“GRAB A SHOVEL!”: SUPPORTING EARLY-CAREER ALTERNATIVELY PREPARED ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

Both early-career teachers (ECTs) and alternatively prepared teachers (APTs) have been shown to have an exceptionally high attrition rate as they attempt to adjust to a new and strange profession, leaving early-career alternatively prepared teachers as an especially at-risk cross-section of the teaching force (Podolsky et al., 2019). Yet much of the research into this at-risk population is evaluative rather than supportive, seeking to determine whether APTs should even be allowed into the classroom instead of seeking to understand the challenges they face and explore potential sources of assistance (Grossman & Loeb, 2008). In an attempt to contribute to the small body of literature that investigates ways in which APTs might be supported in their transition into teaching, this study uses narrative inquiry to tell the stories of five alternatively prepared elementary teachers as they navigate their first semester in the classroom and experience moments of struggle, growth, disappointment, and triumph. Findings identify a number of persistent challenges experienced by these early-career APTs (providing targeted student support, managing myriad responsibilities, interpreting and enacting mathematics curricula, retaining confidence and self-efficacy, etc.) and offer some potential avenues of support (consistent affirmation, frequent connections to prior professional experiences, engaged mentorship, etc.). These findings have a number of important implications for APTs, school leaders, mentors, policymakers, curriculum designers, and researchers, as the task of supporting early-career APTs is shown to be complex, delicate, and critical.

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INTRODUCTION

The difficulty of predicting teachers' needs is likely to be even greater for teachers who enter the classroom with less extensive classroom experiences.

-Grossman & Loeb (2008, p. 205)

I finally stopped Ella[1] the fourth time she came to my office to talk about elementary education and asked her how she had become so passionate about teaching. Her answer shocked me:

> Oh, I'm not even in the education program here. I'm a Psychology major, but so much of the psych stuff I was interested in kept tracing back to the classroom, so I decided the best way to make a difference in child psychology was to try to become a teacher.

Further conversation with Ella that day revealed that, unlike the rest of my students, she was in her last semester of college and was taking my elementary mathematics content course as an elective.[2] As she had discovered her love of teaching too late in her college career to complete the requirements for teacher certification, Ella was afraid both that she would not be able to find a job after graduation and that even if she did find a job, she would not know enough about teaching to do the job well. Ella was dedicated to the craft of teaching; she had demonstrated an aptitude for the profession over a semester's work in my class; she even had a depth of knowledge in a teaching-adjacent field (psychology) that most of her classmates did not possess. Yet, her persistent fear that she would not be given the opportunity or the support to even enter the teaching profession caused her to doubt whether she was making the right decision.

[1] Pseudonyms used for all people and places to preserve participant anonymity.

[2] The traditional pathway for undergraduates interested in pursuing education at my university is to apply to the Teacher Preparation Program at the end of their freshman year, and the vast majority of students in my class were freshmen and sophomores in that track. Graduating with a PK-3 certification requires a minimum of 73 credits that are directly education-related, and graduating with a 3-6 certification takes a minimum of 65 credits. While these courses certainly provide a thorough preparation for those who decide upon their career path in their first few years of college and are fortunate enough to be accepted into the program, it does not represent a particularly viable option for someone like Ella who began to look into teaching at the end of her junior year.

Ella's story immediately resonated with my own. As a junior in college, pursuing a major in mathematics, I received a fellowship to join a summer research group working on an unsolved problem in number theory. I had intended to pursue my PhD in mathematics and hoped this summer opportunity would give me ample material for my applications to graduate school. Over the course of the summer, however, when I experienced firsthand the realities of what mathematics research was like, I came to the (haunting at the time) realization that what I really loved about mathematics was not the occasions it afforded for cutting edge research, but the way it dovetailed with teaching and learning – offering tools to make sense of the world, stimulating creative and beautiful problem solving, and providing opportunities for conversation and discussion. The next fall, I pivoted from graduate school applications to teaching applications, secured a job as an upper school mathematics teacher at a charter school that did not require certification, and before I knew it, I was staring at twenty-six eighth graders with an Algebra textbook in my hands and almost no preparation or training whatsoever.[3] Like Ella, I had arrived (albeit in a roundabout fashion) at a passion for teaching, I had significant technical knowledge of the subject I was teaching, and I even had the support of a school administration that often sought out uncertified teachers.[4] Yet, just a few months into my new job, I found myself considering quitting due to the weight of the responsibilities that had been thrust upon me and the lack of support I received in managing them.

[3] Like Ella, I did end up taking one course in the education department at my undergraduate institution during my senior year as an elective, and I did spend a few weeks shadowing a friend who generously allowed me to observe her teaching. Additionally, I was provided with two weeks of localized professional development right before I began teaching that was led by my school principal, but other than that, all of my preparation was informal.

[4] The school board of the charter school I worked at (a 6-12 school) had given the principal specific directions to hire teachers who majored in the subjects that they were going to teach, believing, I imagine, that subject-matter expertise was the most important thing for a teacher to possess.

Fortunately, for Ella and for myself, we did end up finding the supports we needed to transition into the teaching profession, though the road was anything but smooth for either of us. Ella, after a short stint as a substitute teacher, was finally admitted to an alternative teacher certification program that included a mentorship component which helped give her the opportunity and the self-confidence to jump into an elementary classroom. She has completed her third year of teaching, and the initial passion she displayed in my office has finally been paired with the structure and support necessary for her to thrive. And I, after several months of feeling overwhelmed by the complexities of teaching, found a colleague at my school who took the time to answer questions, share experiences, and offer suggestions as I slowly but surely was able to pair my subject matter knowledge with the pedagogical content knowledge I needed to succeed in the classroom (Ball et al., 2008). For both of us, as alternatively prepared teachers, there *were* supports that ended up making a difference in our teaching stories, supports that connected with our backgrounds and tapped into our potential; but the structures we encountered were not geared towards making those supports available and accessible, a failure that almost caused us to leave our dreams of teaching behind.

Alternatively prepared teachers (APTs) like Ella and myself represent an important cross-section of the teaching force.[5] APTs can help counteract the negative effects of teacher shortages in hard-to-staff urban and rural school districts (Cardichon et al., 2020; Ng & Thomas, 2007), they are capable of implementing high-leverage instructional strategies even early on in their teaching career (Maxwell, 2014), and they often bring a diverse perspective on teaching and

[5] While "alternatively certified" is by far the more common term, this paper uses the more inclusive "alternatively prepared" term in order to capture the group of teachers, myself included, who never went through an official certification program yet are part of the teaching force and thus deserving of support. Worse still are the all-too-common "under-certified," "uncertified," "under-prepared," or "unprepared."

learning (Matsko et al., 2022).[6] Yet early-career APTs have an abnormally high attrition rate (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Podolsky et al., 2019) as they encounter a particularly unfamiliar teaching environment often without any APT-specific supports.[7] Instead of looking to design and implement policies and structures that might mitigate the challenges APTs face and help to lower this attrition rate, the field of APT-related research spends much of its time debating whether or not APTs should be in the classroom at all (Chiero et al., 2012; Ing & Loeb, 2008). To inspire teachers like Ella to enter the classroom and to retain them once they join the profession, we must shift the conversation in the field from *whether* APTs should be in the classroom to *how* they might be supported in their teaching endeavors. Such a shift first requires an awareness of the stories of early-career APTs not as data points in an argument over policy but as personal narratives of hope, struggle, and triumph. These stories – the experiences of alternatively prepared teachers – make up the core of this project.

[6] Ella often brought ideas from her psychology classes into our classroom conversations, enriching the discussions we were able to have; while her story is merely anecdotal, alternative pathways into teaching are often specifically geared towards recruiting individuals whose backgrounds and demographics are nontraditional. Consider here the recent findings of Matsko et al., (2022, p. 235): "We find that nontraditional pathways have been successful at recruiting nontraditional PSTs into teaching. Nontraditional PSTs are more likely to be Black, prioritize working with minoritized students (Black, low-achieving, and/or low-income), and hold noneducation undergraduate majors," as well as the work of the many non-profit organizations like Black Men Teach (https://blackmenteachtc.org/) and government sponsored programs like Grow Your Own (https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/equitdiv/grow/) that provide grants, scholarships, and training for members of the community who are of color or American Indian in order to equip them to enter the teaching profession through alternative licensure.

[7] Salyer (2003) even makes the case that pre-conceived antagonism towards APTs from colleagues or administrators might harm or distort some of the supports that *are* in place for early-career APTs.

CHAPTER 1: Project Rationale

If we continue to seek evidence that any one structural model of teacher education is superior to others and to ignore the wide range of quality that exists within all models, we will continue to be disappointed in the results.

-Zeichner & Schulte (2001, p. 280)

Teaching is a complex endeavor requiring practitioners to navigate multiple simultaneous challenges – the demand to engage students with dynamic, task-based pedagogy; the tension between individualized instruction, small group discussions, and whole class conversations; the interplay between conceptual understanding and procedural fluency; and the need to encourage students to throw themselves into the difficult work of problem solving while supporting the struggles that will necessarily result – all while continuously making in-moment instructional decisions, each of which necessarily impacts opportunities for student learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Franke et al., 2009). As this complexity has become more readily apparent and researchers have attempted to provide some specificity and three-dimensionality to the question of *how* teachers might go about attending to these challenges, a variety of helpful classifications have emerged – high-leverage practices, core competencies, ambitious teaching practices, etc. (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Grossman & McDonald, 2008; Stein et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2013). Regardless of the nomenclature, however, learning to teach remains a daunting task.

As teaching standards have increasingly been revised to reflect the complexity of teaching (CCSSI, 2010a, 2010b), an entire movement of educational evaluation and accountability has emerged, investigating whether teachers are living up to such high standards and seeking to hold teachers accountable for their performance (Carnoy et al., 2003; Elmore & Fuhrman, 2001). Such evaluative studies, however, have been criticized for their often reductive

conceptualization of teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012), and a number of researchers have responded by pivoting to studies that explore questions of teacher support (rather than teacher evaluation) (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2017; Darling-Hammond et al., 2014). Such studies investigating teacher support often acknowledge the complex and problematic task of learning to teach and shift the conversation to the various structures and systems that might enable and empower teachers in their work. These avenues of research into teacher support have taken on a variety of forms – some seek to uncover the ways in which teachers interpret and understand the standards and corresponding curricular materials (e.g., Roth McDuffie et al., 2017; 2018); some call for the transformation of teacher education programs to align with the complexities of teacher practice (e.g., Lampert et al., 2013); some attempt to parse out the nuances of enacting high-leverage practices in the moment (e.g., Spillane et al., 2002); and some seek to set up programs that can provide mentorship, collaboration, and care for early-career teachers, (e.g., Schuck et al., 2018). While issues remain from the over-emphasis on accountability and performance (e.g., school funding or teacher pay tied to student test scores), studies like the ones listed above seem to have opened up a research space that balances the desire to evaluate teachers' enactment of practice standards with the need to support them as they learn and grow in their profession.[8]

Paralleling this rise in standards and support efforts, a second shift has taken place, namely the rise in both the number of APTs in classrooms across the country and the variety of

[8] In no way do I intend to imply that there is not a time, place, or method for teacher accountability. In the same breath as she encourages evaluators not to boil teaching down to something that can be measured by test scores and value-added models, Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2003, p. 4) says that teachers "must be held accountable for our work." This accountability, however, cannot be accomplished using a single metric, cannot result in some kind of pass/fail system, cannot ignore the qualitative dimensions of teaching, and perhaps most of all, it cannot allow us to shirk our primary responsibility as researchers – namely that of support. Accountability must be collaborative; it must account for the complexity of that which it is trying to evaluate; and it must attend to the perspectives of all stakeholders involved.

pathways through which these APTs might enter the workforce (Glass, 2008; Grossman & Loeb, 2008; Zeichner & Schulte, 2001).[9] This development was encouraged most prominently by the No Child Left Behind Act passed in 2001, which called for the growth of alternative routes to certification which, "as opposed to the traditional routes offered by colleges of education, streamline the process of certification to move candidates into the classroom on a fast-track basis" (U.S. DOE, 2002, p. 15). As a result of initiatives like these, the number and percentage of APTs has risen steadily in the United States from 6.3% in 2006 to 14.6% in the 2011-2012 school year to 18% in the 2015-2016 school year, totaling approximately 676,000 teachers (NCES, 2022; US DoE, NCES, 2007, 2011-12). In the subject area of mathematics, this percentage is even higher (Sutcher, et al., 2016), with one estimate by the National Center for Education Statistics putting the percentage at 23.5% during the 2017-2018 school year (US DoE, NCES, 2017-18).[10] While there remains plenty of debate with regard to the virtue and effectiveness of these alternative pathways into teaching, there can be little doubt that such pathways have become embedded into the education system in the United States, with Grossman and Loeb (2008, p. 1) describing them as a "pervasive feature of the teacher-education landscape" and Glass (2008, p. 3) proclaiming them to be a "prominent part of the teaching profession."

[9] While these two phenomena – that of teacher accountability and that of the increase in alternatively prepared teachers – certainly parallel one another temporally, making a case for causality is a bit more problematic. A few reasons might be posited for their connection – perhaps the stifling accountability drives teachers out of the profession, which leads policymakers to implement other pathways to recruit new teachers (see Ingersoll et al., 2016); perhaps both phenomena are a result of broader market-based shifts in education stemming from neoliberal ideology (see Apple, 2001), etc. – but their relationship might also be more coincidental than anything else.

[10] This same phenomenon is true in the subject area of science. The NCES report finds the percentage of alternatively prepared science teachers to be 30.1%.

As might be expected, given the diversity in education and preparation of APTs, they seem at times to employ teaching practices that are distinct from their traditionally prepared counterparts (Hammerness & Reininger, 2008).[11] Not only do APTs enter teaching with a wide array of previous experiences and motivations (Chin & Young, 2007), they also have teacher identities shaped through membership in different knowledge communities (Schultz & Ravitch, 2013), they have different foundational ideologies (Linek et al., 2012), and they report different levels of self-efficacy (Chiero et al, 2012). Some studies suggest that APTs might be more likely to engage in high-leverage teaching practices (see Maxwell's 2014 finding that APTs seem to use group work and manipulatives more often), while other studies suggest that APTs employ more traditional non-reform-based practices (see Meagher & Brantlinger's 2011 case study revealing the teacher-led instructional strategies that were heavily embedded in an alternatively certified teacher's practice). But many studies seem to agree with Linek et al. (2012, p. 77) that "there are distinct differences in what teachers need and value based on whether they have completed a traditional undergraduate field-based program or an alternative certification program."

Given these differences, it would seem reasonable that, as was the case for traditionally prepared teachers,[12] we might find a parallel strand of research that looks at how APTs can be supported as they transition into the classroom. By and large, however, this is not the case as the

[11] Balancing the distinctions laid out within this paragraph, research also suggests quite a bit of overlap in the practices of these two groups of teachers. As an example, see Noble (2008), who found little difference between traditionally prepared and alternatively prepared teachers in the ways they described their planning and teaching practice, the ways they used lesson structures, and in their commitment to facilitation rather than lecture. See also Miller et al. (1998).

[12] Actually, even the use of 'traditionally' here might even be a bit of a misnomer, as the current model for teacher preparation is actually somewhat of a modern phenomenon. For one thorough history of teacher preparation in the United States, see Fraser (2007).

vast majority of research surrounding APTs is evaluative in nature.[13] Most APT-related research seeks to assess how effective these teachers are in the classroom in order to investigate the quality of the alternative certification programs and implement policies that ensure that such programs are held accountable to produce high-quality teachers (Boyd et al., 2006; Chiero et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Ing & Loeb, 2008; Kane et al., 2008; Matsko et al., 2022; among many others).[14] Even the studies listed above that do spend time investigating the transition of alternatively certified teachers into the classroom (e.g., Linek et al., 2012) often conclude with policy implications or an evaluation of the preparation programs rather than recommending authentic implementable structures and supports.[15] These evaluations have used different metrics: student test scores (Kane et al., 2007), principal observations (Miller et al., 1998), teacher retention rate (Grissom, 2008), etc., and their results have been mixed: positive (Foster et al., 2008), neutral (Johnson & Birkeland, 2008), and negative (Meagher & Brantlinger, 2011), but the common denominator uniting them has been a driving force of evaluation and accountability. A few of these studies have ended their evaluations with a call for researchers to

[13] Like with all gaps, the relative absence of studies investigating APT support is a bit tricky to prove, as one cannot cite a lack of something. As one piece of evidence, consider that Grossman & Loeb's (2008) book seeking to synthesize and summarize the APT-related research has the following chapter titles: 1) The Development of Alternative Certification Policies and Programs in the United States 2) Who Goes into Early-Entry Programs 3) Getting Beyond the Label: What Characterizes Alternative Certification Programs? 4) Is Fast-Track Preparation Enough? It Depends 5) But Do They Stay? Addressing Issues of Teacher Retention through Alternative Certification 6) Assessing the Effectiveness of Teachers from Different Pathways: Issues and Results. While the book, on the whole, is excellent, it reflects the prevalence of evaluative studies in the field of alternative certification at the expense of studies that investigate potential supports.

[14] It would be impossible to list all such studies here – the number of them is truly staggering. See Ing & Loeb (2008) for a more complete review of the literature seeking to evaluate APTs.

[15] There are several notable exceptions which will be covered in depth below – among a few others, see: Kwok & Cain (2021), Meagher & Brantlinger (2011), and especially Foote et al. (2011). I owe a great deal to these studies in particular as inspirations for conceptualizing this project, and I see them as trailblazers of an important research space. But the existence of a few studies that do raise the question of how APTs might be supported in learning to teach does not diminish the larger problem that the majority of studies tend towards evaluation at the expense of support.

turn their attention to the question of support (see especially Darling-Hammond's (2010, p. 45) call for an "infrastructure for ongoing intensive professional development"), but there have been remarkably few studies that press beyond the question of whether or not these teachers were well-prepared to explore what can be done at the school level to support them.[16] Thus Glass' (2008, p.1) observation that "very little qualitative or ethnographic research on the lives of alternatively certified teachers has been published" remains nearly as true as it was fifteen years ago.

In this study, then, I take up the question of how APTs are and could be supported at the school level as they transition into and navigate their first semester in the elementary classroom. In so doing, I hope to complement the evaluative body of research that assesses the quality of APTs, and to extend the strands of research that are concerned with supporting early-career traditionally prepared teachers to include and address the challenges that face APTs.[17] It seems clear that no matter the length or content of these alternative certification programs, graduates of such programs will require additional support as they make an abrupt transition into a demanding field and work with school leaders and other mentors who may not be open to the alternative certification process (Grossman & Loeb, 2008; Meagher & Brantlinger, 2011; Salyer, 2003). I center the stories of these APTs, helping to paint a more comprehensive picture of the specific challenges they face, the resources they draw upon, and school-level supports that they find

[16] Note again that I am not implying that there is not a space for evaluative research. High-quality instruction must be ensured, but such evaluations must be complemented by research in support-related spaces.

[17] Given some evidence that alternatively prepared teachers seem to be similarly effective in the classroom (Constantine et al., 2009) but have a higher attrition rate that traditionally prepared teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), it seems reasonable that we turn our attention to supporting these teachers once they enter the classroom, a task that has been largely neglected.

helpful. Grossman and Loeb (2008, p. 205-206) end their book, which summarizes the research surrounding APTs, with the following call:

> Regardless of their pathway into teaching, teachers and their students can benefit from ongoing instructional support, especially in the first few years of teaching. A critical area for both researchers and practitioners is how to structure those supports to best respond to what may be quite different needs of teachers across classrooms and schools.

This study takes up this very important call.[18]

Research Questions

Given the above rationale, this project is directly aimed at an exploratory investigation into the following research questions:

1) What stories do alternatively prepared teachers tell of the ways in which their teaching develops throughout the first semester of their transition into the teaching profession?
2) What challenges do alternatively prepared teachers perceive as particularly significant throughout this transition, and how do they respond to these challenges?
3) What supports do alternatively prepared teachers perceive to be available throughout this transition, and how do they respond to these supports?[19]

In listing these questions, I have intentionally offset questions two and three as definitively secondary sub-questions of question one. As seen in the study's methodology described below, I

[18] Zeichner & Shulte (2001, p. 279) make a similar claim about teacher preparation: "Instead of continuing the debate over which is better—alternative versus traditional 4- and 5-year undergraduate teacher education programs—it seems that it would be more useful to focus on gaining a better understanding of the components of good teacher education regardless of the structural model in which they are present."

[19] Implicit in these questions are the supports first-year APTs would like to have but are not able to find. These nonexistent supports might take the form of a challenge (RQ2) or of a partially available or unhelpful support (RQ3) and should emerge from the discussion directed by the interview protocol.

had some evidence that challenges and supports might emerge from the data, but I was committed to letting the stories of my participants drive the findings (Hansen, 2017). While I did ask specific questions regarding challenges and supports to my participants (see the interview protocol in the Appendix), I had no intention of pressing them into these narrative paths, and I remained open to pursuing the themes that emerged from the narratives of the teachers.

CHAPTER 2: Background Literature

A broader challenge for states, school districts, and teacher preparers is how to develop and expand the reach of strong, efficient, and affordable preparation routes that enable teachers to be competent when they enter teaching.

-Darling-Hammond et al. (2005, p. 23)

The literature informing this study sits at the intersection of the body of research related to alternatively prepared teachers (APTs) and the body of research related to early-career teachers (ECTs) and the various influences on their practice. Below, I summarize both bodies of research in brief before highlighting a few studies that have carved out a space at the intersection of these two fields, namely the influences specific to early-career APTs. Finally, I briefly investigate teacher attrition as it pertains to the recruitment, support, and retention of early-career APTs.

