

## New Teachers Identify Teacher Leaders as Key Support for Transition into the Profession

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### Abstract

Through an analysis of 289 open-ended survey responses, this study examines how teacher leaders support new teachers transitioning from teacher preparation programs to full-time teaching positions. An analysis of the responses revealed that teacher leaders support new teachers with instructional planning, professional learning, mentorship, resource sharing, assessment guidance, and inclusive teaching strategies. Through these efforts, teacher leaders foster collaborative and reflective practices, cultivate professional capital, and promote adaptive expertise. The findings emphasize the relational nature of teacher leadership, highlighting the role of teacher leaders in co-constructing professional growth and resilience among new teachers and enhancing teacher development. Implications for policy and practice include prioritizing teacher leadership initiatives to reduce new teacher attrition, promote equity, and foster sustainable professional cultures within schools.

### Résumé

En se fondant sur l'analyse de 289 réponses à un sondage à questions ouvertes, cette étude examine comment les enseignants leaders aident les nouveaux enseignants dans leur transition à partir de programmes de formation jusqu'à des postes d'enseignement à temps plein. L'analyse des réponses révèle que les enseignants leaders sou-

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tiennent les nouveaux enseignants dans la planification pédagogique, l'apprentissage professionnel, le mentorat, le partage de ressources, l'orientation en matière d'évaluation, et les stratégies d'enseignement inclusives. Grâce à leur soutien, les enseignants leaders favorisent des pratiques collaboratives et réflexives, augmentent le capital professionnel, et développent une expertise dans l'adaptation. Les résultats soulignent la nature relationnelle du leadership des enseignants, mettant en évidence le rôle des enseignants leaders dans la co-construction du développement professionnel et de la résilience des nouveaux enseignants, ainsi que dans l'amélioration du développement des enseignants. Les implications pour les politiques et les pratiques comprennent la priorisation des initiatives de leadership des enseignants afin de réduire l'attrition des nouveaux enseignants, de promouvoir l'équité, et de favoriser des cultures professionnelles durables au sein des écoles.

**Keywords / Mots clés :** teacher leadership, new teachers, professional learning, professional development, mentorship / leadership des enseignants, nouveaux enseignants, apprentissage professionnel, développement professionnel, mentorat

## Introduction

The transition for new teachers from initial teacher preparation programs to full-time teaching is marked by numerous challenges, opportunities, and moments of profound growth. This transition is not merely a period of adjustment; it is a continuous process of constructing and reconstructing professional identity, pedagogical skill, and relational practice. New teachers are entering the profession at a time when there are widespread teacher shortages (UNESCO, 2024). There is also a rise in teacher turnover and departures are higher for beginning teachers (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2018). Moreover, the classroom, with its dynamic interactions, curriculum demands, and diverse student needs, becomes a site of complexity that can be both invigorating and overwhelming for new teachers.

Teacher leaders in schools are uniquely positioned to serve as mentors and provide support for new teachers as they transition into the profession. As both sense-makers and boundary spanners, teacher leaders can help new teachers interpret what some experience as a dissonance between their initial teacher education and the lived realities of teaching practice (Anthony, Gimbert, Luke & Hurt, 2019; Maready, Cheng, & Bunch, 2021; Wenner & Campbell, 2016). Beyond merely providing instructional advice, teacher leaders can foster a culture of collaborative inquiry, equity, and adaptive expertise. In doing so, teacher leaders create spaces where new teachers can engage in critical reflective practice, develop resilience, and cultivate inclusive pedagogy that honours the diverse identities and needs of their students (Anthony et al., 2019; Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2021; Lopez, 2015; Maready et al., 2021). This study explores the role that teacher leaders play in supporting new teachers.

## Research question

Given the increasing concerns about teacher shortages and retention (UNESCO, 2024) and the challenges new teachers face in transitioning from preservice prepa-

ration to full-time classroom teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2018), this study explores how school-based teacher leaders can meaningfully support the professional growth and instructional development of new teachers. By examining the relational work of teacher leaders, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how schools can foster professional capital and collaborative cultures of learning (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). It highlights the importance of teacher leaders not just as providers of support, but as co-creators of professional environments that shape teacher development, student success, and the broader goals of public education (Anthony et al., 2019). This study addressed the research question: How do teacher leaders support the professional development and instructional growth of new teachers? By exploring this question through the lens of new teachers' reflections on their experiences, this study sheds light on the practices, strategies, and relational dynamics that define teacher leadership and its impact on novice teacher development. This exploration is an invitation to consider how shared leadership, learning, and community intersect to create the conditions where new teachers cannot only survive but thrive.

## **Review of literature**

This selected literature review examines the key dimensions of teacher leadership, exploring how teacher leaders navigate complexity, foster adaptive expertise, and create relational scaffolding for new teachers. To situate the study within existing scholarship, the literature review is organized into four sections: teacher leadership, instructional leadership, transition period, and collective responsibility. Each of these sections offers a lens to understand how teacher leaders can support the professional growth and instructional development of new teachers as they transition into the profession.

