asking somebody for help, but no one really offered either.*

An ongoing theme in the study has been the circumstances in which new teachers feel comfortable asking for help. The years four and five interviews suggest that, in asking for help, new teachers feel that they are perceived as either a "giver" or a "taker" with respect to a school's most valued currencies: time and resources. Beginning teachers will go to great lengths to avoid being viewed as a "burden." As one teacher put it, "the more I can handle things myself and the more I can stay out of the way, the more valuable I am." During the course of the study, participants evolved from being in a position of very high need to one in which they were able to both seek help from and offer help to colleagues. In general, participants felt that they were on a more equal footing with their colleagues once they could both ask for and offer assistance.

New teachers vary, however, in how confident they feel in approaching more experienced colleagues for help. With hindsight, some participants observed that new teachers can be too hesitant in seeking support and need to learn "how to advocate for themselves" and "ask for what they need." At the same time, participants remembered that they were quick to pick up on cues—both subtle and not so subtle—from colleagues concerning their willingness to offer help. One participant recounted that her first experience with her mentor was not positive: "He did provide me with resources, but I felt guilty getting them. I was a burden and I knew it. It

wasn't his choice to do it."

The culture of support in some schools is passive and informal. In such schools, new teachers may only discover through trial and error which offers of support are cursory and which are genuine:

*I find it depends on the people. I can think of one individual who would probably give me "that attitude." So I know my relationship with that person is a certain way, and that's the way it is, right? But I know other teachers who have just as much experience as this other person, and I can talk to them about some stuff because my relationship is different.*

Another participant attributed the support he had received from colleagues to "good luck" in being where he was. If someone does not "really have their heart in helping you," another participant noted, "it can be a big waste of time."

Other schools, by contrast, have active, structured forms of collaboration that spare new teachers the guesswork and awkwardness of having to determine who can be approached for help and under what circumstances. Here's how one participant described what can happen if mentors and novices do not have structured time:

*By having something scheduled, [collaboration] is not considered extra. It gives you that time. Because it's not extra, there isn't that, "I've got things to do. Can we just get through this so I can ...?" Sometimes I think experienced teachers can feel that way. Or you're thinking, "Man, I forgot I have to do these field trip forms, and then I have to get this ready for tomorrow."*

Many participants emphasized that providing structured time for collaboration and mentoring not only relieves the new teacher of feeling guilty and stigmatized for seeking help but also helps all teachers involved to better plan their time.

### Sharing Resources

*In my school, teachers swap stuff back and forth. Teachers who don't share don't "get" what profession they're in. If you're dedicated to student learning, you can't just be dedicated to students in your own classroom.*

Another type of interaction fraught with political implications for new teachers is asking a veteran teacher to share resources and lesson plans. As one participant noted, "Teachers in general are willing to share stuff as long as they know you're willing to do the work as well." This observation implies that some experienced teachers believe that new teachers are not willing to work. Another participant reported receiving this rebuff from a colleague: "Why are you asking me for a test you should be making on your own? ... I didn't get any of that myself, but you know there are teachers that are like that."

These examples suggest that some teachers believe that acquiring resources and making lesson plans are rites of passage, another aspect of "paying one's dues." One participant observed that, having invested time, money and energy into classroom planning, she felt a strong sense of ownership with respect to her resources:

*Everybody's scrambling to keep on top, and there's a little bit of a competitive atmosphere, right? So you feel like, "Well I busted my butt working all year and nobody helped me. I earned this unit. I'm not just giving it away."*

On the other hand, some participants reported that sharing resources was a norm in their schools. One participant noted that her school had an online system that enabled teachers at the same grade level to share plans and resources. Another participant stated, "At our school we're trying to have more of a culture of professional learning. So it's really meant to support each other. There's a big push for collaboration, so we try to share everything."

All participants described asking for, offering and receiving resources and plans as substantive acts of support and reciprocity. When asked how they supported newer colleagues, participants frequently stated that they "offered resources." They also noted that they had felt supported when colleagues had shared materials with them. The study suggests that a school's culture plays a major role in determining the extent to which teachers are willing to share resources, lesson plans and other information with colleagues. In schools in which reciprocity is the norm, teachers willing share resources. Conversely, in schools in which sharing is not the norm, withholding resources can become a way of reinforcing the status hierarchy among staff.

### Teaching Assignments and Extracurricular Activities

*Beginning teachers are often given more challenging teaching assignments than those of their colleagues; are assigned to multiple-class preparations; are likely to be assigned to teach low-performing students; and are not given professional support, feedback and demonstrations of what it takes to be an effective teacher.*

—Andrews, Gilbert and Martin  
(2003)

Another area of political tension for new teachers concerns the allocation of teaching assignments and participation in extracurricular activities. Beginning teachers typically have temporary or probationary contracts. One consequence of their tenuous employment status is that they feel pressured to "prove themselves." Participants noted that some schools exploit the vulnerability of new teachers by giving veteran staff first choice with respect to teaching assignments. In such a de facto system of seniority, veteran staff have no qualms about saying "no" to extra assignments. New teachers, on the other hand, are expected to take on the more

difficult assignments and the bulk of extracurricular work. Although not particularly happy about it, most participants accepted this situation as normal and inevitable. As one teacher put it, “That’s what your first year is all about.” However, other participants pointed out that heavy extracurricular loads and difficult teaching assignments distract new teachers from their central and most important work in the first year: learning to teach well.