Alternatively Prepared Teachers

Attempting to define or categorize *alternatively prepared teachers* is immediately problematic, first because the term is inherently apophatic, deriving its meaning from that which it is not (namely traditionally preparation), and second because the wide range of preparations that might be characterized as 'alternative' leaves any definition almost too broad to be practically useful. In this vein, Zeichner and Schulte's (2001, p. 266) definition of an APT as someone who participates in "*any* alternative to the 4-year or 5-year undergraduate teacher education program"[20] provides a helpful umbrella description, but it encompasses such a wide variety of preparation experiences (from someone who completed 99% of a traditional teacher preparation program to someone who has zero coursework or field experiences to draw on) that

[20] The emphasis is mine. Also, it is worth noting here that Zeichner & Schulte are defining "alternative certification program" rather than "alternatively prepared teacher." Such a broad baseline definition, however, seems appropriate to outline the general sphere of alternative preparation within which I intend to work.

it makes for an unwieldy concept in practice. Darling-Hammond et al. (2005) divide the different pathways into standard, alternative, emergency/temporary, certified out-of-field, certified no-test, and uncertified, but while this division is generally helpful, it over-emphasizes the credential and under-emphasizes the preparation. Other studies shift their focus to the self-understandings of the teachers regarding their own preparation; that is, whether *they* describe the primary source of their feeling of preparedness for the classroom as traditional (coming from formal education classes or field experiences) or alternative (coming from non-education classes, other career experiences, their own self self-study, etc.) (Iyer & Soled, 2007; Matsko et al., 2022). While this distinction is fraught with its own difficulties,[21] it places the agency back on the teachers to describe their own preparation and it allows for transparency about where teachers find themselves across the wide spectrum of alternative preparation.

In emphasizing the ways that teachers define and characterize their own specific kind of alternative preparation, this study draws heavily upon Chin and Young's (2007, p. 74) "person-oriented approach" to this question. Rather than looking to the credentialing pathway of APTs as their defining factor, Chin and Young asked APTs to describe their own background, values, teaching practices, and motivations for entering the profession. From these responses, by using the "situated individual" as their unit of analysis, they built six different profile clusters that APTs tend to embody (Chin & Young, 2007, p. 77). These six profiles attempt to describe the "types of persons" who enter teaching as APTs: 1) *compatible lifestylists* perceive teaching as a job that fits their preferred way of life and are motivated by the benefits of the profession

[21] For example, the phenomenon of the 'alternatively-certified but traditionally-prepared teacher' who was licensed through an alternative pathway but describes most of their preparation as coming from classes they took or field-experiences or perhaps even the phenomenon of the 'traditionally-certified but alternatively-prepared teacher' who went through a traditional teacher preparation program but describes their 'real' preparation as stemming from more informal sources

including summers and holidays off or the chance to work in close proximity to their own children; 2) *working-class activists* enter the profession to serve their communities and work with young people in need; 3) *romantic idealists* are reform-minded, seeking to change or impact the world through education; 4) *followers in the family tradition* come from families with teachers and are familiar with the expectations of the profession; 5) *second-career seekers* often have deep content knowledge in a particular field but are disenfranchised with their career in that field (e.g., former engineers seeking to become math teachers); and 6) *career explorers* know little about the profession but are presented with the opportunity to teach and decide to try it out. While this division is neither mutually exclusive nor non-overlapping, it looks to the narratives of the teachers for a description of their preparation and motivation, a vision that aligned with the methodological choices of this study.

Given the difficulties of even defining an 'APT,' much of the existing research into alternatively prepared or alternatively certified teachers is conflicted, with most surveys of the field concluding that the wide variety of factors at play (demographic differences, differences in alternative certification programs, limited assessment metrics, etc.) make it nearly impossible to draw conclusions about APTs in general (Glass, 2008; Ing & Loeb, 2008; Johnson & Birkeland, 2008; Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). Some consensus does seem to have been established about the demographic information surrounding APTs (where they come from and what kinds of classrooms/schools they step into): we know that the population of APTs is growing (NCES, 2022), that the diversity of pathways into teaching for APTs is expanding (Matsko et al., 2022), that APTs are more likely to find themselves working with minoritized students (e.g., Black, low-achieving, and/or low-income) (Cardichon et al., 2020), and that APTs themselves are more likely to be racially diverse (Boyd et al., 2008).

Once APTs step into the classroom, however, research into the evaluation of their teaching practices and teaching outcomes seems much more conflicted. Regarding student learning, Darling-Hammond and colleagues produced a series of studies (2001, 2005), each of which arrived at the conclusion that traditionally prepared teachers consistently produce higher student achievement gains than their alternatively prepared counterparts. Laczko-Kerr and Berliner's (2002) study found similar results, determining that students with an under-certified teacher[22] achieved learning gains that were 20% less than students with traditionally certified teachers. Other studies, however, have concluded the opposite: Miller et al. (1998) used three different metrics (teacher practices, student test scores, affective interview data) and found "no major differences" between alternatively prepared and traditionally prepared teachers after three years of teaching experience and mentorship; Kane et al. (2008) used six years of data and found "little to no difference" in the average academic achievement impacts of certified, uncertified, and alternatively certified teachers; and Decker et al. (2004) suggested that hiring Teach For America graduates, few of whom are traditionally prepared, might even improve the mathematics achievement of students. Regarding persistence in the profession, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2019) found that alternatively certified teachers had a 25% higher rate of attrition than traditionally prepared teachers, but Grissom (2008) found no evidence that teacher turnover was any higher for teachers entering from an alternative certification program. Regarding teaching practices, Linek et al. (2012) argued that alternatively certified teachers are both less reflective in their practice and more prone to engage in low-leverage knowledge-dissemination practices. But several other studies (e.g., Salyer, 2003; Wayman et al., 2003) found APT practices and motivations to be similar to their traditionally prepared counterparts,

[22] Note the deficit language.

and Maxwell (2014) concluded that APTs may even be more likely to engage in high-leverage practices. With such lack of consensus in the field, Glass' commentary (2008, p. 1) that "discrepancies among the studies hinge on abstruse matters of statistical methods" and that "there is little reason to expect any consensus on the question of relative effectiveness" seems to adequately summarize the state of the research in this particular area.[23]

Influences on Early-Career Teachers

The complexities of the teaching profession render the early-career phase of teaching extremely difficult to navigate (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Surveys of this early-career phase often center around the variety of influences, unfamiliar experiences, responsibilities, and dilemmas that combine to make entry into the profession a time of "survival and discovery" (Huberman, 1989, p. 349). For example, in their survey of ECTs, Fantilli and McDougall (2009) list time management, insecurity, lack of preparation, inexperience, communication with parents, district hiring practices, adequately differentiating instruction, behavior management, and feelings of anxiety and stress among the challenges new teachers face. They go on to list collaboration, mentorship, supportive school principals, professional development, preservice education programs, familiar curricula, access to resources, and specialized resource personnel among the potential supports they may or may not be provided with. As another example, Kelchtermans'

[23] While some of these studies may seem outdated at this point, I have included them to show the history of the lack of consensus in the field of APT research. Newer studies seem to have arrived at equally mixed results. For example, consider Podolsky et al., (2019) who find that: "The proportion of teachers holding less than a full credential (i.e., an intern credential, temporary or short-term permit, or waiver for their teaching position) shows a strong negative association with student achievement for all student groups" and therefore come to the conclusion that: "After controlling for the socioeconomic status of students' families and district characteristics, LPI finds that teacher qualifications are the most important school-related predictors of student achievement." This finding seems to be directly contradicted by Goldhaber (2019) who finds that "Research exploring whether traditional and alternative route teachers have differential impacts on student test scores tends to find relatively little difference in student test impacts between teachers entering the profession through traditional and alternative pathways." Such incongruity in the research field is a testament both to the variety of influencing factors as well as the need to press past evaluative and comparative research.

(2019, p. 84) list of areas where ECTs need support includes: the technical challenges of curriculum and pedagogy, the workplace drama of professional relationships, the negotiation of a professional identity amidst an uncertain ethical and emotional landscape, the "practice shock" of "full responsibility for an entire classroom," emotional uncertainty, and the need for mentorship. Such surveys underscore the myriad influences that impact the transition into teaching and thus might shape the narratives of the early-career APTs in this study.[24]

Undertaking an exploration into the factors that affect ECTs requires an acknowledgment not just of the variety of such factors but of their interconnectedness as well. Rarely can one of the influences on ECTs listed above be studied in isolation; rather, research studies have often identified and investigated the links among multiple influences and the complexities that emerge from these connections. For example, Peters and Pearce (2012) argued that school leaders and administrators play an essential role in the induction of ECTs, participating in the mentorship process, shaping school culture, and taking a personal interest in their well-being. Bieda et al. (2020) found that the practices of ECTs (especially lesson planning) are shaped directly by the curricular resources available to them and by interactions with their colleagues, both of which can be traced back to the policies and practices of the school districts. McNally et al. (2008) explored the impact that identity formation has on ECTs and how such formative endeavors must be undertaken and negotiated within the contradictory demands of standards and policies and among the culture and relationships in the school setting. Day and Gu (2007) investigated the ways in which teachers' professional learning and development is shaped by the various workplace and social conditions in which teachers find themselves. And Webel and Platt (2015)

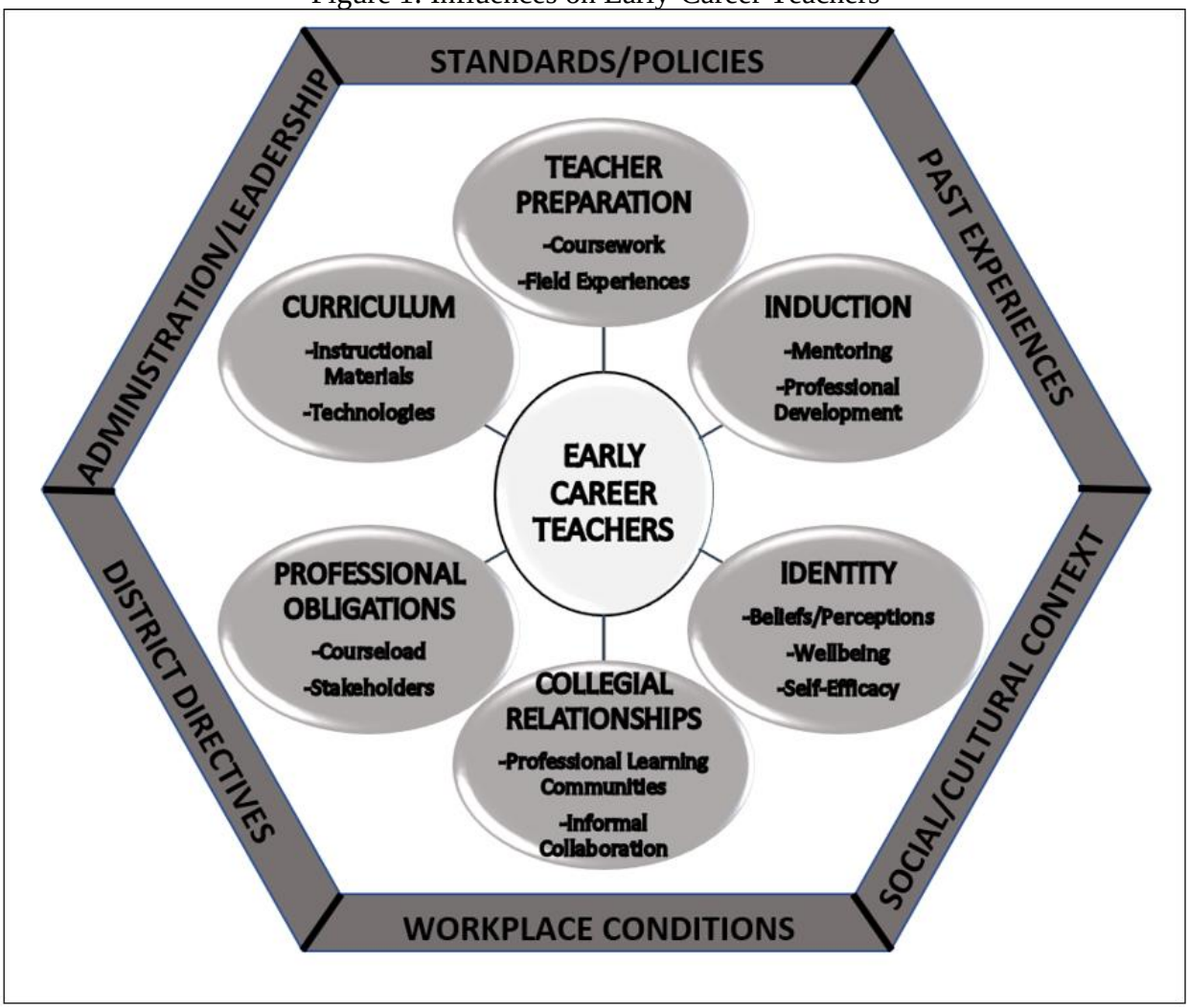
[24] No doubt my list of influences on ECTs is incomplete. The intention in this literature review is not to compile an exhaustive list or a set-in-stone model (if such a thing were even possible) that might pigeonhole the stories that these APTs told but to get a general sense for the context these teachers were immersed in, so as to appropriately understand and analyze their narratives.

concluded that efforts to change teaching practices and develop teaching identity are often inhibited by the different professional obligations that ECTs face and the time constraints such obligations place on the teacher. Not only, then, are ECTs subject to a host of influences, but the various combinations of these influences weave an intricate web of factors that often prove impossible to disentangle.

Such studies represent a small cross-section of the research into the factors that impact ECTs, but taken together these findings point to a set of *immediate* influences on ECTs that are directly present, strongly felt, and consciously recognized by the teachers themselves: 1) their formal preparation (coursework, field experiences, etc.), 2) the curricula and instructional resources provided to them, 3) their emerging teacher identity, 4) their specific professional obligations (to students, to parents, etc.), 5) the interactions they have with colleagues (formal and informal), and 6) their induction structures and supports. Behind these immediate influences, however, seem to be a number of background influences that may be less consciously experienced by ECTs: 1) governing standards and policies for teaching, 2) specific directives and decisions made at the district level, 3) the conditions and culture of their workplace, 4) the administration and leadership of the school, 5) various social, cultural, and community-related factors, and even 6) their own past experiences and narratives. ECTs may not have direct interaction with these background influences or may not recognize the extent to which they affect their current practices (as may be the case for their own past experiences), but the impact of these background influences is no doubt felt in the ways they shape the more immediately felt influences.[25] Together these influences might be conceptualized in the below diagram (Figure 1):

[25] In truth, this shaping is probably mutual. For example, not only does the workplace culture shape the specific interactions and conversations of APTs, but those same collegial interactions have a marked effect on school culture. While the model below has been drawn to emphasize the ways in which these factors provide influences *on* ECTs, it in no way intends to imply that ECTs do not impact any of the influencing factors.

Figure 1: Influences on Early-Career Teachers



While this model was not imposed on this study (thus allowing space for participants to identify the influences that were most impactful to them), it did inform the study in a variety of ways. First, while the initial interview questions were left intentionally broad (see the Appendix), many of the follow-up questions utilized language from these known influences to offer the opportunity for participants to clarify their responses and delve more deeply into the contextual factors surrounding them.[26] Second, as the stories of these teachers took shape, though each

[26] For example, after a participant response describing their struggle to use manipulatives effectively in the classroom, a follow-up question inquiring whether or not they felt supported by their district-mandated curriculum materials allowed further nuances of the story to emerge.

narrative was unique, an awareness of the above influences helped me to contextualize and compare the stories, exploring various themes and threads that could help knit together individual anecdotes into a holistic narrative. Below, I explore each of the six immediate influences in greater depth, especially as they pertain to ECTs.[27]

Teacher Preparation

Teacher education programs and other preservice *teacher preparation* experiences seem well situated to impact ECTs teaching beliefs and practices, given their location between "their past experiences as students in classrooms and their future experiences as teachers in classrooms" (Kennedy, 1999, p. 57). And in many ways, teacher preparation has been shown to impact the practices of teachers after they transition into the classroom, providing them with content and pedagogical knowledge, encouraging them to adopt reform-based orientations or dispositions, and offering them opportunities to practice some of the components of the teaching profession before they take on the full responsibilities of the job (Grossman et al., 2009; Horn et al., 2008; Kennedy, 1999). Yet, despite this seemingly smooth pathway from student to preservice teacher to teacher, the assumption that there is a linear, causal relationship between what is learned in a teacher preparation program and what is brought into the classroom by graduates of such programs is problematic and fails to account for the complexities in both teacher preparation and the classroom itself (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014; Grossman & McDonald, 2008). Not only is teacher preparation itself a multifaceted network of component parts including coursework (both content and methods), fieldwork, preparation for diversity and equity, assessment, licensure, policy, and accountability (Cochran-Smith et al., 2015), but each

[27] Each of these six influences touches upon an immense body of research that I could not possibly hope to fully address in this space. Given these limitations, I have attempted to define some of the guiding questions of each field before focusing my review on the ways in which the field intersects specifically with research into early-career teachers.

of those component parts must be ‘transferred’ or ‘recontextualized’ by teachers as they negotiate the transition into school-based settings with particular cultures and dilemmas (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Ensor, 2001; Liston et al., 2006). In the face of such challenges that leave many ECTs feeling frustrated and bewildered at the differences between their teacher education programs and their professional contexts, numerous researchers and policymakers have called into question the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Grossman, 2008; Wideen et al., 1998). In response, a growing number of researchers have designed, implemented, and studied ‘practice-based’ teacher education programs that attempt to approximate professional teaching practices in a preservice setting: Feiman-Nemser (2001) called for a professional learning continuum that draws together teacher preparation and practice; Grossman et al. (2009) identified representations, decompositions, and approximations as three central practice-based pedagogies for teacher education programs; Lampert and Graziani (2009) constructed a set of instructional activities that might refocus teacher education on ambitious teaching practices; Korthagen (2010) called for ‘realistic’ teacher education; and Zeichner (2012) attempted to categorize the core teaching practices that might make up a teacher preparation curriculum.

The effect of such teacher preparation programs on ECTs is difficult to determine or evaluate. While it seems clear that ECTs do value and draw upon their preparation (Grossman, 2008; Kang & Windschitl, 2018; Kennedy, 1999), much of what is learned in their formal preparation is mediated by their prior beliefs, the specific circumstances of their professional placement (curriculum, norms, support structures, etc.), and other identity-related or biographical factors (Ensor, 2001; Liston et al., 2006). While Grossman’s (2008, p. 15) lament that “very little research actually follows graduates of teacher education into the classroom” remains somewhat

true, a number of recent studies have explored the influences of teacher preparation on early-career teaching practices: Bieda et al. (2020, p. 796) investigated the ways in which the lesson planning practices teachers learn in their preparation coursework undergo a "metamorphosis" once they are faced with the "institutional environment" where they are employed; Youngs et al. (2022, p. 12) identified several learning opportunities in teacher preparation programs, including "designing high cognitive demand mathematics tasks, using representations to develop students' mathematics understanding, and facilitating classroom discussion in mathematics," all of which seem to support the enactment of ambitious instruction by first-year elementary teachers; Horn et al. (2008) showed that teacher preparation can help to form and shape the identities of ECTs which impacted their teaching practices; Nolen et al. (2011) found teacher education useful in helping ECTs to develop assessment tools; and Kang and Windschitl (2018) showed that teacher preparation can help develop a beginning repertoire of teaching practices and support new visions of teaching and learning. Still, many questions in this area remain unanswered as researchers attempt to understand the differences between the theoretical, emotional, and practical spaces of teacher preparation and the analogous but distinct theoretical, emotional, and practical spaces in schools and classrooms (Liston et al., 2006).

Teacher Identity

Developing and negotiating a *teacher identity* has emerged as an enduring tension in the practices of ECTs (Flores & Day, 2006; McNally et al., 2008; Pillen et al., 2013).[28] Unlike early understandings of identity that conceptualized it as a fixed and static construction (e.g., Cooley,

[28] Though I use the word "developing" here to describe the growth and evolution of early-career teachers' identities, it should be understood that this development is not something that is brand new. Pre-service teachers have a teacher identity, and while their identities tend to undergo a marked shift as they enter the classroom (see Hong et al., 2018), it is an evolution not an inauguration.

1902), most current research (e.g., Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Alsup, 2006; Arslan et al., 2021; Gee, 2000; Sfard & Prusak, 2005; etc.) recognizes it to be an ongoing, dynamic process in which the self is continually formed and re-formed by interacting with various social and cultural factors, including personal life, prior experiences, geographical location, support systems, and collegial relationships. A teacher's identity is thus continually negotiated as their self-understanding evolves through the integration of their personal beliefs, values, and knowledge with the external professional demands and influences they encounter (Beijaard et al., 2004; Morrison, 2013; Pillen et al., 2013). In this negotiation process, identity can often be connected to the idea of narrative, with Sfard and Prusak (2005, p. 14) even *defining* identity as "a set of reifying, significant, endorsable stories about a person."[29] Within this overall understanding of teacher identity,[30] a variety of studies have attempted a subdivision into its component parts (see Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009 or Beijaard et al., 2004 for an overview), and while each subdivision has its merits, this study draws particularly on Kelchtermans' (2009) breakdown of professional self-understanding into the five elements of self-image, self-esteem, task perception, job motivation, and future perspective.