### ***Teacher leadership: Navigating complexity and cultivating equity***

Teacher leadership is not merely a function or position; in contemporary schools, it is a dynamic and relational practice embedded within the contextual fabric of educational communities. Nguyen, Harris, and Ng (2020) describe teacher leadership within and beyond the classroom and took an integrated view of teaching and leadership, a process of influence through collaboration. Similarly, Anthony et al. (2019) and Wenner and Campbell (2016) suggest that teacher leadership resists static definitions. Instead, it unfolds through interactions and relationships that shape—and are shaped by—the professional community (Comstock, Supovitz, & Kaul, 2021). In these relational spaces, teacher leaders become sense-makers and boundary spanners (Porter, Phillips, Stallings, & Worsley, 2025), supporting new teachers as they make the transition from being a student in a teacher preparation program to becoming a practicing teacher in a school and responsible for navigating the complexities of classroom practice, curriculum expectations, and student engagement (Anthony et al., 2019; Maready et al., 2021).

Beyond instructional support, teacher leaders act as equity advocates, fostering environments where justice and inclusion are central to educational practice. Anthony et al. (2019) calls for teacher leaders to address systemic inequities by helping new teachers recognize and dismantle biases within their classrooms. This critical

work is rooted in a commitment to culturally responsive and socially just pedagogy. Maready et al. (2021) argue that mentoring new teachers toward culturally responsive practices involves not just instructional strategies but also co-constructing learning pathways that honour diverse student identities and histories.

In today's rapidly changing educational landscape, adaptive expertise is a hallmark of effective teacher leadership. Hatano and Inagaki (1986) originally conceptualized adaptive expertise as the ability to innovate and transfer knowledge to new contexts, distinguishing it from routine expertise, which relies on efficiency within familiar conditions. Building on this foundational work, Bransford and Schwartz (1999) emphasize the importance of flexibility and deep understanding in navigating complex and evolving environments, qualities essential for teachers in contemporary classrooms. Timperley, Ell, and Le Fevre (2018) further extend this idea, framing adaptive expertise as the capacity to respond thoughtfully to unexpected challenges—a quality that teacher leaders strive to exemplify and cultivate in new teachers.

This adaptability is particularly crucial during periods of disruption or transition. Anthony et al. (2019) illustrate how teacher leaders guided new teachers through moments of uncertainty, such as the shift to remote learning that occurred during a global health crisis, by embracing a practice of co-discovery and mutual growth. Anthony, Hunter, and Hunter (2015) argue that adaptive expertise thrives within collaborative spaces where teachers engage in reflective inquiry, enabling them to co-create solutions to unprecedented challenges. These acts of adaptation are not merely pragmatic; they are relational and reflective, fostering resilience and innovation among new teachers as they transition into the profession.

### ***Instructional leadership: Relational scaffolding and inquiry-in-action***

When enacted by teacher leaders, instructional leadership becomes a relational and inquiry-based practice that supports new teachers through scaffolding, feedback, and collaboration. Klein, Taylor, Munakata, Trabona, Rahman, and McManus (2018) contended that distributed instructional leadership has the potential to provide collaborative relational support, allowing new teachers to deeply engage with instructional challenges. Wronowski, VanGronigen, Henry, and Olive (2024) argue that teacher leadership evolved through three waves, from managerial, to technocratic, to collaborative. This evolution underscores the growing recognition that teacher leaders are key agents in creating “systemic cultural changes required for sustained school improvement” (Wronowski et al., 2024, p. 452). The shift to collaborative leadership represents a culmination of earlier waves, moving beyond hierarchical control to embrace relational and reflective practices that prioritize professional growth and shared inquiry.

Hargreaves and O'Connor (2018) add that collaborative professionalism, rooted in shared responsibility and inquiry-based practices, can transform professional cultures in schools. This is particularly true for new teachers. Similarly, Leithwood, Sun, and Schumacker (2020) emphasize the importance of leadership practices that build trust, which are required to foster mentorship, aligning with the notion of inquiry-in-action. Timperley et al. (2018) further highlight the value of adaptive expertise in leadership, where teacher leaders guide new teachers in navigating the complex-

ities of teaching through iterative cycles of reflection and action. In this sense, instructional leadership is not prescriptive; it is dialogic and reflective, co-created through continuous interactions (Aas & Paulsen, 2019). Together, these perspectives underline the importance of relational and inquiry-based instructional leadership in shaping supportive and growth-oriented environments for new teachers.

### ***Transition period: New teachers constructing their identity***

For new teachers, entering the profession is a journey of constructing and reconstructing professional identity. Ingersoll et al. (2018) describe this transition as a period marked by both vulnerability and potential. In this journey, teacher leaders act as navigators and emotional anchors, helping new teachers make sense of the inevitable dissonance between their pre-service expectations and the lived realities of classroom teaching (Anthony et al., 2019). The role of emotional attunement in teacher leadership cannot be overstated. Teacher leaders provide not only instructional support but also emotional sustenance, offering stability amidst the uncertainties of early teaching (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Myers & Anderson, 2012; Squires, 2019). Isensee (2017) extends this idea, highlighting that teacher leaders, who acknowledge and respond to the emotional complexities of teaching, can help foster resilience among colleagues.