A second negative consequence of new teachers’ lack of tenure is that it discourages them from asking for help when they need it or from voicing concerns when they face unreasonable expectations. Although some participants noted that they had reported their concerns to the ATA, they said that they did not feel truly “safe” until they had obtained a continuing contract. Even when districts and schools claim to be supportive, noted one participant, stiff competition in the job market means that new teachers have little security: “There’s a distinct feeling that there’s this mass surplus of young teachers and, if you don’t like it, there’s 600 more begging for your job. Don’t talk too loud.”

## The Role of Administrators

*The principal and vice-principal provided me with acres and acres of support. I had meetings with them every day. If I had had the previous administrative team, I would never have taught again because their attitude was kind of like, “Nope, it’s your classroom; you figure it out.”*

According to the literature, the most successful induction programs are those that recognize that new teachers have unique learning needs but that insist that strategies to meet those needs be incorporated into an organic, positive climate of ongoing professional growth and learning (Wong 2004). A theme that emerged as early as year two of the study was this: *What’s good for schools is good for beginning teachers, and what’s good for beginning teachers is good for schools.*

Experts agree that a school’s administration plays a crucial role in determining the school’s culture and, by extension, the way in which early-career teachers experience their work. Asked to describe the support they or teachers hired after them had received, most participants mentioned the involvement of the principal. Although the quality of the relationship that they had with their administrator varied, most participants agreed that the school administrator plays a major role in determining what a new teacher’s first years will be like.

The best administrators were those who established and maintained a positive school atmosphere and who were open, consistent and predictable in relating to teachers. Participants especially valued principals who created environments where “everyone was encouraged to contribute their ideas” and where “teachers’ views were taken into consideration in programming.”

*My principal was very supportive and helpful. She gave me lots of suggestions about being the kind of teacher I want to be. She had an open-door policy. So there was lots of sharing. It was always positive, and upbeat.*

### How Administrators Can Support New Teachers

- Check in regularly with the new teacher to see how things are going.
- Help the new teacher to build relationships with colleagues.
- Create embedded professional development time for mentorship, professional learning communities and classroom observations.
- Limit expectations with respect to participation in extracurricular activities.
- Reduce the complexity of teaching assignments.
- Ensure that new teachers receive an orientation to the school.

- Keep an open-door policy so that new teachers feel comfortable discussing their concerns.
- Observe classes, evaluate the teacher's practice regularly and offer constructive feedback.
- Facilitate access to district mentorship programs, the ATA's Beginning Teachers' Conference and other forms of professional development.
- Support the new teacher with classroom management and discipline issues.
- Support the new teacher in communicating with parents.

This study corroborates decades of research demonstrating that school administrators play a pivotal role in shaping the culture of a school. For this reason, induction programs should be accompanied by district-level leadership-development initiatives that explicitly incorporate strategies that principals can employ to help early-career teachers get off on the right foot.

### Styles of Leadership

**Active Administrators:** These administrators recognize that new teachers need extra time, attention and support. They model supportive behaviours for experienced staff members by checking in on new teachers frequently; creating an atmosphere in which new teachers feel safe asking questions; and monitoring mentorship relationships to ensure that they are working well.

**Passive Administrators:** These administrators do not recognize that new teachers have unique learning needs or require exceptional forms of support. Although they may be welcoming and friendly, they tend to allow existing school norms to determine how new teachers will be integrated.

**Absent Administrators:** Though well intentioned and caring, these administrators are simply too busy to offer support to new teachers. For their part, new teachers do not want to burden an administrator who, they believe, is too busy to answer the mundane questions and problems that they inevitably encounter in getting to know the school routines, staff and students.

## Conclusion

A literature review undertaken at the onset of this study, in 2007, suggested that (1) attrition rates are high among early-career teachers and (2) these high attrition rates could be attributed, at least in part, to difficult working conditions for beginning teachers (Ingersoll 2001). The literature also suggested that induction programs could improve teacher retention.

The assertion that attrition rates are high is questionable on a number of grounds. First, attrition rates vary widely from one jurisdiction to another. According to American studies, attrition rates are higher in poorer schools, inner-city schools and other schools that are hard to staff (Darling-Hammond and Sykes 2003). Attrition rates are also related to teacher salaries and to the quality and quantity of preservice training that teachers receive (Darling Hammond and Sykes 2003; Ladd 2007). Closer to home, Alberta Education (2012) notes that urban areas may be oversupplied with teachers while rural and remote districts struggle to find and retain staff. Attempting to identify a single early-career teacher attrition rate, therefore, is not useful because attrition rates vary widely depending on the conditions in each jurisdiction.

A second problem is that working conditions may not be a significant factor in determining whether or not an early-career teacher decides to leave the profession. The current study suggests that working conditions for new teachers, while far from ideal, are seldom bad enough to cause novice teachers to contemplate a career change. Although poor induction practices may prompt some teachers to leave the profession, a bigger concern is the impact that these practices have on the long-term development of the majority of teachers who “tough it out” and remain in the profession.