For early-career teachers, teacher identity has been shown to be particularly volatile as they encounter novel experiences, new bodies of knowledge, unfamiliar expectations and

[29] Importantly for this study, Sfard & Prusak find identity to be completely inescapable from narrative. The introduction to their (2005 p. 14) study is both illuminating and groundbreaking: "Lengthy deliberations led us to the decision to equate identities with stories about persons. No, no mistake here: We did not say that identities were finding their expression in stories—we said they *were* stories….We argue that the narrative rendering of identity, while not as 'reductionist' as it may sound, leads to immediate theoretical insights inspired by the burgeoning research on human communication." This claim not only helps to justify my methodological choice of narrative inquiry but it also helps to situate the findings regarding self-efficacy and identity as central to the transformations of the early-career APTs.

[30] In some studies, teacher identity is referred to as 'professional identity' or 'teacher professional identity' (for one example, see Beijaard et al., 2004). Though there are certainly some nuances that can be seen in this shift in terminology, for the purposes of this paper, the terms are used interchangeably.

growing responsibilities (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2011; Morrison, 2013; Watson, 2006). Given this instability, Hong et al. (2018, p. 253) describe the teacher identities of ECTs as "provisional" with a high likelihood of being frequently "challenged and changed" as they become exposed to the inherent tensions present in their new profession – unpredictable classroom dynamics, complex school environments, and undefined demands on their time and energy – and, importantly for this study, they found that teachers' ability to cope with these identity shifts was influenced by the "kinds of school-level support which they experienced." Given the compulsory transition between different communities of practice, ECTs often experience what Pearce and Morrison (2011, p. 49) describe as "a mismatch or dissonance between idealism and reality." And given that this transition takes place over time, teachers' identities are developed as they attempt a temporal integration of "pieces of the present" with the lingering "parts of their past" with the "kind of teacher and colleague they want to become" (Feiman–Nemser, 2001, p. 1029-30). Such a complex context necessitates constant self-assessment as ECTs wax and wane in their ability and willingness to identify with and embrace the role and responsibilities of the teaching profession (Flores & Day, 2006). As such, teacher identity has been shown to correlate with ECTs' motivations to teach and their persistence in the profession. (Morrison, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016; Wang et al., 2015).

Of particular relevance to this study is the subdimension of teacher identity that concerns self-efficacy. Drawing heavily on cognitive theory (e.g., Bandura, 2006), Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) define a "teacher's efficacy belief" as "a judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated" (p. 783). For ECTs especially, given the lack of concrete evidence they have of their own teaching abilities, self-efficacy is a critical component of their

professional identity as they struggle to comprehend their own capacities and explore the effectiveness of various techniques (Nickel & Crosby, 2021). The classroom is not just an intellectually challenging space; it is an emotionally challenging one, and navigating the "emotional drama" while taking care of their health and wellbeing remains a struggle for many ECTs (Intrator, 2006, p. 232). Like the overall concept of teacher identity, these efficacy beliefs have been shown to correspond to resilience and attrition rates, as teachers tend not to persist if they do not see themselves as successful in the classroom (Beltman et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2015). In particular, Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2016) found that teachers tend to quit if they experience efficacy-related struggles that include teacher stress, conflict with colleagues, a lack of supervisory trust, low student motivation, emotional exhaustion, or a decrease in personal engagement.

Teacher Induction

Research surrounding *teacher induction* identifies and investigates the holistic set of practices through which schools welcome and support new teachers as they transition into a new work environment. Teacher induction practices are directly aimed at increasing a teacher's job satisfaction, retention, and commitment to teaching in general, each of which correlate with an increase in student learning (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Teacher induction programs are often made up of specific systems or structures, but successful induction programs transcend each individual feature to impact and shape the culture and environment of the school itself: "Induction is a process – a comprehensive, coherent, and sustained professional development process – that is organized by a school district to train, support, and retain new teachers and seamlessly progresses them into a lifelong learning program" (Wong, 2004, p. 42). Feiman-Nemser (2003) agrees, describing quality induction as a "process of enculturation" and arguing

that “even the best induction programs cannot compensate for an unhealthy school climate, a competitive teacher culture, or an inappropriate teaching assignment” (p. 3, 5).

In determining the makeup of these induction processes, a number of studies begin by identifying a series of principles that ought to guide any concrete decisions regarding specific practices. For Bickmore and Bickmore (2010), induction must be multifaceted and must attend to positive working conditions, the support of leadership, the attention to both professional and personal needs of the teacher, and the fostering of collegiality. For Wong (2004), induction must be collaborative, must integrate some form of mentorship, must be sustained over multiple years, must involve opportunities to observe and model effective teaching, and must be backed by administrative support. And for Carver and Feiman-Nemser (2009), successful induction programs are supported, enabled, and often funded by policy initiatives, especially ones that provide time and space for teachers to engage in real sustained mentoring.

In enacting these principles, a wide array of structures and systems have been recommended, varying in complexity and in scope. Wong’s (2004, p. 49) survey of successful programs included learning circles, video recordings, mentors, demonstration classrooms, a welcome center, and study groups, among other things. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) identified a number of features that statistically increase teacher retention including: an orientation seminar for novice teachers, regular collaboration with colleagues, opportunities for teachers to connect with one another outside of a school setting, the presence of a teacher aide in the classroom, and a reduced teaching load. Kwok (2018) urged schools to set up programs for new teachers to receive frequent observation, specific feedback, and opportunities for ‘trial-and-error’ especially in the area of classroom management. Shanks et al. (2020) identified the core of induction programs to be mentoring, and they found time, inquiry, collaboration, authenticity, and

reflectivity to be hallmarks of a successful mentoring program. Fantilli and McDougall (2009) added other successful features of induction programs including adjusting hiring practices to provide new teachers with ample time to familiarize themselves with their new school and curriculum; training school leaders and mentors in best support practices; and providing specialized professional development in key areas such as planning, classroom management, special education, and assessment. Overall, then, successful induction programs seem to be structured around both the elimination of anything that is especially burdensome for teachers (e.g., extra responsibilities) and the provision of anything that might occasion teacher growth or comfort (e.g., mentorship, collaboration); however, the identification and execution of these eliminations and additions has proven to be fraught with complexities.

Professional Obligations

Elementary teachers encounter an assortment of dilemmas in their classrooms on a daily basis (Ball, 1993). One way of conceptualizing and categorizing these dilemmas is the notion of *professional obligations* proposed by Herbst and Chazan (2011, 2012).[31] Under this framework, teachers find themselves influenced by various authorities, constrained by various requirements, and accountable to various stakeholders that both establish norms for behavior and provide situations where a departure from those norms is required. In particular, Herbst and Chazan (2011) list four overall types of obligations – disciplinary, individual, interpersonal, and institutional. *Disciplinary* obligations are subject-specific concerns that include content knowledge and subject-specific teaching practices; *individual* obligations involve attending to

[31] This framework was initially proposed by Herbst & Chazan for secondary math teachers although they allow for its potential expansion to other grade levels, positing that it "may also apply to the elementary teacher who teaches mathematics part of their time." Since the proposal, a few researchers have applied this framework to elementary teachers (e.g., Lilly et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022), so there is precedent for the shift in grade level this study made, but this may also be an area where more research is needed to modify and adapt the framework to fit the experiences of elementary teachers.

the well-being of individual students including their "behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or social needs"; *interpersonal* obligations require teachers to consider their relationships with other human beings both inside and outside the classroom; and *institutional* obligations compel teachers to respond to procedural and administrative concerns including "school policies, calendars, schedules, examinations, curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and so on" (Herbst & Chazan, 2011, p 450-1).[32]

For ECTs, these professional obligations are especially stressful when they are forced to engage in a complex practice at the intersection of multiple obligations, like lesson planning (Lilly et al., 2022), managing their time (Meister & Melnick, 2003), interpreting and negotiating state standards (Frank et al., 2020), or receiving and implementing coaching and professional development (Webel & Platt, 2015). Even when the practice is primarily centered around a single obligation, ECTs have been shown to feel anxiety if the obligation is particularly unfamiliar, like managing parent relationships (Meister & Melnick, 2003) or assisting students with learning disabilities (Fantilli & McDougal, 2009). And, like many of these influences on ECTs, the quantity and complexity of their professional obligations can threaten to overwhelm them, challenge their well-being, and impact their willingness to persist in the profession (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; Schuck et al., 2018).

While much of the research in this field seems to directly correlate teacher obligations with sources of teacher stress, a few researchers have explored a distinction from psychology research between 'hindrance-stressors,' that is, demands that seem to *interfere* with the

[32] While Herbst & Chazan provide the primary frame for this particular study, other researchers have complied alternative lists of obligations. For example, Keller-Schneider et al., (2018) list four domains of professional demands on teachers: teaching to meet individual students' needs, professional role and identity, adaptive classroom management, and co-constructive cooperation within the school. No matter the framework, the field seems to share a belief that teaching requires the negotiation of multiple (and sometimes conflicting) obligations.

professional goals of teachers, and 'challenge-stressors,' that is, obligations that can *promote* growth and achievement (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; LePine et al., 2005). Within this framework, while too many 'hindrance-stressors' might contribute to teacher burnout and attrition, the *lack* of 'challenge-stressors' might prove equally discouraging to ECTs, robbing them of important opportunities for growth (LePine et al., 2005; Searle & Auton, 2015; Webster et al., 2011). Mujtaba and Reiss (2013) have applied this framework to distinguish between positive stress and distress in the narratives of secondary math and science teachers, investigating which obligations were distress-ful and which were stimulants of growth.

Curriculum

Curriculum materials and other instructional resources form a central part of teachers' day-to-day work with their students and thus have been shown to impact many of the factors related to teaching and learning (Ball & Cohen, 1996; Davis & Krajcik, 2005; Lloyd et al., 2009; Remillard, 2005). Davis and Krajcik (2005), in particular, define 'educative curriculum materials' as curricula that can promote teacher learning, guide instruction, increase pedagogical flexibility, anticipate student thinking, and support high-leverage teaching practices. As such, educative curriculum materials can influence teachers' knowledge as well as their lesson planning practices, beliefs, curriculum trust, identity, and textbook use (Bieda et al., 2020; Drake & Sherin, 2009; Remillard, 1999, 2000, 2005). To help conceptualize such a complex and interconnected set of ideas, Remillard and Heck (2014) developed a robust framework that explores the interplay between the written curriculum (as conceived by textbook-writers), the official curriculum (as formalized by the expectations of an accountability system), and the operationalized curriculum (as put into practice by teachers and students as they plan, instruct, and learn in the classroom). Each of these stages can be considered individually, but the model is

most appropriately understood as a dynamic system, with each stage affecting and being affected by the other stages. For example, the different policies adopted by a school district, the selected textbooks, and the recommended instructional practices (all aspects of the designated curriculum) have been shown to profoundly impact how teachers lesson plan (an aspect of the teacher-intended curriculum) (Bieda et al., 2020). Even this framework, however, can fail to capture all the complexities and intersections inherent in the selection, understanding, and enactment of what Drake (2021) calls a "rapidly changing landscape of instructional materials in elementary education" (p. 136).

For ECTs, educative curriculum materials have been shown to positively impact their ability to implement reform-based instruction, but such materials are not sufficient in and of themselves to effect such practices (Burkhauser & Lesaux, 2017). Without guidance on how to use curricular resources, ECTs can struggle to take advantage of the opportunities that curricula present (Johnson & Kardos, 2008; Kauffman et al., 2002; VanZoest & Stockero, 2006). As is the case for experienced teachers, curricular resources have been shown to impact multiple elements of the process of learning to teach, including planning lessons (Lilly et al., 2022), collegial relationships (Bieda et al., 2020), and teacher identity development (Valtierra & Michalec, 2017), among others. But novice teachers often become overwhelmed with the complexities of the curriculum enactment process and need additional support in noticing and capitalizing on curricular affordances (Burkhauser & Lesaux, 2017). In the absence of such supports, curriculum decisions (what to teach, how to teach it, etc.) become one of the primary challenges faced by ECTs who are particularly vulnerable to incoherent or changing curricula (Christou et al., 2009; Fenwick, 2011; Kauffman et al, 2002). Curricular-related insecurities have even been shown to correlate with teacher attrition, as attempting to meet the demands of the profession without the

necessary resources can make teaching seem like an untenable proposition (Johnson & Kardos, 2008; Kauffman et al., 2002).

Collegial Relationships

As they adjust to the practice of teaching, ECTs also find themselves undergoing what Feiman-Nemser (2003, p. 27) calls a "process of enculturation" as they attempt to "fit into [an] existing system" of colleagues and supervisors. These *collegial relationships* have been shown to play in influential role in ECTs' induction processes as they turn to coworkers for solidarity, encouragement, and friendship; turn to mentors and veteran teachers for advice and guidance; and turn to administrators for support and leadership (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Hargreaves, 2019). Such relationships can be formalized in the workplace, as in the case of professional learning communities (Vescio et al., 2008), but they can also be casual and even social, stemming from an ad hoc culture of collaboration (Hargreaves, 2019). In either case, collegial relationships have the power to dramatically improve teacher well-being and educational outcomes (e.g., Foote et al., 2011; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006), becoming "not just a collection of meetings but a way of life" (Hargreaves, 2019, p. 611). Just as easily, however, they can produce relational conflict (e.g., McCormack & Gore, 2008) or descend into a kind of contrived collegiality (e.g., Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990) that often feels like a waste of precious time.

For early-career teachers, navigating the relational dynamics in a new workplace can be particularly challenging as the relative isolation of the classroom can inhibit the chance to form strong relational bonds (Ingersoll, 2009; McCormack & Gore, 2008). Numerous studies have emphasized the importance of finding a professional place within the culture of the school as a source of affirmation, community, support, curricular understanding, and even autonomy (e.g., Beck et al., 2007; Bieda et al., 2020; Hebert & Worthy, 2001; Woods & Weasmer, 2004), but

carving out such a place requires ECTs to recognize, interpret, and navigate a range of micropolitical and personal obstacles (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). Given the demanding time constraints of first-year teaching, ECTs often find their school to be their primary place of socialization in addition to their place of employment (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002), but for many ECTs, a lack of confidence and competence in their classrooms can cause them to feel isolated, alienated, or discouraged in their social lives as well (Schuck et al., 2005; Woods & Weasmer, 2004). Sabar (2004) even goes so far as to compare novice teachers to 'migrants' due to the feelings of marginality and strangeness that leave them navigating new relationships from a place of uncertainty. In particular, their "willingness to perform tasks and invest effort without compensation" and the "innovations they bring" can be "threatening to veterans" (Sabar, 2004, p. 157), creating a power dynamic that impedes the building of relationships and diminishes their willingness to persist in the profession (Schuck et al., 2005). Johnson et al. (2019) even describe teacher collaboration as having a "dark side" with "unintended consequences" in which collaboration becomes "good for some but not so good for others" leading to "a perceived loss of autonomy and increased interpersonal conflict and staff factionalism" (p. 119).

Among the variety of collegial relationships that are important to ECTs, two seem particularly vital to their ability to adjust to a new workplace environment, namely their relationships with mentors and principals. As seen above, mentors and principals play an important structural role in the establishment and enactment of teacher induction structures, but their influence on ECTs transcends these formal functions, passing into the relational realm as well. In the case of mentors, while ECTs seem to value expertise, logistical competence, and professionalism in a mentor, they also seem to gravitate to mentors who are relational, compatible, flexible, and comfortable to work with (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). Mentoring is

best accomplished and received out of a spirit of collaboration emerging from a strong relational bond that goes beyond the professional arena to provide social, emotional, and personal support (Shanks et al., 2020). Principals also, in addition to providing leadership and logistical support, play a relational role in the life and practice of ECTs. “Trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative” teacher-administrator relationships seem to have positive effects on other collegial relationships, while “fearful, competitive, suspicious, and corrosive” teacher-administrator relationships tend to negatively impact relationships throughout the school (Barth, 2006, p. 9). In particular, relationships with their principals have been shown to influence ECTs’ feelings of well-being (or discouragement), empowerment (or debilitation), and self-confidence (or doubt) (Peters & Pearce, 2012; Wynn & Brown, 2008).

Influences on Early-Career Alternatively Prepared Teachers

At the intersection of the above two bodies of literature lie a few studies investigating the experiences of early-career alternatively prepared teachers, documenting the challenges that they tend to face in the classroom and examining the supports that they rely upon. While these studies stand out due to their alternatively prepared study participants, few of them have made definitive claims about whether the challenges and supports that were observed may be unique to APTs as compared to traditionally prepared teachers. In attempting to make such comparative claims, not only do the variety of contextual and demographic factors make it extremely difficult to do a large-scale side-by-side study (Glass, 2008), but the few studies that have followed first-year teachers from multiple pathways into the classroom (e.g., Chiero, 2012; Matsko, 2022) have, once again, focused on evaluation rather than inquiry. Still, while many of the results listed below overlap with more general studies of ECTs, even these similarities are worth noticing as

they place early-career APTs as a subset within larger population of both traditionally prepared and non-traditionally prepared ECTs.[33]

Kwok and Cain's (2021) survey returned three primary difficulties identified by early-career APTs: the inability to understand the lack of motivation in their students, a series of concerns about time management, and various struggles with student disrespect and classroom management. Cleveland (2003) monitored the conversations of a cohort of first-year APTs, identifying five primary frustrations: lack of administrative support, discontinuity between coursework and the classroom, lack of adequate mentorship, feelings of disorganization, and the overwhelming claims on their time and energy. And Hart (2004) followed eight elementary APTs through their first year in the classroom, finding that the teachers developed a "strong reform perspective" in their beliefs about mathematics teaching but were "unable to consistently implement pedagogy that was consistent with those beliefs" (p. 79).

The scope and variety of these struggles has led multiple studies to conclude that, without proper induction or support, APTs are an 'at-risk' population that can quickly lose their belief in their teaching abilities and their interest in continuing to teach (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Podolsky et al., 2019). Hung and Smith (2012) followed six APTs whose first-year experience was so challenging that three of the participants revealed they had no intention

[33] No doubt the majority of the challenges and supports listed in this paragraph are not unique to APTs but overlap with the challenges and supports encountered by traditionally prepared teachers. Given the prevalence of the local school context in mediating the first-year teacher experience, it makes sense that there would not be much difference between the concerns identified in APT-specific studies and others identified in studies with traditionally-prepared novices in similar school contexts over similar periods of time. Without longitudinal comparative data, any differences would be merely hypothetical, and even with such data, the work of disentangling the relevant factors would be next to impossible.

Yet, even so, we might imagine that some of the similarities might take on different forms or arise in different contexts for APTs. For example, it would not be surprising to see that APTs and traditionally prepared teachers both struggle with self-efficacy in their first-year, but it also would not be unreasonable to expect that APTs might experience a particular vulnerability regarding their lack of official certification or formal coursework that would not apply to traditionally prepared teachers. More research that investigated these similarities and differences would certainly be helpful.

of returning to the classroom and two others said they would only return if they could teach "students that cared more about learning" (p. 13). And Meagher and Brantlinger (2011) followed a single graduate of the New York City Teaching Fellows alternative certification program as she entered a high-needs school, documenting the ways in which a lack of professional development and mentoring left her to fend for herself and caused her to feel overwhelmed in the classroom, and telling "the story of a teacher who we see as having the potential to be an effective middle grades teacher, but who was failed by the system of induction supports that were designed to help her reach that potential" (p. 125).

In the midst of these challenges and struggles that threaten to overwhelm APTs, a number of studies suggest that APTs benefit greatly (even disproportionately so) from a high-quality induction program. Duke et al. (2006) found that mentoring and induction programs seemed to have a "greater marginal benefit for teachers without education degrees than for those with education degrees" (p. 61). And Cain (2020) used data from focus groups and surveys to show that APTs overwhelmingly appreciated an induction program that continued over the entirety of their first year, concluding that it was critical for their induction programs to have a significant mentorship component. In suggesting specific supports that might be incorporated into such an induction program, Smith and Evans (2008, p. 270) found that APTs seemed to benefit from a "mentor team" made up of people with "varying types of knowledge and experience" who could adequately meet the wide variety of APT support needs. LoCascio et al.' (2016) comprehensive study found that an inconsistent induction program seemed to be worse for APTs than no induction program at all, and that APTs appreciated mentors who 1) responded quickly, 2) seemed to care, 3) demonstrated flexibility, and 4) were trustworthy. Unruh and Holt (2010) found that alternative-entry teachers required fewer supports in understanding the subject matter

or developing curricular content knowledge but did especially benefit from some supports surrounding the practicalities of teaching – classroom management, relieving job stress, time management, and professional collaboration with other teachers. Kwok and Cain (2021, p. 6) found that most induction support was "irrelevant, overwhelming, and limited," recommending that teachers be provided with professional development content that was simple, scaffolded, and extended across the entire semester. And Schultz and Ravitch (2013) investigated the role of a Narrative Writing Group in providing supports for APTs, reporting that participating in such a support group helped teachers to investigate their teacher identity and engage in a professional community. Though the results from these studies seem a bit scattered in the variety of induction structures they recommend, there does seem to be some consensus that APTs respond to programs that are both long-term and high-intensity, and these findings, while often limited in scope and scale, represent hopeful directions for further research.