Teaching is a profession that involves a heavy workload (Beck, 2018) and this can impact a teacher's health, wellbeing, and attrition (Creagh, Thompson, Mockler, Stacey, & Hogan, 2023). Mentoring, such as pairing a new teacher with a teacher leader in a school, is a type of support perceived as helpful by new teachers particularly when the mentorship is frequent and supports planning lessons, analyzing samples of student work, using student assessment data, and supports using appropriate pedagogical strategies (Chaney, Braun, & Jenkins, 2020). Effective mentorship involves navigating the intersections of identity, pedagogy, and practice (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Myers & Anderson, 2012). Teacher leaders also engage in dialogic mentorship, where learning is co-constructed and culturally situated (Anthony et al., 2019). Squires (2019) and Maready et al. (2021) emphasize that individualized mentorship reduces anxiety and burnout by addressing the specific needs of new teachers, while Desimone and Pak (2017) highlight the power of active learning when it is built into the instructional coaching. By engaging in relational, dialogic, and active learning practices, teacher leaders foster resilience and professional growth, enabling new teachers to develop their identity and navigate the complexities of early teaching, including heavy workload (Beck, 2018; Creagh et al., 2023).

### ***Collective responsibility and collaborative spaces***

Zhu, Liao, Yam, and Johnson (2018) highlight how shared leadership creates a culture of collective responsibility. Shared leadership reflects a belief in the collective wisdom and agency of teachers (Angelle & Teague, 2014; Friesen & Brown 2022; Webber, Nickel, Hamilton, & Braunberger, 2024). Shared leadership has been conceptualized in various ways; however, Zhu et al. (2018) contend that across the different conceptualizations three key commonalities exist: 1) shared leadership is about lateral influence among peers, 2) shared leadership is an emergent team phenome-

non, and 3) leadership roles and influence are dispersed across team members. Brown and Friesen (2023) argue that shared leadership enhances collective efficacy by facilitating collaborative spaces where teacher leaders and new teachers engage in sense-making and problem-solving. These spaces often take the form of professional learning communities (PLCs), which become sites for collaborative inquiry and reflective dialogue (Wenger-Trayner, Wenger-Trayner, Reid, & Bruderlein, 2023). Wenger-Trayner et al. (2023) further emphasize that PLCs enable boundary-crossing conversations, where diverse perspectives contribute to innovative and equitable practices. Through these processes, new teachers experience leadership as relational, recursive, and co-constructed. This sense of collective responsibility is crucial for supporting new teachers as they develop their instructional practices.

## Methods

This study draws from a larger design-based research (DBR) study that investigated the experiences of new teachers participating in a professional learning series for beginning teachers. In parallel, teacher leaders participated in a separately scheduled professional learning series for teacher leaders designed to enhance their own practice and develop their ability to lead the learning of their colleagues, including new teachers in their respective schools. The professional learning series for both groups was organized by a design team comprised of university researchers, district leaders, and professional learning consultants. Design-based research is characterized by iterative cycles of design, implementation, analysis, and refinement (Easterday, Rees Lewis, & Gerber, 2017; McKenney & Reeves, 2019) and informed the professional learning. The larger study was conducted in five iterative cycles, during which professional learning supports were developed, implemented, and refined based on ongoing feedback from new teachers (Brown, Friesen, Beck, & Roberts, 2020). Each cycle informed the next, allowing for continuous improvement of the professional learning supports provided.

The professional learning series for new teachers that took place during this study focused on areas outlined in the Alberta Teaching Quality Standard (TQS; Alberta Education, 2023). This standard articulates six competencies that all teachers must meet. These competencies serve as the foundation for effective teaching practice and professional growth. The professional learning series supported new teachers in the following six areas:

1. Fostering effective relationships: developing the capacity to build respectful, caring, and professional relationships with students, colleagues, parents, and community members.
2. Engaging in career-long learning: cultivating a commitment to continuous professional growth through reflection, collaboration, and engagement with research-informed practices.
3. Demonstrating a professional body of knowledge: strengthening subject-area expertise, instructional planning, and the use of evidence-based teaching strategies to support student learning.
4. Establishing inclusive learning environments: learning to create safe, welcoming, and inclusive classrooms that recognize and address the diverse needs of all students.

5. Applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit: understanding and integrating Indigenous perspectives, histories, and ways of knowing into teaching practice, in alignment with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.
6. Adhering to legal and ethical frameworks: developing an understanding of teachers' legal, ethical, and professional responsibilities to protect student welfare and uphold the integrity of the profession.

The professional learning series aimed to provide new teachers with practical strategies and relational support intended to help navigate the complexities of classroom teaching while developing confidence and competence in meeting the expectations of the Alberta TQS. In this article, the authors focus on open-ended survey responses analyzed from the larger study in Alberta (Brown et al., 2020). The open-ended responses provided by new teachers offered insights into the relational work of teacher leaders and the diverse ways they support new teachers. The following open-text survey question was administered to new teachers at the end of the series: What role do the teacher leaders at your school play in supporting your development and understanding of effective teaching practices? The responses provided a rich data set of detailed, personal reflections, and insights identifying teacher leader support.

## Participants

Participants in this study were new teachers ( $N = 289$ ) in Alberta who also participated in the larger design-based study. These new teachers worked in a variety of school settings, within a large metro school district, and represented all subject areas and grade levels (elementary, middle, and high schools). All participants were part of a professional learning initiative for new teachers aimed at enhancing teacher induction and development.