This study suggests that a more significant factor than weak induction practices in early-career attrition is the inability of many aspiring teachers to obtain secure, long-term employment. In other words, hiring practices may have as much to do with the challenges of retaining teachers as do induction practices.

## Induction from a Systems Perspective

A school's ability to improve its induction practices is affected by many conditions that are outside the control of the school: budget constraints, population density, the composition of the student body, district and government policies, and both preservice and ongoing professional learning. In short, broader environmental conditions need to be taken into account in planning induction programs for new teachers.

Taking a systems perspective also highlights the fact that no one agency is responsible for the problems facing first-year teachers. Labour agreements do not ensure that new teachers will have training and support. Districts, which are removed from the daily life of schools, generally lack mechanisms for monitoring working conditions that either contribute to or detract from a teacher's ability to learn. Although principals play a vital role in the induction of new teachers, many lack the resources, skills, time and awareness needed to structure their schools for effective learning. Furthermore, principals are often not held accountable for the quality of their instructional leadership and, as a result, may not make this area of practice a priority (Pajak and Arrington 2004). Here's how one participant described a situation that is probably common in many schools:

*Well [the division] cares about [induction] on an umbrella level. The division talks about [induction] a lot and puts these policies into place. But as they work their way down, they get diluted. At the ground level, it ends up being like, “Here's your mentor; you're going to talk to them for five minutes in November.” And that's it, right? It started as this big policy: “You're going to have a school mentor; you're going to have a curriculum mentor; you're going to do all these good things.” And then the reality of it is just not that at all.*

Avoiding implementation gaps of this kind

requires coherence and accountability at many institutional levels.

A systems perspective also reveals that, although schools are given the bulk of responsibility for new teacher induction, they often lack the resources required to implement effective induction programs. Lack of resources can affect schools in many ways:

- Lesson planning and learning curriculum are made more difficult and time consuming when new teachers lack such basic classroom resources as supplies, textbooks and curriculum guides.
- Lack of time discourages new teachers from “bothering” busy colleagues and administrators with questions and requests for help.
- Teachers are often overwhelmed by complex and multiple demands and, as a result, may compete for choice assignments and a reduction in their involvement in extracurricular activities. Because workloads are often distributed on the basis of seniority, new teachers tend to receive the most onerous and difficult assignments, a practice that is seldom in the best interests of the students or of the school as a whole.
- Many schools lack specialists and in-class supports for students with special or high needs.
- Schools are often not staffed at a level that would enable them to embed optimal levels of professional learning time into the regular schedule. Such time allows new teachers to consult with mentors and to work alongside experienced colleagues in professional learning communities.<sup>23</sup>

Teachers’ labour is a finite resource. Asking teachers to do more and more within a fixed period of time is false economy. The study suggest that otherwise-effective induction practices are often undermined by the simple fact that new teachers and their mentors, colleagues and administrators lack the time required to implement them.

## *Improving Induction Practices at the System Level*

### *Disrupt Hierarchies and Status Systems*

Studies consistently show that new teachers are frequently given the most difficult teaching assignments and are expected to take on more than their fair share of extracurricular activities. The fact that new teachers are untenured and eager to demonstrate their competence makes them vulnerable to exploitation. A few participants reported that their administrators deliberately attempted to disrupt the status quo by asking experienced staff to take on extra responsibilities so that new teachers would have more manageable teaching assignments. This is the kind of leadership that is required at the school and district levels to change attitudes that justify poor working conditions for new teachers. Also needed are policies limiting the extent to which new teachers can be involved in extracurricular activities or assigned other tasks that distract them from what should be their primary focus: learning to teach well.

### *Increase Stability of Practice for New Teachers*

Participants in years three to five were asked to identify the factors that affected the stability of their practice. One important factor was the chance to work in the same school for an extended period of time. Participants who remained at the same school for most of their practice were able to establish relationships that helped them participate more effectively in the school community and gave them the confidence to assume greater leadership roles. Teachers who feel that they belong in the school community tend to have more self-confidence in their early years of practice.

Another factor that contributed to teachers’ sense of stability was having consistent teaching assignments. Although some participants stated that experiencing frequent changes made them more

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<sup>23</sup> Many participants said that they had access to some collaborative time each week, suggesting that schools and districts are making strides in this area.

flexible, most participants preferred to teach the same lessons and units several times so that they could try new approaches and evaluate the results. Working toward mastery also gave them a sense of satisfaction. Overall, having to cope with frequent assignment changes impedes a teacher's ability to refine his or her pedagogical skills. Although teachers who are preoccupied with learning new curricula and finding new resources may develop the skills and strategies necessary to carry out the basics, they will likely have little time or energy left over to refine their pedagogy. In short, frequent changes can keep early-career teachers trapped at a basic or foundational level of practice and prevent them from embarking on activities that foster long-term professional growth.

District hiring policies and the autonomy that some administrators have to hire and release untenured teachers without giving reasons can create a situation in which early-career teachers are shunted from school to school. Some may experience years of temporary, insecure employment. School boards often turn to this supply of untenured novices when they are looking to replace tenured teachers who are on maternity or sick leave.