To conclude this section, special attention is called to the work of Foote et al. (2011), whose in-depth study is directly aimed at investigating whether APTs have access to support systems that are adequate to meet their specific needs. Their conclusions paint a bleak picture of a subset of teachers who need more supports due to a "lack of experience and lack of training" but who are often provided with supports that are "loosely linked, uncoordinated, and at times at odds" (p. 418). Thus, APTs often remain "unprepared to meet the needs of and be advocates for low-socioeconomic status students of color and English language learners" (p. 418). Foote et al. recommend systems of support that are "site based, of an ongoing duration, and grounded in teachers' practices and peer collaboration" and a "less-demanding first-year teaching schedule coupled with the requirement that new teachers collaborate with and observe more experienced mathematics teachers" (p. 419-420), recommendations that seem promising and worthy of

investigation. Their paper concludes with a series of questions, wondering how it might be possible for an "alternative certification induction program [to be] structured to provide and utilize supports to address the needs of new mathematics teachers" (p. 420). While my study was not directly oriented towards designing or testing a specific induction program, the insights that emerged from my investigation of the teaching stories of first-semester APTs informed these same questions and explored these same tensions.

Teacher Attrition

Running parallel to a number of the above strands of research lies a set of investigations into the problem of *teacher attrition.*[34] While statistical analyses of teacher attrition vary from state to state and country to country, especially during and surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic (Blieberg & Kraft, 2022),[35] estimates tend to show that between 30% and 46% of new teachers leave the profession entirely within their first five years, and between 8% and 14% of all teachers leave the profession in any given year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Ingersoll et al., 2021). Financially, the cost of finding, replacing, and training new teachers has been estimated between 1 and 2.2 billion dollars annually, monopolizing resources that could be spent elsewhere (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2014). Institutionally, teacher attrition leads to teacher shortages which have been shown to result in a less experienced teaching force

[34] While the word "problem" is used here, teacher turnover itself is not inherently problematic (Ingersoll, 2001). For teachers, mobility can be empowering especially in pursuit of other career opportunities. And even for institutions, some level of turnover can be a vehicle for introducing new innovations and ideas (Hausknecht & Holwerda, 2013). Still, teacher attrition is often problematic for schools as it can create chronic instability and impose significant costs to recruit and train replacements (Podolsky et al., 2019).

[35] Bleiberg & Kraft (2022) stress how little we know about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher retention and attrition. Not only has the pandemic introduced a number of mediating factors that are difficult to disentangle, the restrictions on research have limited the ability to collect high-quality data. Unsurprisingly, different metrics have yielded different results and there are few hypotheses that seem promising in reconciling these discrepancies. More information is needed to understand the full impact of the pandemic on teacher attrition.

overall and to hinder the development of long-term relationships between teachers, students, and administrators, both of which negatively impact school performance (Ingersoll et al., 2021; Macdonald, 1999; Newberry & Allsop, 2017).[36]

Efforts to explain teacher attrition or pinpoint the factors that impact whether teachers persist in the profession have come to a variety of conclusions. Many studies have surveyed teachers who leave the profession, identifying a wide range of potential causes for their dissatisfaction including anxiety and stress, lack of student discipline, lack of student motivation, salary, lack of collaboration, paperwork and assessment, loss of joy, class size, workload, status, lack of influence, and inadequate administrator support (Clandinin et al., 2015; Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint et al., 2007; Macdonald, 1999; Schaefer et al., 2012; among others). Other studies have identified potential systemic issues such as neoliberal educational policies, shifting working conditions, the 'teacher blame game,' or a lack of societal respect for the teaching profession as key root causes of teacher attrition (Curtis, 2012; Dunn, 2018). Still other studies have attempted to examine demographic factors, finding that teacher attrition seems to be mediated by a number of personal characteristics including age, race, gender, years of experience, grade level, subject, education, and a variety of factors associated with the sociocultural context of the school (Ingersoll, 2001; Kersaint et al., 2007). Research even at times seems conflicted, with some studies associating teacher attrition with the frequency of traumatic or high-stress moments encountered in the classroom (e.g., Hupe & Stevenson, 2019), while other studies pinpoint the everyday 'little things' as the primary influence on teacher job satisfaction (e.g., Kitching et al.,

[36] Some of the teacher shortage doomsday predictions seems to be hystericized by the media (for this perspective, see Gantert, 2015 or Barshay, 2016), but most studies seem to agree both that we are currently experiencing a teacher shortage (at least locally) and that the projections of future educator supply and demand do not seem promising. Sutcher et al.'s (2016) report on teacher supply and demand ends with the following summary: "Current data and projections reveal an emerging teacher shortage in the United States that will, if trends continue, grow worse before it improves and exacerbate perennial shortages in areas such as mathematics, science, and special education."

2008). Needless to say, little consensus seems to have been reached about what causes teachers to leave, leading a growing number of researchers to abandon an attrition-based perspective and instead investigate supports that might encourage teachers to stay, processes that might encourage teacher identity-building, and sustaining moments teachers might experience (Craig, 2019; Ewing & Manuel, 2005; Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019; Schaefer et al., 2012).

Both early-career (Guarino et al., 2006; Ingersoll et al. 2021)[37] and alternatively-prepared (Hung & Smith, 2012; Trosech & Bauer, 2020) teachers have an exceptionally high rate of attrition, leaving early-career alternatively prepared teachers as an especially at-risk cross-section of the teaching force (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Podolsky et al., 2019). While there are a few qualitative studies that attempt to investigate the reasons for these high attrition rates (see Hung & Smith, 2012 or Meagher & Brantlinger, 2011), there is much that remains unknown about the particularities of this at-risk demographic, a gap this study begins to address. As a helpful starting point for such an investigation into early-career APT attrition, Clandinin et al. (2015, p. 1) identify the following seven factors as most closely aligned with retention and attrition: "(1) support; (2) an identity thread of belonging; (3) tensions around contracts; (4) new teachers' willingness to do anything; (5) work-life balance; (6) the struggle to not allow teaching to consume them; and (7) sustainability." Yet, given the unknowns in this particular arena, it is important to heed the call from Ewing and Manuel (2005, p. 6) to resist the temptation to reduce teachers that leave the profession to data points within a framework, choosing instead to listen to

[37] While there is little consensus surrounding much of the literature regarding teacher attrition, this is one area in which most studies seem to agree, with Guarino et al. (2006) noting that "one very stable finding is that attrition is high for young or new teachers and lower for older or more experienced teachers until they reach ages at which retirement is feasible." In a recent study, Ingersoll et al. (2021) estimated that 44% of new teachers leave within 5 years of entering the profession.

"their stories" which "may provide further insights into the less well understood shifts in attitudes and aspirations."

Summary

While the non-evaluative research specifically investigating early career APTs is scarce, this selection of studies, when taken in summation, provides a sufficient backdrop against which to read and interpret the narratives that follow. ECTs and APTs are both complex and diverse groups that are influenced by a multitude of (often conflicting) factors and face a disorienting and demanding task. Providing explicit and thorough definition to the contexts and dilemmas the APTs in this study encountered would thus be an impossible undertaking, but the breadth of this review offers a wide range of studies that dovetail and resonate with the stories below at various moments. While not every study listed above proved directly applicable to the APTs in this study, I have included them all in an attempt to provide a comprehensive framework for reading the teachers' narratives.[38] The context surrounding early career APTs is complex (recall Figure 1) rendering any research space that might be carved out in this field to be somewhat elastic; thus, I have intended this literature review to identify explore the potential connections that may emerge in the stories below – not with the intent to 'fit' the narratives into some established meta-narrative but rather to imagine the relations and correlations that may emerge.

[38] The studies that appear in the literature review but not in the participants' stories are noteworthy in their absence as particular influences or challenges that did *not* seem to appear in the narratives of these APTs.

CHAPTER 3: Conceptual Framework

I began to see teaching as a 'living practice,' where learning emanates from the living of it, with potential to transform all involved.

-Lange (2009, p. 196)

With the above literature in mind, a few concepts deserve a more detailed treatment as fundamental frames for this project, namely the theory of *transformative learning* and the idea of *narrative meaning.* Below, each concept is developed before its role in framing this study is discussed.

Transformative Learning Theory

To investigate how APTs' teaching develops, this study requires a framework for conceptualizing that development, specifically, in this case, the theory of *transformative learning* (Mezirow, 1997; 2000; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Transformative learning theory posits that human meaning-making is undertaken through a *frame of reference,* described as "the structure of assumptions and expectations through which we filter sense impressions" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16). This frame of reference shapes how we interpret and respond to our experiences, and is made up of *habits of mind,* "broad, generalized, orienting predispositions," and *points of view,* "sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and judgments" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 17, 18). Learning, then, consists of a shift (or *transformation)* in one's frame of reference and "may be understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience to guide future action" (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009, p. 22). Such transformations occur in four distinct ways: "by elaborating existing frames of reference, by learning new frames of reference, by transforming points of view, or by transforming habits of mind" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19).

To effect these kinds of reference-frame-shifts, emphasis is placed upon a transformative experience that acts as catalyst for learning. Mezirow (2000, p. 22) lays out a ten-step process by which someone might experience a transformation, beginning with a "disorienting dilemma" and moving through various stages of reflection, critical thinking, and exploration of new viewpoints before ending with "a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective." Transformative teaching, then, seeks to incorporate elements that encourage the learner to disrupt their current frame of reference and proceed through the process of reconstructing a new one, a process that includes "individual experiences, critical reflection, and dialogue" along with "a holistic orientation, awareness of context, and an authentic [relational] practice" (Taylor, 2009, p. 4).

At first glance, transformative learning theory might seem a strange choice for a study that seeks to tell the holistic stories of APTs, given the focus placed on individual moments of transformation that necessarily break apart larger narratives into discrete chunks. Newman (2012) makes such a critique, calling into question the finitude of the transformative learning process and finding fault with the theory's reliance upon a singular disorienting moment which posits a clear beginning (and end) to learning. He understands learning to be more of an uninterrupted process (in his words, "flowing"), a continuity that transformative learning theory runs the risk of over-compartmentalizing or over-fragmenting (Newman, 2012, p. 42). While Newman's articulation of the dangers of employing transformative learning does provide an important warning against narrative fragmentation, such a non-overlapping dichotomy between the continuity of learning and the discrete moments of learning seems to be equally reductionistic. Like points that lie on a line but do not make up the line, the lens of transformative learning can call our attention to individual moments wherein learning occurs

without diminishing the importance of the learning that is continually taking place.[39] Mezirow himself (2008, p. 94), in elaborating on the theory of transformative learning, acknowledges such an idea, finding that learning can be *epochal,* "the result of a sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight" or *incremental,* "involving a progressive series of transformations in points of view that culminate in a transformation in habit of mind."

As such, transformative learning seemed particularly helpful for this project as it calls attention both to the individual moments or stories that APTs find to be particularly transformative (epochal) and to the role those mini-narratives play in the overall arc of their semester-long transformation (incremental). The investigation of shifts in frames of reference as revealed through the stories that APTs tell seems to be directly aligned with Mezirow's (2000) understanding of transformation as "a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives" (p. 19). Thus, adopting a transformative lens raised the very questions this study purposed to investigate: what moments in the classroom, if any,[40] were transformative for APTs, how did those moments affect their habits of mind or points of view, how did those momentary transformations aggregate over time as their dominant narratives and structures shift, and how did the larger frame-of-reference-shifts inform and guide their future experiences. This cyclical 'zooming-in' and 'zooming-out' both in time and over time that calls the researcher to wrestle with the (small-s) stories and (large-S) Story of their

[39] Learning, in my view, can be conceptualized in multiple ways, and just because one learning theory is chosen as the primary lens does not mean that we should ignore other conceptualizations. Learning theories ought to talk to one another, and thus my choice to center the transformative perspective (Mezirow, 2000) in this study does not mean that I intend to ignore other conceptualizations in my analysis. See Rogoff et al. (1995) for an example of different theoretical constructs informing multiple planes of analysis.

[40] It is important not to assume that transformations will necessarily take place. While I did observe transformations in this particular study, it would have been just as important of a finding to discover that APTs seem to undergo little to no transformation throughout their first semester in the classroom.

participants provided both a perspective and a methodology that were essential to this study's project.

Narrative Meaning

While a number of broader conceptual frameworks inform narrative inquiry and might be employed to scaffold this study (Bruner's narrative ways of knowing, Dewey's theories about experience, various aspects of post-positivist and post-structuralist thought, etc.),[41] the narrower conception of *narrative meaning* provided an identifiable space for this particular project (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). In conceptualizing *narrative meaning*, I primarily followed Polkinghorne (1988, p. 1) who describes it not as an organic or material 'object' that might be directly observed by a researcher but as a mental 'process' or 'activity,' an individual's way of "organiz[ing] human experiences into temporarily meaningful episodes." This definition was a particularly suitable choice for this study due to its fit with the language of transformative learning ('episodes,' 'meaning-perspective,' and 'process') and its conceptualization of storytelling as part of the very means by which humans (and thus APTs) respond to experiences and make meaning out of them.

Polkinghorne's conceptualization of narrative meaning relies on a Ricoeur-ian understanding of narrative as a natural human response to the forgettable past, fleeting present, and uncertain future, with story serving as a primary means by which humans stitch together the chaos of temporal existence into meaningful entities (Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur, 1984). But Polkinghorne pushes past Ricoeur's understanding in at least one key capacity, finding that "the narrative form is not simply imposed on preexistent real experiences but helps to give them

[41] For a more thorough historical and philosophical tracing of the frameworks relied on by narrative inquiry, see Clandinin & Rosiek (2007), paying special attention to their illuminating discussion of theoretical "borderlands."

form" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 68). In other words, narrative does not just make sense of the meaning inherent in experiences, but it is a process of meaning-making or meaning-creating, serving not just as a means by which we might gain insight into other meanings but as a set of meanings in and of itself.

Studying narrative meaning, or in Polkinghorne's words (1988, p. 6), attempting to "make explicit the operations that produce [narrative] meaning, and to draw out the implications this meaning has for understanding human existence" can never be a straightforward research endeavor. Not only do we not have direct access to someone else's 'realm of meaning,' the clues or data by which we might approach the narrative meaning of another are linguistic in nature and are often complicated by images, metaphors, representations, imaginations, etc. (Kim; 2015; Polkinghorne, 1988). Yet, despite this linguistic obscurity, meanings are shared between persons, a beautiful "miracle" in the words of Ricoeur (1976, p. 16):

> My experience cannot directly become your experience. An event belonging to one stream of consciousness cannot be transferred as such into another stream of consciousness. Yet, nevertheless, something passes from you to me. Something is transferred from one sphere to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle. The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public. Communication in this way is the overcoming of the radical non-communicability of the lived experience as lived.

Still, attempting any type of sustained inquiry into someone else's narrative meaning is a complex undertaking. Given that narrative data "operates in a complex of interacting strata," the methods for studying narrative meaning must mirror the data and are therefore "not as precise" and lie outside of "the usual forms of research used by the human disciplines" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 8). More is said below about the methods by which narrative meaning might be uncovered.

CHAPTER 4: Methods

If we understand the world narratively, as we do, then it makes sense to study the world narratively.

-Clandinin & Connelly (2000, p. 17)

Methodologically, this study employs narrative inquiry to tell the stories of alternatively prepared teachers navigating their first semester in the classroom. Below, I briefly theorize the methodology of narrative inquiry before outlining the particularities of this specific study.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is based upon the fundamental idea that human beings are story-finders, story-makers, and story-tellers, both in the way that we experience the world and in the way that we make sense of those experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Kim, 2015; Ricoeur, 1984). The phenomena of teaching and learning, then, are bound up with the phenomenon of living itself, and "life – as we come to it and as it comes to others – is filled with narrative fragments, enacted in storied moments of time and space, and reflected upon and understood in terms of narrative unities and discontinuities" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). While story is by no means the only method of interpreting experience, it represents a particularly potent way of synthesizing complex occurrences anti-reductionistically, seeking to preserve and honor the voices of the participants rather than boil their experiences down to a set of facts or figures (Foote & Bartell, 2011). This centering of story provides a more synthetic and three-dimensional description of experience, presenting researchers with a variety of affordances: for Saleh et al. (2014, p. 272), it allows us to "break with the taken-for-granted;" for Bell (2002, p. 209), it allows us to "present experience holistically in all its complexity and richness;" and for Clandinin and Murphy (2009, p. 600), it allows us to "animate the lives of participants and ourselves." Narrative inquiry thus imagines researchers as witnesses, compelling them to observe

as thoroughly as possible, retell as truthfully as possible, and analyze as faithfully as possible (Hansen, 2017).

Narrative inquiry imposes a host of responsibilities upon researchers, requiring them to navigate a multi-dimensional space with a myriad of complexities, including time, space, relationship, purpose, community, and identity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Huber et al., 2006). Each of these complexities cannot be explained away or controlled for but must be acknowledged and investigated: how are the participants' experiences mediated by temporal factors, how are they interpreting their stories through their own character and personality, how are their stories affected by the stories they imagine others might tell of them, etc. Just as the experiences of teachers and learners resist any single-lens interpretation, so too must the stories that are told of those experiences resist any kind of single-lens interpretation, but must be presented (as much as possible) as a narrative whole.[42] Ricoeur (1995, p. 6) captures this notion beautifully, observing that narrative cannot be an "immutable substance or a fixed structure," but must instead be a "mobile identity issuing from the combination of the concordance of the story, taken as a structured totality, and the discordance imposed by the encountered events." The stories we tell are incomplete; they are always in the process of revision; and they are situated alongside the stories our past selves have told, the stories we would like our future selves to tell, and the stories that are told by those around us (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Story is eternally vibrant, taking place within a dynamic "dialectic of order and disorder" (Ricoeur, 1995, p.6), and employing this methodology thus calls researchers "into the midst" (Clandinin & Connelly,

[42] Though unavoidable, writing is a necessarily reductive enterprise. Attempting to capture that which is living and dynamic through such a static medium as that of language necessarily reduces the stories to something less holistic than they were originally.

2000, p. 187) as they attempt to capture as authentically as possible what is "mercurial and perennially evolving" (Craig, 2019, p. 302).

Given the ways in which we weave our own stories into the stories of others, the methodology of narrative inquiry necessarily draws out the story of the researcher as well as the stories of the participants,[43] for "it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 62). While this narrative mutuality does offer certain affordances, allowing me, as researcher, to be an active participant in the data creation and allowing my own experience as an APT to help contextualize my participants' stories, it also imposes a dual responsibility upon me: first, to acknowledge my own positionality, identity, and biases, and second, to empower the study participants as active co-creators of the stories that are told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Foote & Bartell, 2011). I have aimed to uphold this responsibility throughout this project by cultivating a spirit of "researching *with*" through a series of collaborative steps in the data collection, analysis, and composition processes (Foote & Bartell, 2011, p. 50).

This collaboration was fostered through techniques that have arisen within the tradition of narrative inquiry for revealing and developing story (Clandinin, 2013; Kim, 2015). While acknowledging the complexity of the methodology and the individuality of each particular story, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) list three general interpretive tools that guide data collection and analysis in narrative inquiry: *broadening*, *burrowing*, and *storying and restorying*.[44] Broadening

[43] As seen in the opening narrative.

[44] Caine et al. (2017) describe a fourth interpretive tool, fictionalization, in which researchers engage in creating imagined accounts of the experiences of their participants. While I was not immune to the power that fictionalization can have in the narrative inquiry analytic process, it was less applicable to this particular study due to my desire to preserve the authentic accounts of the teachers.

describes a situative process of generalization in which specific moments or stories are located or placed within a larger context – the broader sociocultural climate, other relevant policies or administrative structures, a more comprehensive understanding of someone's character or habits, etc. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Broadening 'zooms out' from a story's time and place, attempting to unearth the other strands of story that are woven in, around, and through a particular narrative, thus expanding the boundaries of a story's singularity (Mishler, 1986). Burrowing, on the other hand, involves a process of 'zooming in' on a story, taking a fine-grained look at the details and nuances that make up the particularities of a narrative. Burrowing probes the minutiae of story, seeking to gather information from as many perspectives and angles as possible – characters' feelings and thoughts, relational considerations or complications, dilemmas encountered, etc. – all in order to tell a more complete and more three-dimensional story (Kim, 2015). Lastly, storying and restorying attempts a "creation of further meaning" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 9), that is, a synthetic weaving together of various broadenings and burrowings that tries to capture significance, sensemaking, implications, reasons why, and impacts of a narrative. Storying and restorying knits together multiple narratives into something that is holistic, attending to the overall narrative arc as *gestalt* and then reframing individual narrative moments as parts of this whole.[45] Each of these analytical tools – broadening, burrowing, and storying/restorying – informed the data collection practices, the interview protocols, and the analytical processes of this study, as described below.

For this study, narrative inquiry was particularly appropriate not only because the narrative arc of these APTs' experiences made for such a compelling story to tell, and not only because the induction experiences of these teachers were filled with complexities as they

[45] Again, given its reliance upon the written word, restorying necessarily 'freezes' and 'finishes' a narrative and thus must do some kind of injustice to the dynamic, unfinished original.

experimented with new practices and navigated new situations, but also because this project attempted to contribute a balancing force to the field of APT-related research that can tend towards the overly reductive. In the face of a series of studies that boil down the myriad questions surrounding APTs into their 'effectiveness in the classroom' as measured by some quantitative metric, my choice of narrative inquiry represents both a commitment to tell as holistic a story as possible as well as a commitment to involve APTs in the telling of their own stories. A variety of studies have used narrative inquiry to investigate different components of elementary teachers undergoing transitions, from their preparation as they become mathematics teachers (e.g., Kaasila, 2007) to their induction (e.g., Huang & Xu, 2015) to their adjustment to the Common Core (e.g., Martinie et al., 2016) to even their leaving of the profession (e.g., Craig, 2019), showing it to be a methodology capable of capturing the nuances of teachers' experiences in these transitional moments. None of these studies, however, have done so with APTs, leaving the field of APT-related research in need of the same attention to the stories of its teachers.