## Data analysis

First and second cycle coding were conducted using Saldaña's (2021) qualitative coding manual. In the first cycle of coding, the authors used an open approach to initial coding employing an in vivo process and noted that elements of the participant's responses helped form a category. This initial coding provided codes that were continuously re-worded and reorganized into categories as the synthesis progressed in the second cycle. Frequencies were determined based on the number of individual participants who mentioned a particular category. The categories represented codes that were noted most frequently in the participant responses (63–93%). These two cycles of coding informed the six themes and the organization of the results provided in the next section: instructional support, professional capital, mentorship and guidance, resource sharing, assessment guidance, and support for inclusion and differentiation.

## Results

The following sections explore in detail the specific ways in which teacher leaders supported new teachers according to their survey responses. In presenting these results, quotations that best encapsulate the collective experiences and sentiments of the new teachers were selected. While each quotation reflects the voice of an indi-

vidual, these selected statements are representative of the broader patterns observed in the data. Each quotation was chosen because it succinctly conveys the shared perspectives of the new teachers who identified specific areas of support provided by teacher leaders in their respective schools. These statements serve as touchpoints for the common themes that emerged, providing insight about how teacher leaders support the professional development and instructional growth of new teachers.

### ***Instructional support***

Teacher leaders played a key role in providing instructional support, focusing on instructional planning and co-teaching, and offering feedback on curriculum alignment. Most participants (93%,  $n = 268$ ) identified this type of support helped new teachers navigate the demands of the classroom while aligning their practices with curriculum goals and student needs. The survey responses indicated that teacher leaders engaged in co-planning with first-year teachers, working collaboratively on lesson design and instructional strategies that best support student engagement and learning. New teachers appreciated on-site support, with one respondent sharing, “My teacher leader co-plans with me in my classroom. It has allowed me to further my understanding of the program of studies and how to best support struggling students.” This respondent’s statement succinctly captures the sentiment of 93 percent ( $n = 268$ ) of the new teachers who expressed this on-site and collaborative approach to instructional planning not only helped new teachers develop a more comprehensive understanding of the curriculum but also provided an opportunity for immediate feedback and improvement.

In addition to lesson planning, teacher leaders provided new teachers with feedback on curriculum implementation, helping new teachers to align their instructional approaches with curricular objectives. A new teacher expressed the value of this support, stating, “Supporting me in my abilities to understand and apply the curriculum in a way that suits the best needs for my students.” New teachers found feedback from teacher leaders crucial as they worked to adapt their practices to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Another notable aspect of instructional support was the daily interactions between teacher leaders and new teachers, which facilitated ongoing learning and adaptation. One teacher highlighted the benefit of these regular meetings, saying, “We meet daily to discuss lessons taught and support each other with tools and feedback for next steps and ways that we can best benefit our students.” New teachers stated that this frequent and consistent guidance and reflection was essential for refining their approaches and contributing to their professional growth and student success.

### ***Build professional capital through professional learning and development and professional learning communities***

Analysis of the survey responses indicated that 84 percent ( $n = 243$ ) of new teachers indicated that teacher leaders helped them build professional capital by leading professional learning sessions and structuring PLCs, where they could engage in meaningful dialogue, reflect on their practices, and collaboratively improve their teaching skills. Teacher leaders played a substantial role in organizing and leading professional

learning sessions tailored to the unique needs of new teachers. A participant noted, “They [teacher leaders] provide new teachers with resources and support in teaching and learning. They also hold lunch and learns and provide PD at staff meetings.” These sessions offered a learning environment where new teachers could acquire skills, deepen their understanding of effective instructional strategies, and build the competencies needed to thrive in the classroom.

The survey responses suggested that the professional learning provided by teacher leaders was instrumental in helping new teachers develop the knowledge and skills aligned with the school district’s goals for student success and personalized learning. This alignment ensured that professional learning activities were purposeful, directly relevant to classroom practice, and closely aligned to the school goals and priorities. One new teacher noted,

Teacher leaders at our school help lead professional development as well as take a role in facilitating our school development plan. Most of the professional learning aligns with the school development plan and therefore makes our goals front of mind throughout the year.

Another new teacher reinforced this perspective, stating, “The professional learning they organize connects directly with what we’re working on in our classrooms, making it easier to apply what we’re learning to improve student outcomes.” These reflections demonstrate how teacher leaders’ alignment with school-wide goals helped maintain consistency and direction across the school and fostered meaningful professional learning that could be applied in the classroom.

Teacher leaders encouraged new teachers to apply what they learned in professional learning sessions by incorporating strategies into their daily practices. By linking theory to practice, teacher leaders ensured that professional learning had a tangible impact on new teachers’ work with students. For example, one teacher explained, “The teacher leaders bring back activities and tools from their own learning sessions and give us time to try out new concepts, such as task design or formative assessment techniques.” Another shared, “Our teacher leaders make it a point to create openings for collaboration, which allows me to try new things in my practice and reimagine how I might approach certain lessons.” These responses highlight the practical application of professional learning, where teachers could experiment with new approaches, refining their teaching in real time.