### How Districts Can Reduce Career Instability for Beginning Teachers

- Improve the supports and protections available to temporary teachers.
- Ensure that hiring practices are fair and transparent.
- Ensure that evaluations and feedback provided to new teachers focus on helping them obtain a continuous contract or at least understand why they have been denied tenure.
- Provide schools with incentives to invest in the learning of early-career, untenured teachers.
- Coordinate assignments at the district level so that new teachers get similar teaching assignments in consecutive years, even if they are at different schools.

### Maximize Collaborative and Experiential Learning

This study reinforces what the literature has been saying for years: namely, that collaboration and experiential learning are the most effective strategies for helping teachers to grow professionally throughout their careers. Inexplicably, many schools and school districts continue to invest their scarce resources in didactic, decontextualized workshops and conferences that contribute only cursorily to teacher learning and do nothing to foster communities of practice.

Many participants reported, however, that their schools *do* set aside time for collaborative planning and learning—an encouraging trend. Unfortunately, teachers in small, rural schools are much less likely than their urban counterparts to benefit from site-based collaboration because they may have no colleagues teaching the same grade or subject. Some schools have addressed this concern, at least in part, by encouraging teachers to focus on areas of common interest, such as assessment practices or using technology for learning. New teachers can benefit from such opportunities to plan and develop resources with other teachers, even though they may have quite different assignments.

Some districts organize districtwide collaboration days to ensure that teachers have an opportunity to meet colleagues with comparable assignments. In general, participants valued these opportunities to network with like-minded colleagues outside their school. The most effective form of district-level induction appears to be setting aside time and space for teachers to meet and work together.

Although collaboration is enormously effective in helping new teachers to master the curriculum and develop planning skills, it should not be considered a substitute for other forms of professional development, such as mentorship, classroom observation, and evaluations by administrators and peers, all of which help the new teacher to practise and learn pedagogical and classroom-management skills.

## Breaking the Cycle

One question that emerged as the study progressed was the extent to which new teachers recreate, for subsequent generations of teachers, the conditions that they themselves experienced as beginning teachers. In other words, do teachers who experienced isolation as early-career teachers then contribute to cultures of isolation for the teachers who come after them? Likewise, are teachers who had positive experiences more inclined to ensure that their successors experience positive conditions?

Participants' accounts of their own induction experiences and those of newer colleagues provide evidence of both patterns. One participant, for example, who had enjoyed positive collaborative relationships, observed that these experiences had encouraged her to take the initiative in reaching out to a teacher who had been transferred from another school. Another participant, whose school culture was characterized by collegiality, said that she considered it a "given" that she would help a beginning teacher:

*The principal asked me to support the new teacher. That's just the way that the staff is. When I was new to the school, people would be helpful; they'd volunteer information. In my school, teachers swap stuff back and forth.*

Likewise, several participants who had been inducted into cultures of scarcity and self-interest had taken on some of these qualities themselves. Although they may have tried to challenge the status quo initially, they eventually succumbed to a degree of burnout:

*As beginning teachers, we're "yes" people. "Yes I'll do that. Yes I'll be on that committee. Yes, yes, yes." Especially at the beginning when you're scrambling for a contract and a job, you feel like you're in a perpetual job interview, so you're willing, you're willing, you're willing. "I want to do it, I want to do it, I want to do it." But eventually, you get kind of tired. And you get resentful of the people who aren't doing things.*

It is not difficult, in this case, to see the emergence of a pattern: high engagement in the early years followed by a diminishing willingness to "go the extra mile," especially when the teacher perceives that some staff are expected to carry heavier loads than others. By the time they have gained seniority, some teachers may believe that they are justified in cutting back on their involvement in extracurricular activities. Such a pattern is clearly evident in this participant's observations:

*In terms of extracurricular, there's no official expectation, but in a few years I will have paid my dues and I'll not feel bad about stepping back. As a newer teacher, if you're not willing to go that extra mile, they may not keep you, and you want to make yourself look as good as possible.*

Another participant who had experienced isolation in her first years also appears to have accepted such a situation as the norm for new teachers:

*I think it's just a learning curve you have to go through. If you go running for help all the time, you don't look very competent, and if they're partnering you up with someone, it costs them money. It would be nice to have team teaching, but there's probably not enough money. I think you just have to figure it out as you go.*

Although it may be the norm in many schools, the notion that new teachers must pay their dues is, according to the literature, detrimental to the professional growth of new teachers. Yet the very teachers who were on the receiving end of such negative attitudes and practices will, in all likelihood, perpetuate them.

Disturbingly, a number of participants made a determined effort to cast the difficulties that they had experienced in their early years in a positive light. One participant, for example, was assigned a difficult split class in her first year. Although she felt alone and overwhelmed at the time, she nevertheless characterized her first year "as an awesome learning experience ... I am a better

teacher because of that school year.” Although there is likely some truth to the notion that experiencing hardship can accelerate professional growth, participants themselves were somewhat ambivalent about the “no pain, no gain” approach: “I wonder if [hardship] creates a bad teacher because maybe that makes them negative; they get jaded,” mused one participant. “Bitter,” echoed another participant, “you know, cynical.”