Data Collection

The data for this project was limited, intentionally so, to a small number of participants (five) and to a single data source (participant interviews). While recruiting more participants would allow for a more complete picture of the diversity of APTs, the relational demands of narrative inquiry limited the number of participants that could be reasonably included. And while a number of other data sources – classroom observations, interviews with administrators, lesson plans, student work artifacts, reflective journals, etc. – might also have been considered for this project and might have proven fruitful in telling the stories of the participants, this study intentionally eschewed such methods in order to decrease the burden on the teachers and to remove the temptation to bring any kind of evaluative metric into the study. Asking the teachers

to keep some kind of a journal or diary documenting important moments and reflections would no doubt have provided insights into their experiences, but given the number of responsibilities that were already being thrust upon these teachers (lesson planning, grading, weekly newsletters, meetings, professional development, etc., all in addition to the interviews for this study), such a task would risk overburdening them and causing them to resent their participation in the study.[46] And, while classroom observations or administrative interviews would certainly help to provide context to the stories the teachers told, collecting such data might have given participants the impression that their teaching was being evaluated, something I had committed not to do. In a very real sense, this study aimed to be singularly-minded, investigating the stories that the teachers told of their own first-semester experiences. Thus, limiting the study to a few participants and a single data source represented an intentional attempt to center the voices of APTs.

Study Participants

For this study, I recruited five participants through purposeful sampling methods (Patton, 2014). Each participant was an elementary teacher entering their first semester in the classroom, who was alternatively prepared for teaching (i.e. described their primary source of preparation as coming from something other than education-specific coursework and field experiences). Within this overall APT group, participants were selected to represent the variety of pathways and preparations that tend to describe APTs (Chin & Young, 2007).[47] Of the six categories specified

[46] This was a particular recommendation that emerged from previous work with first-year APTs.

[47] Certainly, this study cannot hope to fully capture the diversity of preparatory pathways for APTs, nor can it investigate the other important differences in the APT population (race, gender, age, school context, etc.), all factors worthy of investigation in future studies.

by Chin and Young (2007), the five participants in this study represented five[48] different pathways into teaching: one "career explorer" (Maya), who enjoyed school herself and decided to give teaching a try; one "romantic idealist" (Grace), who sought out a fellowship program that placed new teachers into urban, underserved schools; one "compatible lifestylist" (Alanna), who entered teaching out of a desire to travel and found it professionally fulfilling; one "working-class activist" (Leila), who did not have a college degree but was invested in making education accessible to all students; and one "second-career seeker" (Bri), who earned a degree in graphic design and transitioned into teaching from a series of office manager positions.[49]

Figure 2: Study Participant Information

Participant	Grade	Category	Educators in Family	School Context	Preparatory Experiences
Maya	3rd	Career Explorer	Mother	Urban, Charter	• Homeschooled as child • Liberal-arts college • Minor in education
Grace	6th	Romantic Idealist	None	Urban, Public	• Liberal-arts college • Major in philosophy • Minor in education
Alanna	1st	Compatible Lifestylist	Mother, Father	Suburban, Charter	• Minor in education • Taught English in Japan • Worked in hometown
Leila	1st	Working-Class Activist	Mother	Suburban, Charter	• No undergraduate degree • Taught preschool • Worked at her alma mater
Bri	2nd	Second-Career Seeker	Mother, Father	Rural, Charter	• Degree in graphic design • Many prior "office jobs" • Worked in hometown

[48] While none of the participants fully fit the sixth category – followers in the family tradition – almost all of the participants (four of five) had a parent who was also a teacher, making this category also reasonably represented in this study. See Figure 2 for a more detailed description of the educators in their families.

[49] Though each of the participants fit most fully into one of these six pathways, there was quite a bit of overlap as well. No one description fully captured any of the participants, and different participants resonated with several of the descriptions. For example, both Leila and Alanna found themselves gravitating somewhat to the "second-career seeker" description as they were transitioning from other jobs, and each of the participants described themselves in part as a "romantic idealist." Still, while the categories may not create a perfect division, hopefully they have facilitated the selection of a group of study participants whose motivations for entering the profession were somewhat diverse.

Participants were recruited through a variety of methods: some were recommended by friends; some were recruited at a professional development conference I spoke at; some responded to a general advertisement; some were former students of mine.[50] Participants remained engaged throughout the data analysis process in frequent communication with me and were compensated for their time. More information on each of the individual participants can be found at the beginning of their individual narrative, although the majority of their demographic information has been omitted to protect their anonymity.

Data Sources

The primary data source for this study was a tri-partite series of participant interviews that took place 1) before they entered the classroom (pre-), 2) at various moments over the course of their first semester (mid-), and 3) after their first semester was complete (post-). The pre-interviews took place in August; the three mid-semester interviews took place monthly near the end of September, October, and November; and the post-interview took place over winter break, either at the end of December or the beginning of January. Each interview was semi-structured, in which the interview protocol (included in the Appendix) provided a general structure and initial conversation prompts, but not only did I ask different follow-up questions depending on the participants' initial responses but the participants also had a significant amount of freedom and flexibility to dwell on a particular question, dismiss a question, or introduce a new topic (Drever, 1995). The interview protocols relied on previous narrative inquiry studies for inspiration (Meister, 2018; Simmons, 2004), but were also shaped by my previous

[50] For further thoughts on my familiarity with the participants, see the section below investigating researcher positionality.

collaboration with a first-year APT[51] as well as the interpretive tools of broadening, burrowing, and storying/restorying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In general, the pre-interview was focused around 'broadening' questions: demographic information, prior schooling experiences, motivations for entering the classroom, and initial ideas about what the classroom would be like, what kind of teacher they hoped to be, what challenges they anticipated facing, and what strengths and supports they expected to rely on. The mid-interviews were focused on 'burrowing,' digging deeply into: daily or weekly routines, specific stories that stuck out as particularly meaningful, detailed descriptions of challenges and supports, ways in which feelings, beliefs, and practices changed over time, and ways in which all of these experiences impacted

[51] As the methods for this study have taken shape, they have been consistently informed by a semi-formal pilot study undertaken over the preceding year with a first-year alternatively prepared teacher named Tarver to whom I owe a great deal of gratitude in helping me conceptualize this project. This 'pilot study' began more out of a friendship than anything else as I kept in touch with a former student as he began his career as an elementary teacher. Many of the 'interviews' were informal, and much of the 'data' went unrecorded. I did not set out to study Tarver's story; rather, Tarver's story moved me to the point of wanting to study it (and other stories like it). Tarver and I were in consistent communication as he navigated his first year in the classroom, and I was privileged to witness the highs and lows, triumphs and setbacks, joys and burdens of his induction into the world of teaching through numerous informal phone calls, text messages, and face-to-face conversations as well as two lengthy, recorded, semi-formal interviews. Throughout, Tarver was aware of my interest in studying the induction experiences of APTs, and he often shared a story or moment from his experience to raise my awareness of the particular challenges and supports he faced.

Imagining the telling of Tarver's story shaped my methodology in a few significant ways. Firstly, my conversations with Tarver were the primary factor that drew me towards narrative inquiry. Both in our formal interviews and in our casual exchanges, the dialogue seemed to consistently gravitate towards story, as Tarver would often share both small impactful narratives – a conversation with a colleague, a moment with a student, or a discussion with his principal – as well as larger overarching narratives – the kind of teacher identity he felt he was developing, the evolution of his classroom culture, or the ways in which he drew on his past experiences. Secondly, my conversations with Tarver provided a space in which my interview protocol could be shaped, tested, and reshaped. I went into both of my formal interviews of Tarver with an interview protocol largely cobbled together from other studies (Meister, 2018; Simmons, 2004), but as we moved from topic to topic, I found myself making changes to the protocol, as some questions proved fruitful, others fell flat, and new topics emerged organically from our conversations. Additionally, after making several revisions myself to the protocol, I invited Tarver to collaborate with me on one final revision, and his edits, additions, and subtractions all made their way into the final version included in the Appendix. Lastly, and most importantly, working with Tarver helped me to develop an awareness of what a collaborative partnership between teacher and researcher can look like. Having never done this kind of collaborative research before, I found myself overwhelmed again and again by the power of Tarver's story, his insightfulness into various facets of teaching and learning, and the poverty of my own ability to capture the nuances of the narrative. It was a truly humbling experience, as I found my thinking shifting from whether or not Tarver's story would provide enough insights into my questions to whether or not I would be able to tell Tarver's story faithfully and authentically. I remain profoundly thankful to Tarver for everything, but especially for giving me occasion to recognize the kind of humility that narrative inquiry requires.

their teaching. The post-interview focused on 'storying,' investigating: any summative reflections participants had, their feelings about the future, the ways in which their experiences compared to their expectations, the biggest challenges and the most helpful supports, the changes they hoped to make in the next semester, and any quintessential stories that seemed to best capture the whole of their first semester narrative. Though the protocol interview questions called teachers' attention to different moments in the semester that they might have found significant (e.g., a professional development training, the first set of parent-teacher conferences, etc.), each interview was centered around generic, open-ended questions (e.g., "How's teaching going?" "Tell me a bit about yourself." or "Any good teaching stories from this month?"), allowing the interviews to be driven by the teachers. Each interview was conducted via videoconference, recorded, and transcribed.

Researcher Positionality

As alluded to above, narrative inquiry demands that researchers take up their own positionality, especially when their experience dovetails with that of their participants, potentially providing an "insider perspective" that might "enrich the research" (Foote & Bartell, 2011, p. 66). For this study, I had some familiarity with almost all of the participants before the study started – I had taught two of them in an undergraduate class, and I had visited each of their schools previously in an observational or professional development capacity. Such familiarity was helpful relationally, providing a certain level of trust that facilitated honesty and openness; it was helpful conversationally, providing a set of contextual knowledge that allowed me to ask probing questions; and it was helpful analytically, providing background information that proved useful in stitching together their stories. However, this familiarity also led me to weave my own story, experiences, and biases into my participants' stories, mixing my interpretation of their

identities, actions, and transformations into their own interpretation of their identities, actions, and transformations. Additionally, my own experience as an APT influenced the study design, interview protocols, interview conversations, and multiple stages of the analysis process, shaping my interpretive lens through my various levels of resonance with the different stories told by the participants.

While I have attempted to separate the results section (in which the voices of the teachers are centered as purely as possible) from the discussion and implication sections (in which my own thematic analysis attempts an interpretation of the narratives), such a clear division is impossible and belies the subjectivity of the narrative inquiry process. In no way, then, does this study pretend to be objective, impersonal, generalizable, or verifiable; rather it seeks relationality, personality, cultural familiarity, and embeddedness (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The closeness between researcher and participants endows this study with a certain depth of inquiry but it also requires interrogation into, consciousness of, and transparency about my own story, some of which is taken up in the below paragraph and more of which finds itself woven into each of the following chapters.

My own story is firmly embedded within the culture and community of alternative preparation. Not only did I enter teaching as an APT, but I currently teach at a small liberal-arts college that does not offer an education major or certification, helping to prepare (as best I can) students who become interested in teaching to enter the teaching field as APTs. My experience, both as an APT myself and as a teacher of other APTs, has left me conflicted: on the one hand, I have seen many of my students struggle when they first enter the classroom (as I did), especially when not given adequate support from school leaders who assume they are familiar with the practicalities of teaching. This has left me wondering if they might have benefitted from a more

traditional preparation. On the other hand, I also have seen many of them thrive, giving me cause to believe that APTs have tremendous strengths that can be drawn upon and, in some ways, are exactly the kind of motivated, passionate, and compassionate people who ought to be encouraged *into* the teaching profession. I thus acknowledge that this inner conflict leaves me navigating my own changing beliefs and opinions about alternative preparation even as I seek to present the experiences and perspectives of others. Here and throughout the study, I have attempted to make transparent my own stances and analyses so that the voices of the participants might be more clearly heard and so that readers of these stories might be equipped to draw their own conclusions. I have intended this project to be, as is hopefully reflected in this methodology, a process of *researching with,* a "relational living alongside" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 23) that culminates in a co-composition wherein the participants' lived stories and the researcher's told stories fit together as a puzzle might fit, with enough definition around the particular pieces to be transparent to the observer but enough cohesiveness between the pieces to stitch together narrative meaning (Josselson, 2006).

Data Analysis

As described above, the methodology of narrative inquiry remains particularly problematic, as any type of analysis process necessarily transforms the data from the stories that participants tell of themselves into the stories that the researcher selected, curated, and represented (Kim, 2015). Still, as alluded to in the discussion of *narrative meaning,* narrative inquiry does not limit itself to mere factual reporting but seeks to excavate the meaningfulness that is present in story. Riessman (2008, p.13) recommends that "a good narrative analysis prompts the reader to think beyond the surface of a text" exploring questions of "how and why a particular event is storied," "what a narrator accomplishes" by telling a story in a particular way,

"for what purpose" a story is told, and "what cannot be said" by the storyteller. Thus, narrative analysis must be done delicately and, above all, must be continuously negotiated between the researcher and the participants, proceeding through an *iterative process* in which the narrative meanings excavated by the researcher are responded to, revised, and corrected by the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In an effort to preserve the complexity of story and the voices of the participants, my analysis process has eschewed any pre-established set of codes that might distill the larger narrative into rigid and preconceived bits and pieces, preferring instead a more collaborative approach that gives some structure to the task of the researcher while still seeking to honor the agency of the participants (Riessman, 2008). At each step in the process – the identification of transformative moments, the stitching of those moments into holistic narratives, and the inter-story thematic analysis – the participants had the first say, in their words and stories that both drove the analysis process and were preserved throughout, and they had the final say, in revising and approving any products that emerged. This study's iterative, collaborative analysis process took the following form.

Identification of Transformative Moments

Following Mezirow (2000), I began identifying the transformative moments in the participants' narratives with his four categories of transformations in mind: 1) new frames of reference; 2) elaborated frames of reference; 3) transformed points of view; and 4) transformed habits of mind. Looking at the data through each of these lenses led me to develop a set of four criteria by which transformative moments might be recognized and classified. First, *new frames of reference* were often particularly *salient* or noticeable moments in the interview where the participant would become animated or agitated. They often occurred when the participant took

control of the conversation (with a statement like: “Have I got a story for you this month…”) or as a first response to an open-ended question or even as a reaction to the final reflective question in the mid-semester interview protocol. They were delivered with passion and charged with emotion. Second, *elaborated frames of reference* were often associated with particularly *lengthy* descriptions by the participants in an interview as they meditated on a particular moment, processing it out loud and trying to make sense of how their views had started to subtly shift. They were not often immediately apparent in the data as a shocking or disturbing moment, but they emerged as participants had a lot to say, turning a moment over and over without interruption or prompting. Third, *transformed points of view* were often particularly *connected* moments that seemed to pop up again and again from the middle of nowhere, as participants were ruminating on something seemingly unrelated (with a statement like: “Weirdly enough, that reminds me of…”). These shifts in attitudes and beliefs seemed to impact other moments, influencing the way participants described themselves responding to other situations and contexts. And lastly, *transformed habits of mind* were often particularly *repetitive* as participants described routines or structures that had come to impact them. These moments emerged incrementally as their day-to-day life was described repeatedly. These four criteria – salience, length, connectedness, and repetition – allowed me to review an interview transcript, taking cues from the actions and attitudes of the participants and making an initial analysis of the stories they told that seemed especially transformative.

For example, consider the following excerpt from an interview with Leila in which she described a transformative moment in her narrative that both provided her with a new frame of reference and prompted a shift in her habits of mind:

> I'm no longer so stressed wondering – Am I teaching well enough? Am I doing it right? I know the content. I know how to teach. So I’m just going for it and trusting

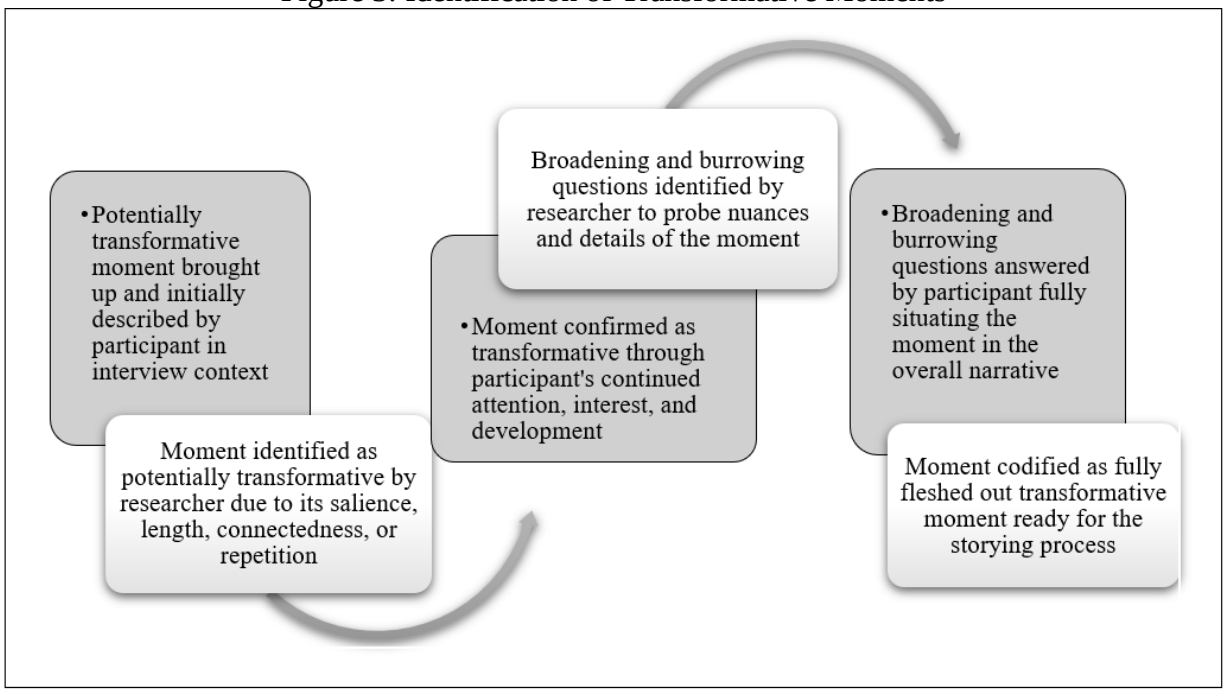
> that I can do it. And just taking that enormous weight off of my shoulders and letting myself just teach has made it a lot better. Probably the most significant thing for that was getting my students' standardized test scores back. They took these benchmark tests and a year's worth of growth on our standardized test is seven points and the lowest growth for any of my kids was eight points! So all of my kids have grown by a year's worth of skill in a quarter, and I feel very, very proud and excited and emotional! … And I feel like finally, this week, my fake self-assurance, which was kind of a fake-it-til-you-make-it thing has started to go away and I've started to have some real self-assurance. Being stressed about what everybody's thinking and whether or not I'm doing it right isn't working. Instead, I just need to trust myself and love my kids and let everything else be what it's going to be.

Though it is somewhat difficult to convey in transcript form, the story of receiving her students' benchmark results was an emotional one for Leila, as seen in her description of her disposition as "very, very proud and excited and emotional!" This animation was emblematic of the *salience* associated with a new frame of reference in which a novel event became a core experience that transformed the participant's "structure of assumptions and expectations" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16). Here, the concrete evidence of her students' learning became a reference point through which Leila interpreted other moments in the classroom and by which she developed new habits of mind. These habits of mind that emerged from her reference frame shift, namely the release of stress, the development of self-assurance, and the willingness to "trust myself" were restated throughout the interview as she described the impact of her transformative experience on her overall outlook on teaching and her daily routines. This *repetition* of her habit shifts provided confirmation that this experience was indeed a transformative one for Leila, indicating not only its novelty but also its significance in altering her teaching practice and its persistence in continuing to impact her thoughts and actions.

After an initial pass through the data to identify potentially transformative moments, I turned to the participants for collaboration and confirmation. Rather than wait until all data had been collected to begin the analysis process, I transcribed each interview soon after it occurred and compiled a list of the moments that I hypothesized might be transformative (those that

satisfied one or more of my criteria – salience, length, connectedness, or repetition). During the next month's interview, I referred often to my list, looking for opportunities to probe, confirm, or reject my hypotheses. Sometimes a moment reappeared organically in conversation, providing natural confirmation that it had indeed impacted the participant. At other times, I would find a chance to bring up a moment in conversation to gauge the teacher's reaction. If, on the one hand, they latched upon the reference and expanded upon it, I was able to validate my hypothesis of the moment as transformative, but if on the other hand, they dismissed the reference as unimportant or immediately shifted to a different story or idea, I could reject my initial analysis of the moment.[52] In this way, I kept a running list of potentially transformative moments throughout the interview process that had received various degrees of confirmation by the participants themselves (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Identification of Transformative Moments



[52] While I did look for opportunities to reference the moments from their previous interviews that I thought might be meaningful, I attempted to exercise caution and subtlety in bringing them up so as to not 'feed' them the key moments. If no opportunity presented itself, I did not force the issue, making sure to let the participants drive the conversation. I was not always successful in this, but I did try to position myself as responsive rather than conductive.