Professional learning communities provided an essential space for new teachers to connect with more experienced colleagues, engage in reflective practices, and collectively problem-solve instructional challenges. By structuring and facilitating these communities, teacher leaders enabled teachers to build their professional capital through ongoing collaborative learning. Teacher leaders took on a leadership role within PLCs, guiding discussions, sharing insights, and keeping the focus aligned with school-wide goals. This structured approach to PLCs allowed new teachers to reflect on their practices within a supportive group. As one new teacher observed, “Our teacher leaders are present for our PLC meetings every other week and guide us to better our teaching practice.” Another commented, “The teacher leaders support our individual development through allowing us time and opportunity to work with colleagues to build tasks and effective assessments. This collaborative time is

invaluable in improving our practice.” These responses highlight how teacher leaders facilitated a reflective, collaborative environment where teachers could learn from one another.

Encouraging reflective practice was a significant focus within PLCs led by teacher leaders, as they emphasized the importance of examining instructional decisions and assessing their effectiveness. This approach allowed new teachers to engage in continuous improvement, supported by insights from their peers and teacher leaders. A new teacher described this benefit, saying, “We use PLCs to reflect on how our lessons are going and to discuss how we can make improvements. My teacher leader is always there to guide these conversations and help us focus on ways to enhance our effectiveness.” Another new teacher valued the open nature of these discussions, sharing, “I find that I can discuss my challenges openly in PLCs, and our teacher leader helps steer the conversation toward solutions that align with best practices.” By fostering an environment of reflection, teacher leaders empowered new teachers to critically assess and refine their teaching practices.

Beyond reflective practice, PLCs provided a collaborative space where new teachers could address common challenges and share successful strategies. Teacher leaders promoted this collaborative approach, encouraging a sense of shared responsibility for student outcomes and professional growth. A new teacher noted the collaborative spirit fostered by PLCs, saying, “Teacher leaders at our school usually lead the PLCs and guide collaborative work, which is incredibly helpful for us as new teachers because it feels like we’re all working together towards the same goals.” Another new teacher emphasized the value of sharing student work, explaining, “Our teacher leaders encourage us to bring examples of student work to PLCs so we can discuss what’s working and what might need improvement. It’s a great way to learn from each other and refine our teaching methods.” These insights demonstrate how PLCs led by teacher leaders supported collaborative problem-solving, allowing teachers to gain insights from each other and improve their practices collectively.

Through consistent PLC involvement, teacher leaders helped establish a culture of accountability and shared learning. By setting expectations for reflective practice and collaboration, teacher leaders reinforced the importance of professional growth as a collective responsibility. One new teacher described this collective commitment, stating, “The PLCs often revolve around examining our teaching practices, and our teacher leaders ensure that we’re all committed to improving our approach. This shared accountability keeps us focused on making progress together.” Another new teacher echoed this sentiment, noting, “Having our teacher leader in PLCs to guide and support us makes a big difference. We know that we’re expected to keep learning and growing, and they’re there to provide the support we need.” These responses illustrate how new teachers recognized that teacher leaders cultivated a professional culture where they felt supported in their growth, with shared goals for continuous improvement.

### ***Mentorship and guidance***

Teacher leaders served as mentors, offering both practical advice and emotional support that helped new teachers as they transitioned into becoming teachers. For many new teachers (73%,  $n = 212$ ), the mentorship provided by teacher leaders extended

beyond instructional strategies to include one-on-one support and individualized guidance. New teachers felt that having a mentor was critical to their development, as one respondent noted, “My grade team teacher leader is also my mentor, so I regularly meet with her to discuss and brainstorm my planning and assessment practices.” This regular interaction allowed new teachers to explore ideas, seek clarification, and develop personalized teaching strategies in a safe, supportive environment.

In addition to mentoring, teacher leaders sometimes modeled effective teaching practices in the classroom, allowing new teachers to observe and emulate these strategies. One new teacher shared, “They often come into my classroom and model teaching and unit planning,” which provided invaluable insights into effective lesson delivery and classroom management. Another respondent highlighted the benefit of this hands-on guidance, saying, “When invited into the classroom, they model best practices and alternative solutions and strategies.” New teachers reported that these in-class demonstrations provided them with concrete examples of successful teaching methods, helping them build confidence and refine their instructional techniques.

New teachers appreciated how teacher leaders were approachable and supported colleagues, as noted in the survey responses, such as the following comment, “Our teacher leaders are very approachable and helpful when it comes to supporting other teachers with effective teaching practices.” Through personalized mentorship, in-class modelling, and instructional support, teacher leaders helped new teachers develop effective teaching practices and navigate the complexities of the classroom. This result is consistent with Desimone and Pak (2017), who found that instructional coaching supports teacher learning when it connects theory with practice in authentic, classroom-based contexts. According to the new teachers in this study, this mentorship helped build the resilience and skills necessary for successfully transitioning into a teaching career.

### ***Resource sharing***

Teacher leaders facilitated resource sharing, providing new teachers with valuable materials and connecting them to specialized supports. In the survey, new teachers (73%,  $n = 212$ ) indicated teacher leaders played a crucial role in providing them with instructional materials, such as assessment tools, planning templates, and other teaching resources. One respondent summed up the benefit of this support, sharing, “Teacher leaders share their insights and knowledge from the sessions they attend. They share resources and ideas pertaining to our school development plan.” By sharing resources aligned with the school’s development goals, teacher leaders ensured that new teachers had access to tools that would directly support their teaching and align with broader school priorities.