Although some participants reproduced, perhaps unconsciously, the unsupportive school culture that they had experienced, many others expressed empathy for their junior colleagues and stated that they were determined to offer new teachers better support than they themselves had received. One participant, for example, noted that he “took a little extra time” to explain the resources he was sharing with a novice. “I didn’t want to just say, ‘Here, copy this and deal with it,’ because I know what it’s like to be on the other end and to just be given a pile [of resources].”

Another participant, who described many instances in which she had helped colleagues, stated that she wanted to “be that person, that teacher, whom people can check in with. ‘Hey, I’m new at the school. Can you help me with this?’ ‘Oh yes, of course.’” This participant and several others took great pleasure in approaching their newer colleagues with offers of help, support and resources. These gestures may be acts of healing and compensation for injuries that they themselves had experienced as novice teachers.

Such attempts by early-career teachers to give better than they got, however encouraging, are unlikely to reverse the prevailing “sink or swim” mentality unless administrators take on the challenge. Here’s how one participant described her administrator’s approach in ensuring that new teachers would have a less stressful teaching load:

*Our administrator rearranged a lot of us who had been in our comfort zones to accommodate the new teachers. She’s saying, “Well we don’t want to put the new teacher in that situation because it’s not fair to them or to the kids.” So, she’s*

*thinking, “Let’s not screw over the new teacher from day one; you guys are used to this, you change.”*

When asked how she felt about such an arrangement, this participant recalled her own difficult early start:

*I get it. She has good reasons for it. I could be fussy and say, “No, I really want to do that.” But what’s my reason? Just because I really want to? That’s not a good reason. If that first-year teacher is going to be in a better situation, and I’m going to be in a slightly worse one. Come on.*

In this case, the administrator persuaded her staff to do things differently than they had been done in the past. In doing so, she challenged the ingrained view that new teachers should be given the heaviest workloads. Because the administrator intervened directly, the school’s norms and practices stand a greater chance of changing permanently than they would if just one teacher had tried to “swim against the current.” Although teachers working alone or in small groups to look out for new teachers may make a difference, such efforts are unlikely to change the prevailing school culture.

### Factors That Perpetuate Harmful Induction Practices

- New teachers want to be recognized as competent and legitimate professionals. As a result, they are afraid to ask for help. They may also worry that their colleagues are too busy to help them.
- New teachers lack tenure and, as a result, are afraid to ask for help and to say “no” to unreasonable expectations. They do not want to “rock the boat.”
- New teachers (like their more-experienced peers) receive little ongoing feedback and few evaluations. As a result, existing practices are seldom challenged.<sup>24</sup>

## Impact of Induction Practices on Teachers Who Stay

*Kids will read on you the attitude you bring into the classroom. If you're having a bad day, if you're stressed, if you're not enjoying your job, the kids will notice. No matter what you're doing, it's not going to be a good environment. If you're coming to work and you're enjoying working with the kids, they are going to pick up on that positive energy.*

The purpose of this study was to explore teacher attrition in Alberta and to determine how induction initiatives could be improved to reduce attrition. In addition to identifying the conditions that cause early-career teachers to leave the profession, the study also examined how these conditions affect teachers who choose to stay. A number of researchers, including Feiman-Nemser (2003) and Glassford and Salinitri (2007), have suggested that difficult induction experiences can inhibit the future professional growth of teachers. Although the current study found no absolute correlation between ineffective induction practices and less-than-optimal professional growth in subsequent years, it nevertheless suggests that induction experiences do have some long-term effects on career development.

The beginning teachers in this study clearly entered the profession with good and positive intentions as, one assumes, did the teachers who preceded them and are now veterans. Yet, participants reported that many of the veteran teachers they encountered had adopted permanently negative attitudes. What experiences

might have dampened these teachers' initial enthusiasm? Many participants reported experiencing a defining moment in their career: the point at which they could still remember what it felt like to be a new teacher but at which they had also started to identify with veteran teachers. Aware of the causes of burnout and fatigue, some participants stated that they had made a deliberate effort to ward off negativity and to avoid taking the path of some of their more cynical colleagues.

As the study progressed, many participants became increasingly concerned about achieving a work-life balance, about continuing to be good teachers while, at the same time, becoming good parents. Participants also became increasingly aware that the pace of their job and their sense of being overwhelmed were not going to diminish. Observing their veteran colleagues, many participants recognized that staying positive in such a climate would be a career-long struggle: "I respect experienced teachers a whole lot more for staying in this career for as long as they have. I find them amazing. I hate modifying my lesson plans to integrate new technology, for example. But these veteran teachers throw themselves into change, and they try their hardest. I respect their enthusiasm and their willingness to learn." Several participants felt that their growth as teachers was inhibited by what they perceived to be their school's lack of support for professional development initiatives. In school cultures characterized by professional isolation, it is easy to see how a motivated and enthusiastic teacher might eventually succumb to professional stagnation. Here's how one participant put it:

*Longevity is hard. If you're coming to a negative school every day, it would be harder for you to grow. You just kind of take on that "it's just me in the school doing my own thing" approach. You're not really doing it together. Even if you are*

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24 In a classic text on organizational learning, Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguish between "single-loop" and "double-loop" learning. Single-loop learning reproduces existing practices, values and assumptions. Double-loop learning, by contrast, shines a light on these existing organizational norms and subjects them to critical inquiry.