Finally, once a particular narrative (either a larger narrative arc or a shorter narrative moment) was identified as potentially transformative in the data and confirmed by the participant as actually transformative, I identified and asked several broadening and burrowing questions that allowed the participants to contextualize the moment and probe its nuances. Such questions were often less open-ended than the rest of the interview process (e.g., "Why did you find this moment to be particularly meaningful?"), but they provided an important occasion to solicit further thoughts from my participants. I resisted the temptation to assume that I already knew what was meaningful about their experiences and instead asked them to flesh out the details of their stories and confirm or deny my initial reactions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Storying and Restorying

After the initial identification of transformative moments and the accompanying broadening and burrowing questions, I undertook the storying and restorying process for each individual participant's narrative, attempting to stitch together the fragmented moments into something more holistic, identifying connections between moments, drawing out thematic threads, and articulating implications and significations (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This process, again, was iterative and collaborative as the stories were co-constructed through a dynamic back-and-forth progression that attempted to give voice and agency to the participants (Foote & Bartell, 2011) without overburdening them in an already stressful season of their lives (Perrone et al., 2019). I began by crafting an initial rough draft of each story, beginning with a set of block quotes from the interview data in which the participants described the semester's transformative moments in their own words.[53] I then attempted to connect the quotes to one

[53] While it might have been more authentic to ask the participants to author their own rough draft (as might be practicable when working with veteran teachers who may have more time), such an extensive writing project did not seem feasible or appropriate to ask of first-year teachers.

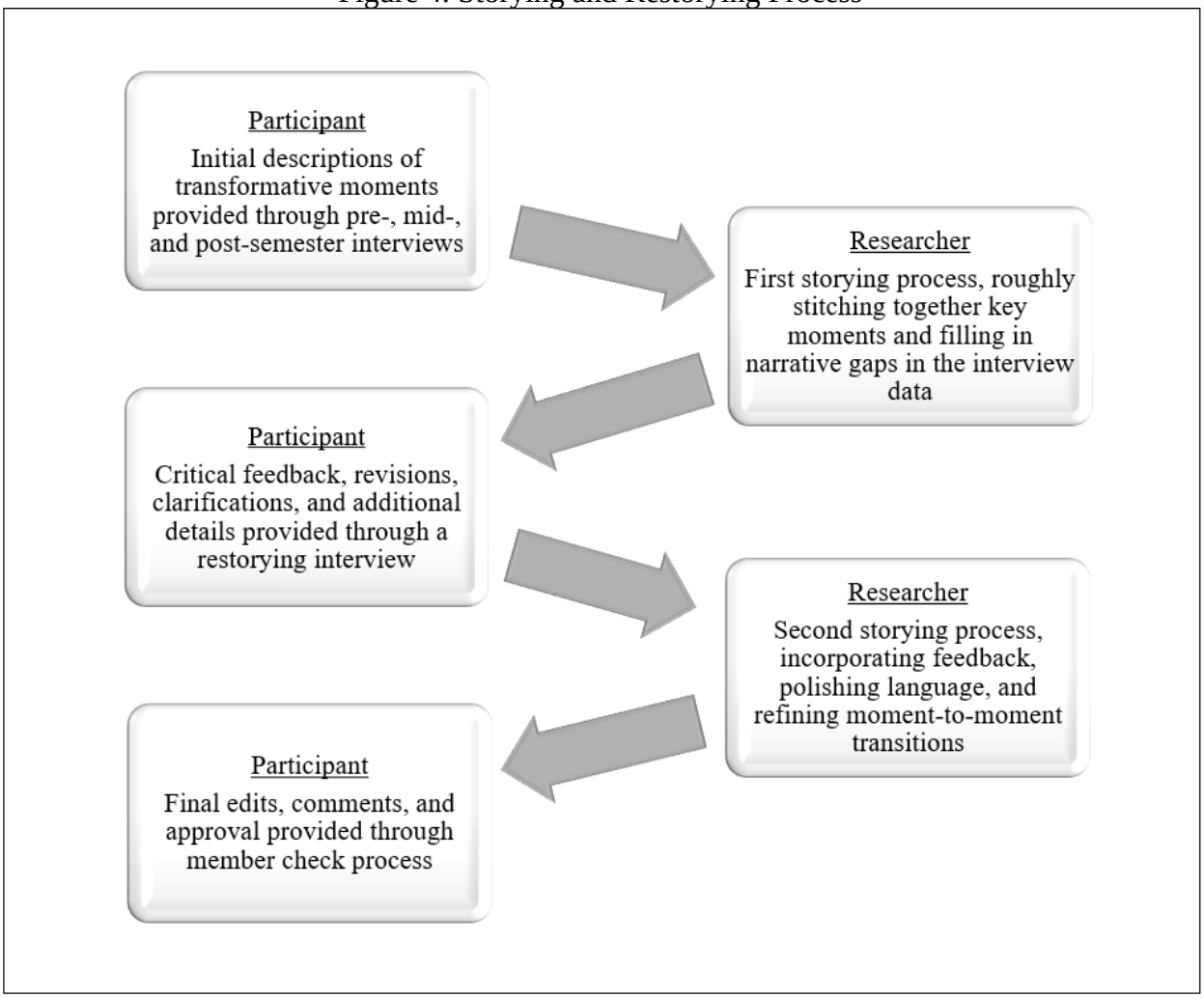
another, providing the contextual details necessary to trace the participant's progression from moment to moment. Finally, I ended this initial storying process by writing one synoptic paragraph at the beginning of each account attempting to summarize the overall narrative arc and highlight the key moments. In crafting this initial draft, I intentionally resisted the temptation to engage in narrative smoothing (Spence, 1986), leaving the rough edges, the unfiltered language, the narrative holes, and even some of the raw data in order to encourage my participants to notice moments where the story was incomplete, imprecise, or ill-defined, and engage in the restorying process.

These primitive storyings were then shared with the participants, who were able to revise, retell, and restory, correcting anything that felt inaccurate, adding additional explanations, and clarifying anything vague or imprecise. Once they had a chance to read and comment on the initial draft, I met with each participant to do a restorying interview in which they could bring any changes they hoped to make to the story, and I could bring any questions that emerged in the writing process that were still in my mind. These interviews took place in February or March and were unrecorded, but they proved central to the narrative inquiry process, covering a wide variety of topics, from the overall tone of the story to the nuances of particular moments to even individual word and grammatical choices.

With notes and revisions from these conversations in mind, I then engaged in a second storying process, composing a full (more polished) draft of each participant's narrative that attempted to present a faithful account of their stories that was woven throughout with their own language and authentically captured the spirit of their narrative. These full drafts were, once again, shared with the participants for a final member check (communicating back and forth electronically) to ensure that their stories were authentically presented. Any edits from this final

member check were accepted unconditionally and incorporated into the project's final draft. After making all of these changes, I arrived at a final version of the narratives, one that was shaped throughout by an iterative back-and-forth process between researcher and participants that attempted to "privilege the voice of the participant" and "render the meanings as presented in the interview" (Josselson, 2006, p. 4). Such an iterative process was (and perhaps needed to be) a bit nebulous, but it facilitated a dynamic exchange of ideas and cultivated a set of honest, comfortable researcher-participant relationships that hopefully enabled the preservation of five authentic first-semester APT narratives (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Storying and Restorying Process



In presenting these final narratives (the Results section below), I have attempted to preserve the authenticity of the stories in multiple ways. First, I have centered each story around a series of lengthy block quotes taken directly from the interviews. While these can, at times, be a bit onerous for the reader, they are essential in attempting to capture the tone and personality of each participant, seeing their experiences directly through their own words. Second, in the sections in which I am not directly quoting the participants, I have refrained (as much as possible) from providing my own descriptive or summative language, using instead the vocabulary, tone, and word choice introduced by the participants themselves. While this can, at times, feel linguistically repetitive, such a choice helps to guard against misrepresentation of the participants' narrative meaning. Finally, I have refrained from any kind of moderating, softening, or fact-checking process, resisting the temptation to tone-down or dilute the words of these teachers to make them more easily palatable or digestible. Some of what is said below is overstated from a place of anger or frustration; some of what is said is framed in deficit-perspective language; some of what is said even seems self-contradictory at times. The goal of this project, however, is to capture and present these very moments as the unfiltered experiences and thoughts of first-semester APTs that we can hear (and attend to) in their fullness.

Inter-Story Thematic Analysis

Only after the individual narratives were approaching their final form did I begin the process of investigating and articulating themes *across* the five participant stories. While such a process was guided in part by my own research questions (that focused on challenges and supports) and necessarily involved my own interpretation and framing (and should be read as such), I have attempted to preserve some of the same iterative and collaborative spirit that guided the whole analysis process. In so doing, I decided not to impose some external analysis structure

that could provide a concrete, efficient, and repeatable process; rather I proceeded delicately, responding to the participant stories to discern a methodology that fit the data I collected. Such a methodology trafficked, at times, in imprecision, but hopefully it also operated with authenticity. While it must necessarily remain a bit nebulous, I hope to include enough examples in the section below so that the reader can understand the rationale behind my choices.

I began by overlaying the five stories, looking not for small-scale comparisons but for a set of persistent concerns that every participant seemed to be sensitive to. In this initial pass, I was not attuned to the individual experiences of the participants; rather I began broadly, looking for the *kinds* of concerns around which their stories revolved. In so doing, I noticed three parallel concerns that were central to all the participants' stories, namely, the *temporal,* the *possessive,* and the *positional.*[54] *Temporal* concerns were marked by the length of time that a particular experience endured: some were short-term or momentary, others were sustained or persistent, still others were repetitive or rhythmic. Most stories told by the participants had some kind of time-sensitive language – when the experience occurred in the semester, what occurred before or after it, how often it happened, etc. *Possessive* concerns were marked by the language of presence (having, possessing, being given, etc.) or by the language of absence (missing, losing, lacking, etc.). Many stories told by the participants centered around the kinds of things that they had (both positive and negative) and the kinds of things they did not have (again, both positive and negative). Often, these possessive concerns came in pairs: the lack of a support that ought to exist became a present challenge while the absence of a challenge was similar to possessing a

[54] In naming these participant concerns "temporal," "possessive," and "positional," I was attempting only to respond to the patterns in the data, so any allusion to other semantic understandings or reference to other methodologies is unintentional. I recognize that these are most likely loaded words, and I am not immune to the nuances they carry and not unopposed to potential connections to other usages. Here, however, I am merely using them as a helpful initial methodological guide for myself and for the reader, and I hope that my definitions might stand a bit apart from potential equivocations.

support. *Positional* concerns were locational in nature, oriented towards where a given support or challenge originated, resided, or manifested itself. The primary divide in these concerns was between internally focused language (first-person, beliefs-oriented, identity-focused, etc.) and externally focused language (third-person, structural, other-focused, etc.). When encountering a challenge or relying on a support, most participants tried to place that challenge or support, identifying it as something that seemed to come from within themselves or something that seemed to originate externally from someone or something outside of their purview.

As an example of these three concerns occurring all together, consider this piece of data from an interview with Maya: "My principal has only observed me once for ten minutes all semester." Here, Maya exhibits a possessive concern by referencing the absence of any coaching or mentorship; she exhibits a positional concern in placing the source of that challenge externally (with her principal); and she exhibits multiple temporal concerns in referencing the momentary nature of the single observation and the sustained nature of the lack of support. Alternatively, consider this piece of data from an interview with Alanna: "It's always math. I'm not good at math." Here, Alanna describes her challenge as an absence of mathematical ability (possessive), locates her challenge internally (positional), and identifies it as something she has always struggled with (temporal).

Given these three overall concerns that seemed to persist throughout my data, I adopted three parallel analysis lenses that helped me attend to some of the more specific comparisons and contrasts present in the five narratives and arrive at some of the themes presented in the Discussion chapter. The participants' temporal concerns encouraged me to attend to the different *whens* of the stories in my intra-story analysis: happenings before the semester started, adjustments made in the first few weeks, habitual occurrences, mid-semester shifts, or rhythms

that were settled into over time. The participants' possessive concerns prompted me to compare the different *whats* of the narratives: what difficulties were present, what potential challenges were absent, what kinds of assistance were provided, and what potentially helpful supports were lacking. And the participants' positional concerns inspired me to investigate the *wheres* in the data: internal identity-related developments, self-efficacy concerns, external support structures, relationships with colleagues (the internal meeting the external), or challenges stemming from students, curriculum, or other outside sources.

Employing these three lenses allowed me to ask questions of the data that mirrored the concerns of the participants, arriving at a set of themes that were named and framed by the APTs themselves. For example, using time (the *whens*) as a comparative lens drew me to juxtapose Bri's pre-semester faculty retreat with Leila's initial hiring experience, finding a pair of moments at the outset of the semester that seemed to set the tone for the participants' induction experiences. Alternatively, focusing on the various presences and absences (the *whats*) gave me cause to compare the extra duties placed on Alanna's plate with the removal of Bri's carline duty, revealing the kinds of obligations that tended to overburden the teachers in their first semester. Finally, attending to the internal and external concerns that emerged from the interviews (the *wheres*) pointed me to the link between Grace's relational struggles with her co-teacher and Leila's feelings of gratitude towards her grade-level team, exposing the importance of relationships in a mentoring relationship. While the themes that emerged from this analysis were certainly shaped by my own biases and interests, I attempted throughout this process to preserve a spirit of collaboration, prioritizing the words and concerns of the participants, and letting the narratives of the teachers remain the driving force.[55]

[55] Importantly, I did not go back and revise the narratives of the teachers (the results) in light of the intra-story analysis (the discussion), letting the teachers' stories remain as raw, unfiltered, and holistic as possible.

CHAPTER 5: Results

The bottom line is good teachers make the difference.

-Wong (2004, p. 55)

The stories below comprise the core of this study. While some themes and patterns will be hazarded in later sections, each participant's first-semester experience appears here, first, on its own, as a holistic narrative. Every teaching story is unique, and while it is tempting to immediately look for commonalities, themes, takeaways, outcomes, consequences, or implications, I have committed first and foremost to listen and attend to the stories as stories – of real people, immersed in real classrooms and schools, doing real work – and allow them to speak for themselves. The words of these teachers are precious and this listening is a privilege, one that I have attempted not to take lightly.

As might be expected, given the volatility of the transition into teaching, each of the participants experienced both triumphs and adversities. On the one hand, all five APTs achieved various degrees of success in their practice, adjusting to the demands of the profession, growing in their teaching abilities, settling into rhythms and routines, effecting student learning, and generally carving out a space to do the work of teaching in their classrooms. All five found the job to be (more or less) fulfilling, and all five expressed their desire to persist in the profession for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, all five APTs also suffered various hardships over the course of the semester. No two hardships were alike – Maya battled isolation and abandonment, Grace battled disrespect and chaos, Alanna battled exhaustion and anxiety, Leila battled patronization and belittlement, and Bri battled fatigue and the fear of failure.[56] Each of

[56] I have used the word "battle" here in an attempt to capture the persistence and intensity of these challenges. While there was no taking up of arms and no head-on confrontation, none of the difficulties listed here were momentary or simple, and all of them did require some struggle, leaving "battle" as a reasonable image to employ.

these persistent challenges threatened their well-being, growth, and ability to thrive in the world of teaching, and in each case, the resources and support systems designed to help them meet these challenges were inadequate (or even became part of the problem). These narratives are thus a blend of triumph and adversity and should be read as such: the participants often found themselves prepared and empowered to meet the challenges in front of them, but they also often found themselves ill-equipped and unsupported, scrambling for answers and unsure of where to turn for counsel or support.

Methodologically, I have chosen to present each story chronologically, beginning with the participant's pathway into teaching, their pre-semester hiring, training, and orientation process, and their initial adjustment into the classroom. From there, the stories diverge through the middle of the semester, as the participants each encounter their own unique challenges, experiencing various stages of growth and struggle, success and failure, ease and resistance, triumph and setback. From this divergence, the stories once again converge at the end (at least in form) with each participant offering a set of final reflections that attempt to sum up their transition into the classroom and look ahead to their future prospects in the teaching profession.

Maya's Story

> *I just keep wondering if I am doing something wrong. There are so many little things to the curriculum that I know that I'm not getting all of them right, but I haven't really been given any guidance. And, I mean, nobody at the school knows anything about Singapore math, so what can the administration really say to me?*
>
> -Maya, November 29, 2022

On the surface, Maya's first semester was relatively smooth. She enjoyed her students, she found her job to be both doable and fulfilling, she got along reasonably well with most of her school's faculty and administration, and she was able to cobble together some semblance of a work-life balance. However, because her transition into the classroom was so smooth, she was left, by and large, to her own devices by an administration that focused its limited resources on solving the more pressing problems that faced her school in its first year. This neglect did give Maya the freedom to comfortably find her own feet in the classroom, which facilitated her ability to develop a good rapport with her students. Eventually, though, the frustration at being ignored began to weigh upon her as she started to crave more intentional support, guidance, and affirmation. In the end, while Maya did experience some growth in her profession, she felt that the lack of any systematic mentorship or coaching restricted that growth to what her own insights and efforts could teach her.

Pathway to Teaching

Maya's road to becoming an elementary teacher involved few experiences in classrooms of any sort. Growing up in a rural area, she was homeschooled for her entire primary and secondary education, taking only a few classes outside her home at a local community college. Maya loved to read, and while she remembers her mom to be an "adequate" teacher, much of her learning took place independently. Her few experiences in formal class settings over her last few

years of high school left her "feeling in a rut," and as such, she never seriously considered teaching as a profession until she arrived at college.

At the small liberal-arts college she went to, however, Maya thrived, catching a vision for what a learning community could look like:

> I remember the first time I ever actually thought about [teaching] was my freshman year of college when I discovered that I love learning so much. I realized – this is what a school community should be. I have learned more in one week than I have in four years of high school, and these professors are incredible.

Maya's love for teaching, then, manifested itself first as a love for learning, having been inspired by the joy, fulfillment, and friendship that education can bring to a group of students. Originally, she had no intention of studying education at all, earning a major and a minor in other disciplines,[57] but as she began to think about teaching as a potential career path, she earned a second minor in education. This allowed her to take a few education-specific classes but did not provide her with any kind of formal certification. As her time as a college student drew to a close, Maya had become passionate about learning and decided to pursue teaching as a career:

> So I think I just had a realization that I love school and I want to be doing this for the rest of my life. And if school is something fulfilling to me, then others need to know about it and I want to invest myself in it.

Though she had little formal training, Maya entered the classroom with a passion to help her students love learning, hoping to cultivate a "familial environment" centered around "warmth" so that her students would "go home and say, 'I love third grade!'"

As a college graduate without a teaching license, Maya was limited in her choice of schools to teach at (she refused to teach at a private school due to a lingering distaste for the "super elite private school" in her hometown that "charged $40,000 a year"). Fortunately, she

[57] The subjects Maya majored and minored in have been blinded at her request to preserve her anonymity. Similar blindings have been employed across all five of the stories.

(along with several of her close friends from college) got connected with a new charter school that was about to open its doors. Because the school was so new, they had many job openings, and their charter did not require teachers to be certified. Maya took a job as one of two third-grade teachers, transitioning directly from her undergraduate studies into the elementary classroom.

Pre-Semester Orientation

As might be expected from a brand-new school with few resources, Maya's pre-semester teacher training was scattered, providing lots of team-building exercises around the mission and vision of the school but little guidance on logistical specifics or teaching practices. The administration of the school did almost none of the pre-semester training themselves, but instead brought in a team of "experts" from a nearby college to do two weeks of onboarding. Maya found this somewhat frustrating as this training primarily consisted of generic recommendations from outside consultants who were unfamiliar with elementary education. This frustration was Maya's first transformative moment in her learning to teach, as she began to realize that no amount of energy, unity, excitement, or faculty culture could serve as an adequate replacement for training in the specifics of teaching practice:

> During training, all of the interpersonal stuff has been amazing, and when we all come together, there's a very unified understanding of what we're doing – we're all in this together. I mean, we do have defined roles, but everyone is helping everyone with everything, even the administration. … But some of the more logistical things were a big struggle, and to be perfectly frank, I feel like some of the teacher training staff were hired just because they needed to hire someone. And that sounds really harsh coming for me, and I'm not trying to be rude, but what is a former high school math teacher doing in my third-grade class telling me stuff about the theory of teaching math, you know? It was just super broad and a lot of theory, and I can definitely take a little bit of theory but let's get down to business! I start school in five days! Talking about how math is artistic is not helping! I mean, math philosophy is great, but three days before school starts – just, no. And it ended up being really stressful for me.

The training prioritized by Maya's administration provided a space for the faculty to become the tight-knit community that she relied upon for support throughout the semester. This "interpersonal" training, however, came at a cost, and the lack of emphasis on logistics, pedagogy, and curriculum left Maya to carve her own path into the world of classroom teaching.

Though she described herself as a "confident person" in general, this lack of guidance in the particulars of teaching left Maya, who had no classroom experience to fall back on, experiencing some trepidation heading into the semester. She often felt her lack of pre-service preparation, especially regarding practicalities of the profession – parent relations, interventions, and remediation:

> So my biggest worry is parent criticism. I just want the parents to be satisfied with me. And the ultimate worry is not even having interpersonal problems with the parents or having to respond to emails. It's just them thinking that I'm incompetent or that I'm too young because they think their child is really failing or struggling and that is a reflection of my teaching. So that's my real concern of just trying everything to alter my teaching and alter how I help that student and nothing is working and just feeling like there's no growth, no improvement.

Maya appreciated her administration's willingness to be "in this together" alongside the teachers, but even before the semester started, she identified the onboarding process as a missed opportunity for her school's leadership team to fill in some of the gaps felt by the inexperienced first-year teachers who made up a significant portion of the faculty.