Additionally, teacher leaders connected new teachers to specialized resources that supported diverse student needs, such as resources for students learning the English language and supports for students with exceptional needs. One teacher aptly described this aspect of resource sharing, noting, “Teacher leaders are supposed to support you in accessing resources for your students. They connect us with different organizations which aid in the development of curriculum and lesson

planning strategies.” This access to specialized resources enabled new teachers to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. Regular resource sharing also fostered a collaborative culture within schools, where teachers could share materials and ideas to enhance each other’s practice. New teachers commented on the collaborative nature of resource sharing, saying, “Our teacher leaders are always available for support and willing to provide/share resources.” This quotation reflects the collective experience of the first-year teachers (73%,  $n = 212$ ) who commented on the benefits of this open approach to sharing. This open approach to sharing contributed to a sense of community and collective growth among new teachers, particularly benefiting new teachers who were at the beginning stages of building their resource libraries.

### **Assessment guidance**

Teacher leaders played an instrumental role in helping new teachers design and implement effective assessment practices. Teacher leaders offered essential guidance in assessment design and collaborative assessment practices, helping new teachers develop their assessment literacy and align their grading practices with school standards. This support in assessment enabled first-year teachers (68%,  $n = 197$ ) to improve their ability to evaluate student learning and enhance their overall teaching effectiveness. Many new teachers appreciated the assistance they received in creating rubrics, calibrating marking standards, and developing consistent assessment criteria. One of the respondents summed up the new teachers’ appreciation emphasizing this support, stating, “With my teacher leader as a guide, my department has collaborated to develop consistent joint rubrics and to calibrate our marking.” This collaboration ensured that new teachers were provided with guidance for assessing students fairly and consistently.

In addition to rubric development, teacher leaders encouraged collaborative assessment practices, creating opportunities for teachers to reflect on their methods and improve through peer feedback. This approach was highly valued by new teachers, who appreciated the opportunity to learn with and from their colleagues. One new teacher captured the collective sentiment, stating, “We are given release time to go and provide feedback to other teachers and get feedback from other teachers. This helps us reflect and recognize our next steps and keeps us accountable.” This collaborative approach provided new teachers with a supportive and reflective environment to refine their assessment skills, enhance their practices, and ensure alignment with their colleagues’ standards.

The consistent guidance provided by teacher leaders in assessment also included support with specialized assessment needs, such as the use of individualized program plans (IPPs) for students with diverse needs. As one teacher noted, “My teacher leaders at my school provide support by being available, helping with IPPs, and assessment.” This specialized support ensured that new teachers were equipped to assess students with diverse learning needs effectively, and to promote equitable learning outcomes for all students. The assessment guidance provided by teacher leaders was invaluable for first-year teachers, offering essential support in designing rubrics, aligning grading practices, and meeting diverse assessment needs.

### ***Support for inclusion and differentiation***

Teacher leaders played a critical role in guiding new teachers (63%,  $n = 182$ ) as they developed strategies for differentiated instruction, accommodations for English language learners, and culturally responsive teaching. This finding is consistent with Lopez (2015), who stresses the importance of culturally responsive leadership and teacher guidance in promoting inclusive classrooms. Teacher leaders provided valuable guidance on inclusive teaching strategies, helping first-year teachers learn how to differentiate instruction and accommodate students with a variety of needs. A teacher expressed appreciation for this support, saying, “Teacher leaders in my school are a valuable resource in supporting the development of inclusion within my classroom.” By offering practical strategies and resources, teacher leaders empowered new teachers to adapt their lessons to meet the unique needs of each student, fostering a sense of belonging and engagement in the classroom.

In addition to general inclusion strategies, teacher leaders helped teachers incorporate specific supports for students who required additional assistance, such as technology for students with literacy challenges. This specialized support was instrumental in enabling new teachers to tailor their approach to individual learners. One teacher highlighted this support, noting, “My teacher leaders right now are helping to support my students with reading supports and with technology that could be beneficial for students that need support with reading, writing, or representing ideas in a different way.” These tools and resources helped first-year teachers bridge learning gaps, providing alternative pathways for students to express their understanding and engage with the curriculum.

Furthermore, teacher leaders were instrumental in promoting equity in the classroom by embedding culturally responsive practices and supporting Indigenous perspectives. Many new teachers felt that having access to teacher leaders who specialized in Indigenous education helped them better address the unique needs of Indigenous students and incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into their teaching. As one teacher shared, “We have an Indigenous teacher leader who comes to help plan from the Indigenous perspective,” underscoring the importance of having knowledgeable leaders who can guide teachers in respecting and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems. These results resonate with Maready et al. (2021), who emphasize the role of mentors in helping new teachers build culturally sustaining practices in diverse classrooms. However, while prior studies such as Maready et al. (2021) emphasize culturally sustaining pedagogy in general terms, less attention has been given to the specific role of Indigenous teacher leaders in mentoring new teachers to embed Indigenous ways of knowing. Our findings foreground this as a critical and underrepresented dimension of teacher leadership. The presence of Indigenous teacher leaders was highly valued, as they provided insights and support to new teachers on how to approach teaching with cultural sensitivity and respect for Indigenous traditions. One respondent reflected on this influence, noting, “Our Indigenous teacher leader works specifically with our Indigenous students and helps us to more properly embed Indigenous ways of knowing into our practice.” This support empowered new teachers to create a more inclusive curriculum that acknowledged and celebrated cultural diversity, contributing to a respectful and enriched learning environment for all students.