*able to grow, your growth as a school is stunted; everyone's just doing their own thing.*

Some participants stated that they were considering leaving the profession or cutting back on their hours because they wanted to focus on their family. However, participants who talked about reducing their FTE or leaving the profession altogether may have been engaging in wishful thinking. (A follow-up study would be required to validate this hypothesis.) Participants were not asked to speculate on what they perceived to be the barriers to making a career change. However, making a career change likely becomes less feasible as teachers take on additional life responsibilities such as marriage and children. Furthermore, many early-career teachers have substantial student loans. Several studies suggest that, faced with the realities just described, many teachers opt to remain in the profession for financial reasons, even if they are unhappy with teaching as a career (OECD 2005; Strong 2005).

On a more positive note, many respondents continued to believe that collegiality and collaboration constitute the ideal environment for professional growth and that establishing meaningful contacts with their colleagues would help them grow professionally. Participants consistently stated, for example, that they wanted more embedded time for collaboration and professional development, more mentorship opportunities and more critical feedback on their classroom practice.

### **Kathleen — I Want to Keep Current**

Kathleen's interest in learning-disabled and socially marginalized youth prompted her to pursue a degree in psychology and sociology and then to work as a community counsellor. Later she became interested in education. Her first practicum placement was in a school with many

high-needs children. She has taught at this school ever since and has never looked back. Kathleen relishes both the challenges and the rewards of working in this community.

Kathleen's mentors taught her to apply her knowledge and skills in meaningful ways. They gave her the skills and the encouragement to grow continually as a teacher through inquiry.

After five years of teaching, Kathleen is concerned that her school is slow to explore new initiatives and that she still has to take the initiative in seeking out opportunities for professional growth. Trying to stay abreast of current research and practice is difficult in an environment that discourages her from doing so.

As much as she loves her students, she feels that she may need to make a change. She wants to be in a place that is challenging and collaborative and where she is supported in her active approach to learning as a teacher. Career-long growth will be hard, she reflects, if she cannot find such an environment. She also realizes that, without that early mentoring in professional learning, she may never have developed the skills required to direct her own professional growth in her beginning years.

## **Are Great Teachers Still Waiting for Jobs?**

Much of the literature on beginning teachers insists that new-teacher attrition rates are high—so high, in fact, as to warrant concerns about shortages in some cases. Other studies, by contrast, warn that teachers are in oversupply. A substantial minority of participants in this five-year study had difficulty obtaining continuing contracts. Teachers who had contracts felt “lucky” and offered anecdotes about friends and colleagues who had not been able to get jobs.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Recent media reports suggest that there is an oversupply of teachers in Ontario and British Columbia. CBC News (2012) notes that “according to the latest numbers from Statistics Canada, for every teaching position open across the country, there are 10 people looking. That makes teaching the most sought after yet unavailable job in Canada.” See also Macdonald (2011).

Although small, the study suggests that less-than-transparent hiring practices in some jurisdictions may prevent motivated and qualified teachers from securing work. Attrition, in other words, may be at least partly attributable to the fact that, after several years of insecure employment, some teachers simply give up on the profession.

### *Accurate Attrition Data Is Difficult to Establish*

Attrition rates are difficult to determine because many variables affect the early-career decisions of teachers. Some teachers, for example, are “pulled” out of teaching because they are enticed by other careers. Others are “pushed” out by unfavourable working conditions or the failure to obtain continuing contracts. Still others leave to have children and never return because they are unable to balance their career and family commitments. Attrition rates may also be confounded by teacher mobility, the tendency of some teachers to exit and then re-enter the profession and a failure to distinguish between true retirees and those who leave teaching relatively early in their careers (Clark and Antonelli 2009; Kersaint et al 2007).

Attrition is also difficult to track and analyze because data for workforce planning are spotty, inconsistent and, in some cases, nonexistent. Classifying and tracking such employment statuses as tenured, fulltime, part-time and casual—to say nothing of the extent to which these statuses are voluntary or imposed—is a challenging task. Furthermore, attrition rates cannot be considered in isolation from other factors that affect hiring and retention, such as maternity leaves, unstable government funding, provincial and district policies,

school hiring practices, labour union contracts, mismatches between teacher supply and the need for teachers who have certain specializations, and a willingness to work in specific geographical locations.<sup>26</sup>

The dearth of accurate data may explain why some studies on teacher induction cite alarmingly high attrition rates. Canadian scholars may be overly reliant on studies from the United States, which do not reflect the Canadian context. Preservice preparation is much more uniform in Canada than in the United States, and Canadian teacher salaries are more attractive. The OECD (2005) has found that both these factors—preservice preparation and salaries—contribute to early-career attrition (Ladd 2007). Caution should be exercised when citing data on early-career attrition without considering the source.<sup>27</sup>

### *Maternity Leaves and Parenting*

As the study progressed and more and more participants took maternity leave, it became increasingly apparent that parenting and the associated dynamics of young family life play a significant role in the experiences of new teachers. Almost half of the participants who remained insecurely employed (that is, those on temporary contracts and/or those substitute teaching) were parents of young children. For female teachers planning to have a family, obtaining a continuing contract is important because it ensures that they will have a financially secure maternity leave and a position to return to. Some teachers who have children return to full-time work and find ways of balancing their careers and family lives. Others find that they are unable to re-enter the profession in any meaningful way after having children.