Adjusting to the Classroom

After a rocky first few weeks getting to know her students and figuring out a set of procedures that would work for her in the classroom, Maya settled into a rhythm fairly quickly, as her expectations of "insane chaos, sadness, and despair" gave way to an easy "rapport" she found with her students:

> One of my favorite moments, and I think this moment, more than anything else, really helped me break out of my shell with the kids was when my kids were in music class and my mom texted me saying that our chicken, Roberto, was taken by

> the fox. And so I told my kids this when they got back and that became the subject of all of our lessons for the rest of the day. In literacy, we made up a bunch of sentences with interjections using Roberto and Francisco (we decided to name the fox, Francisco). And in math, all of our word problems had Roberto and Francisco. And I didn't really plan anything – I was planning things on the fly – and they genuinely loved it so much. And it really helped me – just to share something about myself that was not revealing anything about my personal life but felt very personal to them. And that was a very good moment where we had actually built some sort of relationship as a group. And just letting my guard down a bit with them has helped me to feel comfortable in the classroom, where we can just laugh together and share things together.

Having been left to figure things out on her own by an administration that only stopped by her class "once for ten minutes," Maya felt complete freedom to be herself in the classroom, a vulnerability that immediately allowed her to connect with her students. While she "never crossed any super personal lines," she shared things from her life with them, creating a culture of honesty, lightheartedness, and engagement that fueled her instruction. She trusted her instincts in the classroom, working "on the fly" to design lessons that would appeal to the students, and with no one observing her classes and no mentor peering over her shoulder, she was able to really let her imagination shine.[58] Rather than force herself (or be forced) to conform to some external set of teaching expectations, Maya described herself as "secretly a little grateful" that her administration did not have a more active presence in her classroom as it empowered her to create a classroom where she could thrive:

> Right now, I have a lot of energy to really improve. The first couple weeks was getting a hang of things, where I was just trying to understand what it takes to teach. But recently, I've been settling into the whole rhythm of it. I've been doing a lot of my planning for the day during my planning periods – just trying to feel the energy of the day to know what questions to ask. And I just love the third grade humor – it is definitely my speed and they're meeting me where I'm at. They're also figuring things about me slowly that are just hilarious – like me being very unathletic or me not being able to jump rope at all – and it's those moments, where they recognize that I am a real person, that I have really really loved. There's definitely been

[58] During the retelling of one particularly interactive lesson on rounding numbers that the students "loved" and were "motivated" by, she began to question whether or not her administration would have approved: "Oh gosh, I hope I don't get in trouble for this."

> struggles, but for the most part I do really feel I have established a pretty good rapport with most of them which has really helped me to find my feet as a teacher.

Maya's ability to establish a classroom culture that fit her strengths and connected with her students created a relaxed environment that provided her with stability and self-confidence. Her willingness to trust her in-moment creativity made the task of lesson planning a little bit lighter, which in turn allowed her to take less work home and preserve a work-life balance. Her strong personal relationships with her students provided her with a "good foundation" from which to "address the behavioral issues" she encountered. And the joy that she found in the classroom catalyzed her growth, motivating her to freely experiment with pedagogical techniques, discovering some that worked and some that did not.

Beyond the freedom to do what she wanted in the classroom, however, Maya was provided with little tangible support. She did have one hour a week where an "intervention specialist" was assigned to her classroom, but otherwise, her school did not have the budget or resources to provide her with other supports:

> The one good thing is the intervention specialist does come in for thirty minutes every Tuesday and Thursday, and I have purposely scheduled composition because I tried it without her and there were two kids that couldn't write anything on their papers. So she basically is helping them one-on-one the entire time for writing. And those are my low students,[59] but everybody in my class needs severe help with their writing. So having [the interventionist] take those two boys out while I just kind of go around the room has been really helpful just because I'm not worried about them getting nothing done.

Maya found the presence of a classroom aide valuable to provide targeted support to her students and enable one-on-one instruction, but the school only had a single intervention specialist, who

[59] While each of the participants most often spoke highly, considerately, affirmatively, and thoughtfully about their students, occasionally some deficit perspective language would emerge in the heat of the interview as seen here. This language has been included in the stories for the sake of authenticity and transparency, but it is certainly regrettable. Deficit thinking towards students can be the cause of a number of perilous habits in teachers including an inability to critically examine their assumptions, an unwillingness to make changes in practice, and the superimposition of failure narratives upon their students. For a more thorough treatment of deficit thinking among teachers and its consequences, see Garcia and Guerra (2004) or Valencia (2012), among others.

spread her time over all the elementary grades and sections. Outside of this one hour a week, Maya was on her own. She never blamed the school for the lack of help or guidance, believing them to be "doing their best," but the lack of an established culture of support and expertise afforded her little recourse to address any challenges she experienced.

Craving Tangible Opportunities for Growth

As the semester progressed and Maya started to become more nuanced in her teaching, her desire to grow found fewer and fewer avenues in which she could make progress. Maya never lost her creative energy for improvement, but without any outside coaching or mentoring, she began to feel stagnant in her craft, discouraged that she was left to figure things out on her own. She hit a mid-semester "wall," frustrated with problems that kept recurring: how to reach students who needed extra interventions, how to effectively pivot away from an activity or explanation that fell flat, how to manage the logistical challenges of teaching without succumbing to exhaustion, etc. As these questions kept resurfacing, the complete freedom from observation and coaching that was essential to her development began to be more of a hindrance than a help:

> I've just been pretty stressed out these past few weeks. I mean, things have been supportive in the sense that I have felt pretty positive about being with the faculty and the administration, but I mean, there is really no guidance. I'm doing okay, I guess, and they're assuming I'm doing my job in there every day, and I'm not on fire, so it's not like they've been unsupportive. I just don't think they've been explicitly interested in how they can help. Which is okay. I understand that. It's a first-year school, and I get it. But they definitely do ask a lot, and I'm just frustrated that they don't understand how much you do – you have to be the counselor, social worker, teacher, mom, all of these different things. It's okay. It's fine. But there needs to be some administrator that helps out with the teaching and really holds the teachers accountable to it because no one is holding us accountable to our curriculum and there needs to be some accountability here.

Maya arrived at a point in her teaching where she *desired* accountability. Her administration was stretched thin, needing to focus their limited time and energy on more pressing issues, and since

Maya was “not on fire,” they left her to navigate the complexities of teaching on her own. While not completely overwhelmed, she desired some intentionality from her administration: guidance, accountability, observation, feedback, training, or a point of contact that could give her new ideas and hold her responsible to implement them. She often described herself as feeling “too comfortable,” wanting “some of the pressure” and needing “to be pushed” so that she could move beyond her own “complacency.” Her greatest source of accountability came not from her administration but from her students, as their continued desire to learn gave her the impetus to discover new and effective means to encourage them in their pursuit of knowledge: “There are times where I just feel – oh my gosh, I just don't want to do this right now. But I absolutely have to, because there are 27 students holding me accountable right now.” Other than that, Maya felt abandoned, and this isolation began to weigh upon her as she cast about for ways to improve her practice.

As the semester went on, Maya’s frustration deepened as she became more aware of the opportunities for growth she was missing and more discouraged at the lack of support she was receiving:

> I just crave some support of just someone who can say – you're doing it this way but really this other way is the good way to do it. Rather than just fluffy remarks. I don't know how much benefit it is for them to come into a random classroom for ten minutes. I suppose it's good to check up on things, and I guess it’s fine support, but I don't think it's the best support that they could be putting their energy to. I need someone in my classroom regularly who can say – okay, this transition really works, this transition doesn't, or this procedure could be better, or what if you taught things this way. And I would need to know that they actually have been in the elementary classroom before at a charter school for more than a few years.

At this point, Maya resigned herself to the limitations of her first-year school, namely that there was no one with the experience and expertise necessary to guide her through her challenges. She believed that “for a first-year school, they have done a really good job,” but also that “there's really no one I can turn to for concrete advice.” The leadership at her school was ill-equipped to

handle the teacher coaching that its many new teachers would require (and "crave"). As a result, Maya continued to manage on a daily basis, but she struggled to envision or enact more ambitious teaching practices.[60]

Learning to Teach Mathematics

Maya's mid-semester struggles found their clearest expression in the subject of mathematics, where her limited training in the curriculum, her dislike of the subject, and her lack of ongoing support left her with confusions and reservations that impacted her teaching:

> Recently I've encountered a bunch of discouraging things [in teaching math]. I don't even know how many times I've explained bar modeling in word problems, but it's too many. And it feels like almost all of them are just not getting it at all. And it's so hard to know how we can effectively do this while not wasting thirty minutes on one problem. Now I did talk to some of the other teachers and they had similar experiences because it's a new math method for all the students, but I had no idea whether or not anything I did was working. The math, I don't doubt its effectiveness and I know I need to trust this program and I think it works, but some of my students just still aren't getting it.[61]

As she uncovered the intricacies of her mathematics program, Maya felt frustrated at the complexity of the curriculum, the logistics and procedures required to implement it efficiently, and her own inability to communicate effectively to her students. Because the same challenges kept resurfacing, her faith in the curriculum began to wane, and because she had no one she trusted to answer her questions, she felt trapped in a loop of frustration. Maya's independence gave her the autonomy to find her footing in the classroom, but once she got her feet underneath her, she needed more dynamic supports that could encourage, inspire, and stimulate her growth as a practitioner:

> I just keep wondering if I am doing something wrong. There are so many little things to the curriculum that I know that I'm not getting all of them right, but I

[60] When asked in an interview to recall the best piece of advice she received, Maya said she couldn't think of anything that had really moved the needle for her in her growth as a teacher.

[61] Again, note the deficit perspective language.

> haven’t really been given any guidance. And, I mean, nobody at the school knows anything about Singapore math, so what can the administration really say to me?

Due to the complexities of the curriculum chosen by the school (Maya described it as “not user friendly”), mathematics was the discipline where Maya felt her school’s relative immaturity most keenly. She often appreciated feeling “all in the same boat” with her coworkers and administration, but for mathematics, she craved the guidance of someone with experience who could speak directly to the challenges she encountered.

Near the end of the semester, Maya reported some improvement in her mathematics teaching mostly through her own trial and error. Yet, even as she grew in her curricular knowledge, she encountered more questions she was ill-equipped to answer on her own:

> I think the math is starting to make a little more sense, but I don’t think I understand what it is supposed to do. I'm very much a rules person when it comes to math and I just rely on the method or the formula because that's how I got by in math class. I’ve never approached problems from a more organic way like Singapore wants you to do. And I’ve noticed that a lot of the girls in my class are like that and I understand them, so it does give me a lot of sympathy for my students because I get the struggle. But I feel a bit out of my comfort zone and I just feel like I'm holding them to standards that I don't meet myself sometimes. Oh my gosh – here's a story. I put a word problem up on the board that I could not solve! And it was really really embarrassing! The students were so kind and sweet about it, but it was humbling, and I definitely have some insecurity with the math problems that I'm putting on the board and I feel like I am not confident in it at all. I've been able to teach it okay, but I haven't done math for a really long time, and I didn't do well in math ever really. I know I need to get better and learn more about the Singapore method, but it's just hard because I have zero time to be doing math for fun right now. I think math is going to be my summer project, because I need to grow in this method and grow in numeracy and fluency and learn how to introduce bar models in a totally different way.

Once again, Maya’s ability to build and sustain relationships with her students allowed her not only to survive an embarrassing moment but redeem it as an opportunity to empathize with her students’ struggles. Still, the more she encountered the conceptual approaches to mathematics the curriculum encouraged her to prioritize, the more she became aware of her own need to expand her repertoire of mathematics teaching techniques. Her rapport with the students allowed her to

work through most of the particular pedagogical dilemmas, but she was not satisfied with merely "getting by." But because "nobody at the school knows anything about Singapore math," she ended up just putting off the problem until the summer, when she anticipated having more time to study the curriculum on her own.

Teaching in Community

Amidst the absence of meaningful coaching or mentorship, Maya's greatest support remained her fellow teachers. The learning community that developed early on among the faculty persisted throughout the semester, and Maya was never lacking for supportive colleagues who were willing to listen, share ideas, commiserate, and encourage. First among these colleagues was her roommate and fellow first-year teacher, Evelyn:

> The thing that is absolutely the most supportive is just living with Evelyn, for sure. I don't even have to think about that answer. It helps that we're friends, but I think it ultimately just helps that we're both new teachers. So we're able to really talk about all these things and bounce ideas off of each other with no judgment at all. … It just takes the little stressors off because it's that one extra person that kind of holds you accountable. And especially in the down times, she's helped me so much, and in the times where all you can do is laugh, we can just die of laughter together. We have bonded so much, and we've both just found a way to love it. We've loved the job and we've loved the faculty. And it feels so good to just sit down and have a glass of wine and make dinner together on Friday and feel like you've spent your time purposefully with someone else. I mean we are exhausted, but it feels so deserving. It feels so fulfilling.

Though she was not a formal coach or mentor, Evelyn provided some of what Maya craved from her administration: a sounding board to "bounce ideas off" of, a source of encouragement through the challenging moments, and a resource for co-imagining new ideas and techniques. In the absence of expertise, Maya found a refuge in community, leaning on her friends and coworkers to make the job of teaching both doable and enjoyable.

Final Reflections

In a certain sense, Maya's story was marked by a relative lack of obstacles or complications. She transitioned into teaching almost seamlessly and encountered few personal or professional challenges that left her questioning her choice of profession, yet her growth curve over the semester remained flatter than it might otherwise have been due to the absence of true mentorship and tangible support. Still, Maya's love for teaching grew, and she ended the semester not only determined to persist in the profession but hopeful to remain with her current school for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps her biggest hesitation in envisioning her future as an educator was due to the negative public perception of the work of teaching and the lack of validation that she often felt as a result:

> This sounds weird, but probably the thing that weighs on me the most right now is honestly other people's perspectives [on teaching]. A lot of people in my life have a very low opinion of teaching and they shouldn't. A lot of my extended family have just kind of dismissed it and so sometimes I'll doubt myself and almost start to hear their voices in the back of my head which is really hard. So it's just hard to feel validated at this job and break out of that shell or that boundary that people put you in. It's not babysitting, you know? But teaching as a profession is just so looked down upon. The people who say things like, "God bless you – I could never do that. How do you do it?" I don't want that response. Don't make it sound like I'm cleaning toilets. I don't want your pity right now because I actually find this to be very enjoyable. And then you also get that segment of people who say stuff like, "Oh, third grade, huh, shouldn't you at least be teaching upper school or something?" And it's just pretty insulting because third grade is actually really hard to teach, but people think I should be sitting at a computer at a corporate job somewhere in a business suit. No thank you. I'm very happy engaging in real human life with these students, but it is hard because the lack of appreciation can just creep into your head.

Her administration's lack of involvement in her classroom not only affected Maya's ability to grow in her craft, but it also affected her self-efficacy, robbing her of a source of affirmation and validation. While Maya's own opinion of teaching remained positive, being neglected by her

administration meant she spent the majority of the semester not only uncoached but also unthanked.

Grace's Story

> *Having really bad moments has actually made me more rooted because I've had these bad moments. I'm through them, and I just need to not let them get to me. Especially with middle schoolers -- they're just, they're so mean and rude and they say horrible things and they act like they hate you. And I think now, having pushed through so many of those moments, I can kind of keep my emotional constancy. It just doesn't get to me as much, which is good. You can't be sensitive if you're teaching middle school. You can't! You can't be insecure!*
>
> -Grace, October 27, 2022

Grace's story is one of struggle, of perseverance, and of burnout, perpetuated by a few tragic moments that left deep scars on her psyche. Little of what Grace encountered in the classroom was easy, and while she was supposed to have a variety of supports, the majority of them proved inadequate to help her meet the significant challenges she encountered. Grace persevered in enduring these challenges, experiencing personal and professional growth, especially in her rootedness, fortitude, and determination. Still, she struggled to overcome her students' persistent disrespect and her administration's systemic neglect, and ultimately, they both stunted her growth as a teacher and threatened her love of the teaching profession.

Pathway to Teaching

Grace's primary motivation to become a teacher came from the transformative power that she found in her own high-school experience. Throughout her time as an elementary and middle school student, Grace never enjoyed school and struggled with apathy and loneliness, but during her high school years, a series of teachers helped her discover passion, joy, and community:

> We were reading and analyzing books and just thinking deeply about them, and it sounds kind of obvious, but I had never really been challenged to think deeply about anything before, and that was the first moment that just opened me up to realizing – oh, there's so much here and so much to think about.

Grace thrived under the inspiration and guidance of the teachers who became her "role models," growing in "confidence" and "really develop[ing] a love of learning, especially the humanities."

Having discovered how much she enjoyed reading, thinking, and learning, Grace went on to earn a philosophy major at her liberal-arts college, but she also earned an education minor, hoping that by becoming a teacher she might help the next generation of students to overcome their own difficulties:

> The biggest thing that drives me is just seeing my teenage self in my students because my teenage self was pretty broken, pretty confused, very alone, not really passionate about much of anything, and just really struggling. And it was my education and my teachers that kind of brought me out of that and re-grounded me in something else. So I know everybody has a different teenage experience, but I think everybody's teenage experience is formative, everyone struggles in some way, and so I know I will have some potential to impact [my students]. And I think seeing my teenage self in them gives me more confidence to reach out and bring them into what I'm doing. I know I haven't met my students yet for this year, but I'm hoping to kind of try to make that connection.

Having experienced the kind of transformative power that the classroom could have on a person, Grace was driven to be a role model for her own students, hoping to encourage those who might be "broken" or "alone" and to inspire them to find their own passions.

To that end, upon graduation, Grace sought out the opportunity to work in a low-income school with underserved students, earning acceptance into a fellowship program that placed recent college graduates at disadvantaged schools in urban areas. She had a heart for students who "might not have as many opportunities or privileges," and she was excited about the chance to jump into a classroom with underserved students:

> I think my number one thing [that I rely on] is just my passion for education. I'm not here to make money. I'm not making money. I'm here because I want to be, and I think what I'm doing is really exciting and meaningful. This is a year of mission and

> service, so I want to be a presence in their life.[62] I want them to feel loved and known by me.

Like many APTs, Grace was missionally minded, pursuing teaching not so much as a profession but as a calling, seeking to serve her community and effect change. Still, Grace was not naïve about the challenges she expected to face, acknowledging her shortcomings and eager for support:

> I know I don't have an education degree or too much training or classroom experience, but I do feel confident because passion is something you can't teach or force or train. I want the teacher training though, and coming in, I just feel – give me all the training and everything. So I feel like I'll just need to be really receptive to coaching and training.

At the outset, Grace was confident in the resources she could draw on as a teacher, but she also knew that she faced a daunting task ahead of her, a task for which she hoped to find significant support from the coaching and mentorship of her school's administration.

Pre-Semester Orientation

When she reported to her fellowship program, Grace received five weeks of extensive pre-semester training, both as a part of her fellowship and at the individual school to which she was assigned. She was housed in an apartment with multiple other program members, and while most of them worked at other schools in the district, she did have a community of like-minded individuals who shared her ideals and passions.[63] During her training, she attended sessions on routines, class structure, procedures, discipline philosophies, classroom management, and relationship building. Many of the sessions centered on "role-playing" where Grace was given

[62] While Grace's missional language here seems well-intentioned, it runs the risk of slipping into a dangerous mindset in which the teacher positions the students as 'in need of saving.' For a more detailed formulation of this argument, see Brown (2013) or Matias (2016), among others.

[63] One important facet of her fellowship was that it welcomed APTs, so the majority of her housemates were also without traditional preparation or teacher certification. Grace would say that "less than half" of the members of the fellowship program were education majors.

the chance to imagine how she might respond to various "difficult student behavior issues." While these trainings were helpful and addressed some of the weaknesses and insecurities she felt in her teaching, she found them to be conspicuously one-sided, focusing on managing the classroom at the expense of curriculum and pedagogy:

> Throughout all of our five weeks of training, we haven't had one look at the curriculum, so teachers don't even know what they're teaching. I want to be prepping and reading stuff, but maybe the vision here for the teacher doesn't have as much of an intellectual focus or the teacher doesn't really pull any intellectual weight. We haven't really walked through how the day looks or even what they specifically expect us to do each day. I think it would've been good to have gone through some curricular stuff earlier or even if they could give us the curriculum ahead of time, we could look through it on our own. But I would have really liked a rundown of some stuff like – this is how we do humanities, this is what you'll be teaching, this is what that teaching should look like.

While this lack of attention to curricular content and teaching methods was not overly concerning to Grace at the time (this was the area in which she felt most confident in her own abilities), it caused her to doubt whether her school's vision for the role of the teacher in the classroom was aligned with her own. Her "favorite part" of teaching was, unsurprisingly, the very thing that she appreciated about her own role models from high school, namely, "putting together a lesson" and "figuring out the right questions to ask" so as to "make it relatable" and help her students engage with the content. At her school, however, the curriculum was "secondary," having been forced to the background by an intense focus on responding to student misbehaviors.

In addition to the weeks of training, Grace was given a plethora of official and unofficial mentors who were to guide her throughout the semester. She was assigned a mentor by her fellowship who she met with every week, and she was also given both an instructional coach and

a character lead[64] by her school, each of whom Grace could go to for help. Before her weekly coaching sessions, Grace was required to record a ten-minute video of her teaching and then submit a reflection on the video that could serve as the basis for their coaching conversations. She also taught some of her lessons with an experienced co-teacher in the room who could assist with anything that was immediate or urgent. Ostensibly, then, Grace had an abundance of formal supports that she should have been able to rely on, but the number of people she had to report to and the "pretty long reflection[s]" she had to write "end[ed] up being busy work" and made her feel like she was "jumping through hoops."