The results underscore the pivotal role that teacher leaders play in shaping the professional journey of new teachers. By providing instructional support, organizing professional development, facilitating PLCs, offering mentorship, sharing resources, guiding assessment practices, and promoting inclusion, teacher leaders help create a nurturing and empowering environment for novice educators. While new teachers expressed gratitude for this support, they also identified areas where teacher leaders' roles could be enhanced, particularly regarding availability, subject-specific expertise, and clearer role definitions. Addressing these areas could further strengthen the impact of teacher leaders, ensuring they are equipped to meet the diverse needs of new teachers effectively. Ultimately, the findings emphasized the importance of sustained and targeted support for new teachers, not only to enhance their own practices but also to contribute to the development of a collaborative and improvement-focused school culture.

## Discussion

This study highlights the pivotal role of teacher leaders in supporting new teachers, emphasizing the dynamic and relational practices of informal teacher leaders within schools. In an era when teacher attrition rates are rising and many regions are experiencing a shortage of educators (Maready et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2024), our findings underscore the critical value that teacher leaders add to the teaching profession as a key support for new teachers. Schools that foster a culture of mentorship and leadership are better positioned to address the challenges, ensuring a smoother transition for new teachers, and can arguably promote their long-term success in the profession. This section considers the six themes that captured the ways teacher leaders supported new teachers through a) instructional support, b) professional learning and development, c) mentorship and guidance, d) sharing resources, e) assessment guidance, and f) support for inclusion and differentiation. As a result, two broad implications are noted about the role of teacher leaders relative to new teachers in the profession, and implications for policy and practice. Teacher leaders have an important role in easing the transition for new teachers as they enter the profession and teacher leaders serve as critical colleagues and mentors to help provide relational support. These implications can serve to inform policy development, and schools and school districts examining support structures for new teachers.

### ***Role of teacher leaders to ease new teachers' transition into the profession***

The transition from teacher preparation programs to full-time teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2018) is a critical period during which new teachers begin to form their professional identity and develop their self-efficacy. Teachers are faced with heavy workloads and the stress of everyday classroom demands (Beck, 2018; Creagh et al., 2023). The transition from pre-service teacher to full-time teacher in a classroom is often marked by challenges, including managing classroom responsibilities, navigating school cultures, and addressing the diverse needs of students. New teachers require support for inclusion, culturally responsive practices, and socially just pedagogy and this support can be provided by teacher leaders (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Kraft et al., 2021; Maready et al., 2021).

This study found that teacher leaders played a crucial role during this transition phase by providing adaptive expertise and guidance and serving as an ongoing and

easily accessible source for resources (Porter et al., 2025) and support (Timperley et al., 2018). As noted in the results, teacher leaders provided support through constructive feedback and sharing practical instructional and assessment strategies; teacher leaders helped new teachers bridge the gap between theory and practice; and helped foster a sense of confidence and competence in new teachers. This finding is consistent with Kraft et al. (2021), who found that teacher coaching embedded in teachers' daily work improves both instructional practice and student outcomes. These iterative and continuous efforts (Kraft et al., 2021) are essential in reducing feelings of isolation and overwhelm that often contribute to stress and early attrition (Maready et al., 2021). Investing in a structured support system framed by inquiry-in-action (Brown & Friesen, 2025) and led by teacher leaders can be a key strategy to foster resilience in new teachers (Maready et al., 2021) and in addressing the global teacher shortage (UNESCO, 2024).

### ***Role of teacher leaders as mentors and relational support for new teachers***

Mentorship is a cornerstone of effective teacher leadership and a critical element in supporting new teachers (Desimone & Pak, 2017). The relational support and sense of connectedness fostered through mentoring relationships can have implications for new teachers' professional growth and wellbeing (Anthony et al., 2019; Comstock et al., 2021). This study found that teacher leaders served not only as mentors but also as advocates, creating opportunities for collaboration and shared learning. These relationships enabled new teachers to build professional capital and a network of support, access valuable resources, and navigate the complexities of their roles with greater resilience. This aligns with Hargreaves and O'Connor's (2018) conception of collaborative professionalism, where mentoring and shared inquiry help transform school cultures into sites of ongoing, collective improvement. Mentorship contributed to the development of reflective practice as teacher leaders guided new educators in analyzing their teaching practice and refining their approaches. This can foster ownership of professional growth (Maready et al., 2021; Squires, 2019) that can continue as new teachers become established in the profession. The establishment of teacher leaders in schools can reduce burnout (Desimone & Pak, 2019) and the authors speculate this can enhance retention rates for new teachers and elevate overall quality of teaching within schools. Furthermore, when teacher leaders work alongside new teachers and colleagues in the school, this can contribute toward a culture of collective responsibility (Brown & Friesen, 2023). This result aligns with Fantilli and McDougall (2009), who emphasize that individualized mentorship mitigates early-career challenges, and Squires (2019), who notes that mentoring can directly support teacher wellbeing and reduce burnout.