26 For policy issues related to teacher workforce planning, see Clark and Antonelli (2009); Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003); and Payzant (2004). Alberta Education (2010a; 2012) also recognizes that teacher labour supply is affected by geography. Generally, sparsely populated regions have greater difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers. Urban schools serving high-needs families also have difficulty retaining a stable staff complement.

27 Harris and Adams (2007), Wilson et al (2004), and Boe, Cook and Sunderland (2008) have all noted concerns about the methodologies and analyses employed in studies of teacher attrition.

Two issues about early-career teachers who are parents invite further investigation. First, several participants who were parents noted that a job-share arrangement or a part-time position would enable them to return to teaching. Unfortunately, such opportunities were not available in their districts. Districts that are concerned about teacher shortages should, perhaps, investigate whether competent teachers are being shut out of the workforce due to inflexible or short-sighted hiring practices. Parents have important strengths to offer a school community. They are likely to be engaged in the communities in which they are raising their own children. Furthermore, they may be more empathetic and confident in working with the parents of their students. A job-sharing arrangement could bring two part-time teachers together in a productive, collaborative relationship and relieve the stress that they might otherwise feel about neglecting their families for their careers.

Second, none of the female participants who were untenured when they had children were able to return to work in any meaningful way. Although these participants constitute only 5 per cent of the original sample, the similarity of their experience suggests that maternity as a “career sinker” for untenured teachers may be a more widespread phenomenon. As noted earlier, aspiring teachers may have some misconceptions about the security of teaching and its compatibility with family life.

In short, districts that are concerned about teacher shortages and teacher attrition should investigate whether their hiring practices may be preventing well-qualified teachers who live in the area and who have young children from returning to work.

## The Challenges of Implementing an Induction Program

If nothing else, this study has demonstrated that no one “recipe”—no one set of policies imposed

from above—exists for developing effective teacher induction and retention programs. What new teachers experience depends to a great extent on their individual personalities and the school communities they enter—two variables that cannot be controlled or predicted when implementing induction programs. Much of the contemporary policy literature argues that standardization is a good thing. However, attempting to standardize induction program will never produce consistent results because schools are complex, open systems that cannot and will not produce fully standardized outcomes.

At the same time, the study confirms what the literature suggests are the elements of effective induction programs: the availability of trained mentors, opportunities built in to the school day to collaborate with colleagues and strong support from administrators. The presence of such elements will almost certainly improve teachers’ well-being and quality of learning in their early years.

Although *what* an effective induction program should contain is relatively straightforward, the real challenge is knowing *how* to implement such programs. In fact, the study suggests that learning for new teachers should be thought of less as a “program” than as an ongoing set of practices built in to the school culture to help new teachers move as seamlessly as possible from mastering the basics of teaching practice to embarking on a journey of continuing professional growth.

Support for new teachers must take into account the complex nature of today’s school–communities and the social and political realities in which they are embedded. These realities include budgetary constraints, the structure of the school day and year, hiring practices and the characteristics of the school population being served. Figure 12 suggests that well-intentioned efforts to implement reliable induction practices will likely remain hit and miss unless players at all levels in the system offer support and understand the interrelationships of their respective actions. Attempting to provide induction for new teachers without considering other support initiatives that may already be in place will likely

result in a program that is perceived as operating apart from the system as a whole. Inevitably, the consequences of failing to take into account the broader systems will be felt most acutely at the school level.

## Looking Ahead

This study suggests that the past five years have been a time of great promise for new teachers in Alberta. Unfortunately, the same period has also, in

the words of one participant, been a “rollercoaster ride of hope and frustration.” Despite the stability promised by the five-year labour agreement that teachers reached with the government in 2007, the worklives of many new teachers have been ambiguous, uncertain and unstable. The long-term framework agreement between teachers and the government now in place promises more stability in the years ahead.

To take a broader perspective, the forces that shaped the experiences of participants in this study