Moreover, by working alongside new teachers and more experienced colleagues, teacher leaders help foster a culture of collective responsibility that extends beyond individual classrooms (Brown & Friesen, 2025). This environment supports not just the emotional wellbeing of new teachers but also encourages the entire staff to engage in ongoing cycles of improvement (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). In doing so, teacher leaders can help mitigate factors leading to burnout (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Isensee, 2017) and strengthen school-wide practices that sustain teacher development over time.

### ***Implications for policy and practice***

The findings from this study offer insights that can also inform policy development and practical approaches to supporting new teachers. One critical consideration is the design and implementation of structured mentorship models that reduce early-career attrition. School and district leaders can establish structures that set aside dedicated time for teacher leaders to work closely with novices. These structures may include co-planning lessons, demonstrating specific teaching techniques, team-teaching, and engaging in routine cycles of feedback and reflection (Maready et al., 2021). By creating intentional opportunities for new teachers to learn alongside skilled mentors, schools can provide consistent, targeted support that alleviates the challenges commonly associated with the initial transition into the profession.

While many teacher leaders possess extensive classroom expertise, the results underscore the importance of ongoing professional learning focused on developing their capacity to coach and mentor new teachers effectively. Building skills in facilitating collaborative inquiry, guiding inclusive instructional practices, and adapting to diverse learner needs enriches teacher leaders' impact within their schools (Anthony et al., 2019; Brown & Friesen, 2023; Kraft et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020). This investment in professional learning ensures that teacher leaders are equipped not only to deliver content knowledge but also to cultivate environments of continuous learning and reflective practice, ultimately enhancing the quality of new teacher induction programs.

Additionally, teacher leaders are uniquely positioned to foster inclusive and culturally responsive practices (Lopez, 2015). By actively sharing resources, discussing strategies, and engaging in co-reflective dialogues, they can help beginning teachers design equitable instructional experiences. This involves adapting lessons to honour students' cultural identities, implementing differentiated strategies for diverse learners, and creating safe spaces that encourage student participation (Myers & Anderson, 2012). When new teachers have role models who demonstrate such approaches, they are more likely to embed inclusivity in their own classrooms from the very start of their careers.

Finally, the study highlights how strengthening collaborative school cultures is paramount for maximizing the impact of teacher leaders. Schools that embrace shared leadership models (Brown & Friesen, 2025; Wenner & Campbell, 2016) provide the organizational structures, such as professional learning communities, within which teacher leaders can promote ongoing dialogue, mentorship, and cross-curricular collaboration (Klein et al., 2018; Timperley et al., 2018). Such cultures encourage the collective pursuit of instructional improvement, where experienced mentors and new teachers learn from each other's experiences and reflections. In this way, teacher leadership becomes a catalyst not only for supporting new teachers, but also for enhancing overall teaching quality and student outcomes throughout the school.

### **Limitations and future research**

There are several limitations in this research study. The data originated from a particular professional learning and design-based research initiative in Alberta, Canada, in an urban school district. The findings are based on the perspectives of the new

teachers from survey responses and would benefit from including perspectives from the teacher leaders. The extent to which findings generalize to other education systems with different policy frameworks or cultural contexts remains uncertain (Anthony et al., 2019). While the qualitative approach provided rich insights, broadening future research to include multiple stakeholder perspectives, such as administrators and students, could deepen understanding of teacher leaders' holistic impact on new teachers. Longitudinal studies tracking new teachers and teacher leaders over multiple years could illuminate how teacher leaders' guidance influences teacher retention, ongoing professional growth, and ultimately student outcomes.

Further investigations might also explore how digital learning tools or virtual coaching platforms can enhance teacher leaders' mentoring reach, especially in geographically isolated regions (Porter et al., 2025). Additionally, comparative research looking at teacher leadership in urban, rural, and suburban settings might reveal context-specific strategies or constraints relevant to new teacher support.

## Conclusion

This study underscores the integral role that teacher leaders play in supporting new teachers through instructional support, professional learning, mentorship and guidance, sharing resources, assessment guidance, and support for inclusion and differentiation. By offering constructive feedback, modelling best practices, and fostering collective inquiry, arguably teacher leaders helped ease the transition from teacher preparation to full-time teaching. Their efforts not only shaped new teachers' instructional competencies and sense of self-efficacy but also contributed to a collaborative culture that can enhance overall school improvement (Brown & Friesen, 2023; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). These results are consistent with the results of Nguyen et al. (2020) and Anthony et al. (2019), who underscored the relational and collaborative dimensions of teacher leadership as vital to supporting teacher efficacy and instructional development.

In light of ongoing teacher shortages and rising attrition rates, prioritizing teacher leadership roles and investing in the professional learning of teacher leaders emerges as a key strategy for stabilizing and enriching the teaching workforce (Creagh et al., 2023). Ultimately, by recognizing teacher leaders' capacity to support new teachers, education systems can strengthen their commitment to high-quality public education and foster vibrant, equitable learning environments for all students.

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