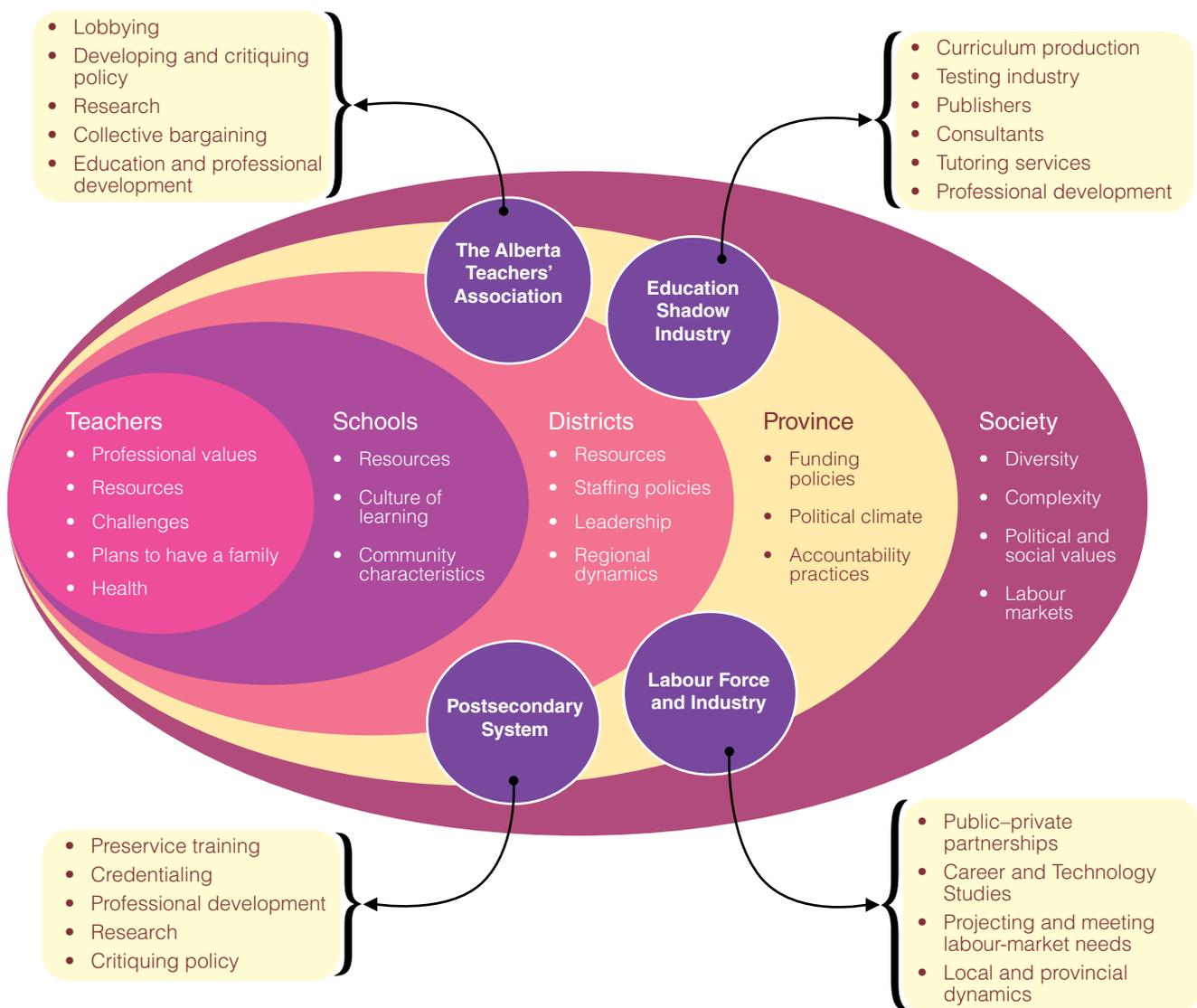


Figure 12: Beginning Teacher Induction and Retention: A Systems Perspective

were also at play for the teaching population in general. In a recent study, Duxbury (2013) found that the average teacher in Alberta works 56 hours a week, the equivalent of almost two days a week of unpaid time. She also found that 32 per cent of Alberta teachers believe that they have little control over their worklives and that 72 per cent have difficulty balancing the competing demands of their working and personal lives. Duxbury suggests that one reason that teachers are experiencing a decline in their professional autonomy is that they are seldom consulted about the acquisition of new technologies, especially those used to track and report on student progress.

These trends are symptomatic of what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) call the “business capital” approach to school reform, an approach that focuses on standardization, compliance, school choice, market-based competition and technology. An alternative, according to Hargreaves and Fullan, is to focus on developing the professional capital of teachers, which, they argue, takes place in three domains: human, social and decisional. *Human* capital has to do with building on the individual talents and qualities that teachers possess as they enter the profession after graduating from one of the high-quality teacher-preparation programs available in Canada. As this study has shown, the

human capital of new teachers is best sustained and supported by fostering the development of vibrant communities of practice among teachers. Hargreaves and Fullan argue that such communities enable teachers to develop what they call *social* capital. By working together to enhance their professional practice, teachers also learn to make professional decisions in increasingly complex circumstances, thereby acquiring what Hargreaves and Fullan define as *decisional* capital.

This study has demonstrated that creating a culture that builds social capital also enhances the human capital of all teachers, not just those in the early years of practice. By developing human, social and decisional capital, teachers achieve what Hargreaves and Fullan call *collaborative professional autonomy*, a collective outlook that may help them cope with the increasing uncertainty and complexity of their jobs.

If this study has demonstrated anything, it is that new teachers are not a homogenous group that simply needs to be acculturated into the status quo. In supporting new teachers, education partners must guard against creating a better version of yesterday. Their goal, instead, should be to listen carefully to the voices of new teachers who not only share our collective hope for the future but will soon be helping to shape the next generation of teachers.

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