Adjusting to the Classroom

Grace's first few weeks were challenging as she adjusted to the "extreme misbehavior" of the student body, a true shock to Grace who "had never been around kids that would act like this before." In each of her classes, Grace regularly experienced dishonesty, sarcasm, verbal abuse, disobedience, refusal to follow directions, outright defiance, and general disrespect of her authority. Yet, in the face of a student culture plagued by rule-breaking and disrespect, Grace's school had "basically no discipline structure" and encouraged their teachers merely to have "restorative conversations" instead of providing students with consequences for their actions. All the role-playing training sessions Grace received before the semester were intended so that *she* could handle every classroom management scenario herself by "relationship building" with her students, but as a result "all the stress is put on the teachers because we're the ones who have to deal with these issues every day." Grace's administration discouraged her from referring students

[64] Grace's school was structured so that each teacher reported to both an instructional coach and a character lead. Her instructional coach handled anything the majority of her academic support – curriculum issues, assessment, student learning support, IEPs, etc. – while her character lead was supposed to be a specific support for student behavior issues – classroom management, student discipline, relationship building, etc. Grace initially expressed surprised that they had a whole position dedicated to the character lead, but as she got to know the culture of the school, it made much more sense (although, as seen below, her character lead was not as supportive as he could and should have been).

to the office as a consequence for misbehavior, and even when Grace did reach a breaking point and sent a student to the office, they were merely sent right back into class after a short conversation without any accompanying consequence: “It's been frustrating to deal with because there's kids who come in every single day and disrespect, get a referral, have a restorative conversation, come back in, do the same thing.” Grace was trained in relationship-building before the semester started, but her administration did not have a structured disciplinary system that she could make use of, leaving her feeling unsupported and frustrated.

Despite her frustrations, Grace remained true to her initial desire to be coachable and threw herself into establishing positive classroom routines and building the kind of relationships envisioned by her administration. Grace had a mission to serve her students, and she trusted the recommendations of her mentors as to the best way to do that, despite the lack of institutional support backing her. And though the persistent misbehavior and disrespect threatened to overwhelm her, she did experience some small successes with a few of her students:

> There was one boy who was having a really bad day and he was not being cooperative at all. I asked him to sit down, he would just say no, and then he started making a scene with some stuff going kind of crazy. And I was able to get over my frustration at him for disrupting and disobeying, and I decided to go in and relationship-build. And I talked to him and said, “I've really loved getting to know you in class so far and I love having you in class, but today has been a rough day and I don't want this to become a pattern. What's going on? Is there anything I can help you with?” And then he just started crying and saying that another teacher already called his mom and that he was scared he was going to get in trouble. So then we kind of talked through it, and ever since then we've been best friends. And now his whole friend group -- we just have this good energy. I come into class and they have a joke for me or look to give me a fist bump.

In the face of disrespect, Grace remained committed to the mission of her school and chose to reach out to her students with forgiveness, kindness, and relationship-building. While many of these moments required her to let student misbehaviors go unaddressed, leaving her feeling like

she was enabling their disrespect, Grace made some inroads with her students through her compassion.

While the majority of Grace's energy was directed towards the persistent challenges of classroom management, the work she was doing to build relationships also started to enable student learning, providing her a foundation for instruction in curricular content:

> There was this one girl who would always sleep in class. And she would never do her exit ticket, she would never ask questions, never answer questions. And then one day she gave me this really thoughtful exit ticket. So I gave her so much good feedback and told her, "This was amazing, I love it so much!" And I realized that she was really motivated by achievement because we were talking about levels of happiness and she said the thing that would make her happiest was getting Scholar of the Year. So I gave her a lot of praise, and then her next exit ticket was even longer, more thoughtful. She was really getting into it. I gave her more praise. And then I gave her the Student of the Week award and from then on, she's been focusing in class, even raising her hand sometimes. Honestly, this sounds bad, but I was tempted to lose hope with her.[65] I had resigned myself to call it a victory as long as she was awake in class.

When Grace was able to connect with her students on a personal level, she started to see those connections bear fruit academically as well. The more she got to know her students and understood what was important to them, the more she was able to tailor her lessons and her feedback to be meaningful to them. At times, her persistent battle with behavior issues caused her to lose hope, but she "kept showing up," she "kept persevering," and she "kept enduring."

Behavioral Challenges

Such successes, however, were scarce, and every inroad Grace made seemed to be balanced out by a series of regressions. Her students knew that they could say or do whatever they wanted in her classroom, and even if she sent them to talk to her character lead, they would be "sent right back" into the classroom after a "restorative conversation." And in Grace's opinion, even these restorative conversations were misplaced, as the teachers were left to act as

[65] Again, note the deficit language that emerged at times.

the disciplinarian (the "bad cop") while the administrators got to do the reconciliation and restoration (the "good cop"). For the most part, Grace remained kind and patient towards her students, but the persistent culture of misbehavior that permeated her school often left her feeling burdened, unsupported, and unable to make any academic strides with her students.

The moment that epitomized Grace's struggles occurred one day during an intervention block she assisted with, where she pulled out small groups of students for targeted support:

> One day my co-teacher was gone, so I had the whole group to myself and three of our most challenging behavioral students were in that classroom and it was 27 kids. And it was just insane. I had no control over what they were doing. They were out of their seats shouting, and me telling them to sit in their seat did nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was just crazy! And then two of the boys started kind of making fun of me, and then they started making really, really inappropriate comments about me and jokes about me to my face. And they just thought it was the funniest thing ever. And it was really hard. And then the last five minutes of class, they decided to have a screaming competition. And I just felt helpless and I just couldn't believe that kids could be so mean to another human being. And then towards the end, the last five minutes, I started crying because I was so overwhelmed. And then one of the girls noticed and said – Miss Wilman's crying guys – and then they were all laughing and I couldn't stand it any longer so as soon as the next teacher came in, I just ran out.

Grace had developed pretty thick skin by this point in the semester, but on this day, her students made her class uninhabitable, completely disrespecting her to the point where she was called a "whore" to her face. Even weeks later, every time Grace remembered the story, she got emotional. The experience left scars on her as a teacher and as a human being. More scarring, however, was the response of her school's administration when she informed them of the incident and asked for their support:

> I went and talked to our character lead who handles student behaviors and I told him what the kids were saying and doing and the exact quotes of what they said and I even teared up a little as I was talking to him because I was still emotional about it. And he … he responded with no empathy … none at all … I'm sorry give me a minute … He responded … he just said, "Well, you need to have clear expectations for the kids."[66] I gave them expectations! It was to be silent and work

[66] The ellipses in this quote represent moments where Grace was overcome with emotion.

> independently. That's not the problem here! … Dealing with the kids was hard but not feeling supported by leadership was so hard because then I felt it was my fault. I just couldn't imagine that kids could speak to a teacher that way and not get a big consequence. So that was just really hard because then if I had felt supported by leadership, I would've felt – okay, now I'm good, leadership's got my back. But now, it's just -- that could happen every day! I have to go back in there tomorrow!

Instead of feeling supported, Grace felt that her administration placed the blame squarely on *her* shoulders, dismissing her concerns as a product of her own ineptitude. Instead of intervening in some way, disciplining the students or providing some structure for relationship repair, Grace's administration abandoned her, leaving her feeling both guilty and afraid. This prevailing "kids-will-be-kids" attitude left her in shock that there could be no consequences for the actions that had hurt her. Not only did Grace feel that there were no structural supports in place that she could avail herself of to relieve the stress of classroom management, but she also felt that there were no personal supports who were willing to listen, sympathize, or help.[67]

After feeling dismissed by both her program lead and her character lead (the people who were supposed to support her in behavioral situations), Grace did finally find someone to take her story seriously (her instructional coach) and at least brainstorm some ways she might respond were it to happen again. But given this was the "fourth person [she] came to for help," at that point, Grace had already resigned herself to the belief that she had been abandoned by an administration that "didn't know me or my teaching" and "never took any action." The very next week, Grace was left alone with the same group of students, and the same thing happened. While she was a bit more emotionally prepared to respond to the situation, she felt equally helpless and

[67] Here and at other places in the various narratives where the participants found themselves at odds with their mentors or administrators, it is important to remember that the limitations I intentionally imposed on my data collection necessarily impose a one-sidedness on these stories. While Grace's feelings about this interaction with her administration are certainly central to the story of her first-semester experience, they also represent only one side of a complex interaction among multiple individuals who are living their own stories. In these moments, I have attempted to preserve the force of the participant's opinions in order to maintain the authenticity of their stories, but I also recognize the need to maintain an asset-based perspective on all individuals that assumes they bring their own perspectives and purposes to the work.

unsupported. These moments weighed on Grace throughout the rest of the semester, and while she tried not to blame herself, the certainty that she would never find support from the leadership of her school caused her to explore the possibility of finding another place to work at the end of the year:

> Up until the rough points in November, I was really wanting to stay at this school. But afterwards, I think it's just honest that I don't think I have it in me. I just don't think I have what it takes to teach at this school. And people have told me, "Oh no, you could totally do it," but honestly, I'm not being self-deprecating, I just genuinely think I don't have it in me to teach at a school with leadership that isn't supportive and very disorganized. We literally have teachers dropping like flies. There was one week we had three teachers leave. It's chaos! It's tough because I don't want to give up on these kids and I feel bad for backing down from the challenge, but I don't know if I would be able to do it, and long-term, it's really important for me to be at a school that I'm one hundred percent on board with. I definitely still feel my calling to work in education, but it's not that simple when you are in the classroom with these kids that … I don't know.

Despite her love for her students, Grace lost faith in her own ability to succeed. Feeling belittled by her administration left her disempowered, and by the end of her first semester, while she still hoped to persist in the profession, she was fairly certain that she could not do so at her current institution.

Adapting to the Math Classroom

Though Grace's primary area of expertise was in the humanities, she was also asked by her assistant principal to take on the responsibility of teaching mathematics to a small group of students during their intervention block. While Grace was more than willing to help out her students and her school to the best of her abilities, she was apprehensive about this new challenge:

> In our intervention block, I'm supposed to pull small groups of kids that need targeted help, and I got assigned the math intervention group, and that has been really hard. I am not a math teacher! I don't know how you guys have the patience for teaching math! I don't think I realized how behind these kids are in math – the

> things they don't know how to do – wow![68] For sixth grade today, we were supposed to be finding the area of unusual rectangular shapes, but for some of these students, we had to start at ground zero with how to subtract two-digit numbers. And I was like – wow! – and I kind of mostly did that for them, just telling them the steps. And then for even simple multiplication we were counting [on our fingers]! It's been…it's just been really hard.

In a discipline that was so foreign to her, Grace experienced immediate difficulties on multiple levels: marrying the procedural with the conceptual, diagnosing her students' needs, inventing interventions, identifying prior knowledge, and implementing remediation strategies. When she was first asked to take on this challenge, Grace mentioned some of her concerns to her assistant principal, but just as with her classroom management struggles, her fears were dismissed by the school's leadership, and Grace knew that she would be on her own:

> They just threw me into it! I asked for help, but they just said, "It's 6th grade math, it's easy, you'll be fine." And I do know how to do the math, but I was super unsure of how to explain it – that's completely different. One of the other program members was an engineering major in college so I've asked him for help and he gave me some tips on different ways to explain things, so that's been helpful. But yeah, they just threw me in.

None of Grace's concerns were content-related – she understood the mathematical concepts on their own; what she needed help with was *how* she could teach those concepts, especially to students who needed remedial support. Grace was not looking for her administration to intervene or solve a problem; she merely wanted coaching or advice on how she might improve her practice, especially in a discipline where she had little expertise. Instead, once again, she was thrown into a tough situation and abandoned, left to fend for herself as best she could.

Despite this lack of support, Grace attacked the challenge of teaching mathematics with a willing spirit, but as she struggled to meet her students' needs, her enthusiasm and her confidence began to erode:

[68] Again, the deficit perspective language tended to materialize in moments of frustration.

> [Teaching math] just requires so much patience! Even on the first day, I started getting really, really impatient. I finally even broke it down into the question of whether we can divide one by two, and the kids had no idea. The next day, I came back better armed. I came in with so much patience and so much joy; I gave them all high fives, I presented what we were going to do in a super exciting way, but at some point I kind of hit a wall. I didn't know how else to explain it. I tried so many different ways. And I have so much more respect for math teachers now – the way they have to think through things and think through how a kid will be able to understand a concept. I tried so many different things and they just couldn't get it and I was just at a loss. One day, I finally broke it down for them so well, and then I asked them, "Okay, now what are we going to do?" And they just stared at me and said, "Uh ... multiply?" And then they would give two random numbers that don't even have to do with each other and I realized that they're just guessing at this point. It's so hard!

Even with an awareness of the distinction between knowing a math concept and knowing how students might interpret that concept, Grace still found herself lacking the ability to put herself fully in her students' shoes. She could solve and explain problems one way, but she struggled to imagine it differently once her initial explanation did not connect with the students. She was perceptive, recognizing when her students were guessing and realizing that she had "hit a wall" in her own teaching faculties, but she could not press past those walls, and she had little recourse to seek assistance.

Yet slowly, despite never having imagined herself as a math teacher and despite receiving almost no support from her school's leadership, Grace made some progress, both in student learning and in her own self-confidence. Through trial and error, Grace had several breakthrough moments with her students, moments that expanded her understanding of what it took to teach mathematics and increased her willingness to embrace that role for herself:

> I think I'm already getting a little better at it. With just practice and seeing what works and what doesn't. We did have a breakthrough one day. I finally made the whole big rectangle into little rectangles and this one boy had this big light bulb go on. He said, "Oh that side is as long as that side because it's a rectangle!" I guess I didn't realize they didn't know that that side is supposed to be as long as that side and then I realized the whole time I've been explaining this, they think that those sides are unrelated so it makes sense that they're just guessing! So that was really humbling for me to have gotten so impatient with these kids for not getting this

> concept that in my mind is so easy, but really they weren't understanding this part of it because I failed to explain to them. So it was a good lesson. It was really humbling. And now I definitely think when kids are struggling over and over, instead of just explaining it again and again and again, I need to find what exactly they're not understanding. For a while I was so discouraged thinking I was going to be teaching the same thing all semester and they just wouldn't get it. As a math teacher, what do you do if they just hit a wall and don't understand it? Do you give up? Do you teach something else? I don't know.

By finally realizing her students' misconceptions, Grace was able to make progress in addressing those misconceptions. And by making that progress, she started to realize the importance of anticipating the potential misconceptions students might have and designing opportunities to resolve them. Through her perseverance, she began to understand some of the teaching techniques that would be helpful for her remedial small group, namely, diagnosing the root causes of their struggles by creatively reframing the concepts in new ways. Even without coaching, Grace grew in her craft, forging an identity as a math teacher, discovering pedagogical strategies, and growing in humility and patience.

Even as she improved, however, she remained discouraged at the ways in which her school's failure to support its teachers directly inhibited the students' learning:

> I would love it if teaching at this school was just teaching kids things. It's not. It's mostly regulating behaviors. And then maybe getting a couple words in or a worksheet in here and there. And it shows in our test scores. I think maybe 13% [of our students] passed the sixth-grade state test in math. It's so low, and it's because we don't get any instruction in. … All you need to do well here [as a teacher] is to just be able to manage a classroom behaviorally. Content, who cares? You give them the packets, they read it, they answer the questions, that's all the content that kind of goes on.

As Grace felt herself grow as a teacher, she also felt her frustration grow as she recognized the limitations the school's discipline policies placed on its teachers. Every time Grace imagined a task-based lesson plan that would engage her students, she felt scared to implement it due to the behavioral chaos that might ensue, and she felt disincentivized to implement it, knowing that the primary task the administration had given her was to keep order, a task that felt antithetical to

designing and teaching dynamic lessons. As she became more aware of high-leverage pedagogical techniques, she also became more aware that she was being positioned not as a teacher but as a behavior monitor.

Final Reflections

Even at the end of such a trying semester, Grace never gave up looking for the transformative moments with her students that drew her to teaching in the first place. She still saw something of herself in her students, and while she realized teaching was "not as simple as I thought it was," she kept looking for ways to serve her students and help them grow:

> One class, this girl was – I could tell something was off – she was talking over everything I said, just being sarcastic and rude, and then she started just going off and started yelling at me. She even made one comment where when she was yelling: "It's because I'm black, isn't it?" So I texted the office for support, and my lead came and picked her up and went and talked to her, but she was so rude to me. And I was really shaken up after that and I think the other girls kind of saw me as the bad guy after that because I did turn on my strict face and reported her and told her that it was not ok to speak to me that way. So I was afraid it was going to ruin the whole tone of our class. … But then the next week she came up to me in the hallway and right as she came up to me, she didn't even say anything, but I knew she was there to apologize. And it was this visceral reaction, I just forgave her. And all of a sudden I was so joyful to have her back and felt like we could build a relationship. And she didn't even say anything. It was just her coming to me. And that was a really powerful experience. And then she did apologize and that was a really good moment. It was hard when she was being rough, but it just showed me a different level of forgiveness. And it was amazing to see that I do have that heart for teaching where I can just completely forgive a student and want them back in my class immediately.

Grace did not become jaded in her teaching. She responded to rudeness and cruelty with kindness and forgiveness, becoming more grounded, rooted, and perseverant, and growing as a person and as a teacher. Despite encountering classroom episodes that left her "shaken," "afraid," and "discouraged," she returned again and again to the same students, willing to endure in the hope of effecting positive change.

Still, even amidst these occasional moments of success, Grace found herself feeling overwhelmed and defeated. The assets and strengths that she considered central to her vision for herself as a teacher were continually deemphasized by her school's leadership, and the weaknesses she recognized in herself were consistently brought to the forefront, leaving her joyless and discouraged:

> I do persevere – I wake up every day and I get myself here, and I show up, and I'm working so hard – but I just feel like I've lost my love in a lot of ways. And that's kind of where I'm at, honestly. I'm trying to figure out how I can keep the love in what I'm doing and not make it just bearing down and persevering. But there are moments where I lose the love and I'm not as joyful in the classroom and I feel myself becoming the strict bad guy teacher. I kind of have to sacrifice good pedagogy just to keep control and I guess where I'm at right now is just a little discouraged. I know what's wrong but I just need to figure out how to fix it. It's been such a hard month, and I just feel a little beaten down. Yeah, not the most positive answer but it is real.

In the end, Grace's love for teaching was at-risk, having been consistently suppressed by the lack of any structure that would enable her to succeed, and her joy in the classroom began to disappear, having been "sacrifice[d]" on the altar of survival.

Alanna's Story

> *What's really sad is that because of the mentor that I had, because she did have such a strong personality, I was kind of shrinking myself a lot because I was just trying to survive. And I definitely feel like I haven't been able to bring my personality as much as I would love to.*
>
> -Alanna, November 30, 2022

Though she entered the profession with some classroom-adjacent experience, Alanna had a strenuous time adjusting to the demands of full-time teaching. Owing to the weight of the expectations that were placed upon her and the relative lack of structural supports designed to help her, Alanna found herself battling stress and doubt from the very first week of the semester. Alanna loved her job and her students, and she believed wholeheartedly in the mission and vision of the school, but as a self-described "perfectionist," she pushed herself hard all semester long to keep her head above water, studying the curriculum, observing other teachers, and putting in long hours in the evenings and on the weekends. Alanna survived the semester, settling into an uneasy rhythm by the end, but her successes were hard-won amidst a demanding and severe environment.

Pathway to Teaching

Throughout her own time as a student, in high-school and in college, Alanna was adamant that she never wanted to teach. Both her parents were involved in education, so Alanna developed a familiarity with teaching from an early age, but she never imagined it could be something she would pursue.[69] Alanna wanted to travel the world, and ironically it was her desire to travel that ended up driving her into the teaching profession. Midway through her four

[69] The very first sentence out of her mouth in her first interview for this study was: "I can't believe I'm actually participating in a study about teaching. I did not want to teach. I definitely did not want to teach in America. That's what all English majors do, and I did not want to do that."

years of college, Alanna applied for a prestigious program that would send her overseas to teach English in Japan. To make her application more competitive, Alanna earned a major in English and a minor in education. She did the later reluctantly, however, as she "really, really, really did not want to get an education minor" and did so primarily in the service of her dream to travel abroad.

After graduating and being admitted to the overseas teaching program, Alanna moved to Japan, teaching English to elementary students and traveling all around Asia. As an English teacher, Alanna did not have a classroom of her own but travelled from classroom to classroom and school to school,[70] helping first through sixth graders with their language acquisition skills. She gained experience as an instructor, but she was "limited" in what she learned because she always taught with another teacher present in the room to help keep order and navigate dilemmas in the classroom. After the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the health and safety restrictions nearly eliminated her opportunities to travel, and she began to feel like she was "hitting a wall" in Japan. Returning to the United States in the middle of the school year, she had "gained enough confidence" from her teaching experiences in Japan to apply for a job as a long-term substitute teacher at a charter school in her hometown where she "ended up falling in love with the students." So, when she was asked over the summer to step into a full-time teacher position, Alanna accepted and, despite her previous reluctance towards the profession, she found herself at the head of a first-grade classroom.

Alanna thus entered the classroom with some familiarity with the teaching profession, from her parents, her college classes, her teaching abroad, and her time as a long-term substitute,

[70] Alanna worked across five different schools over her time in Japan, as it is customary for teachers to be moved to schools as needed. This afforded her the opportunity to experience a wide variety of classroom environments but inhibited her ability to become deeply invested in a single school or faculty culture.

but she also had to cope with the culture shock of a system of education that was completely unlike what she had previously experienced in Japan. In particular, Alanna had a hard time transitioning from the relatively peaceful, structured system in Japan to the more drama-filled, chaotic experience in the United States:

> Americans are very blunt. If someone has a problem with you, they will come to you and say, "I got a problem with you." In Japanese culture, it is the exact opposite: if you have an issue you go to somebody else about it. In Japan, if I had an issue with a teacher, I would actually go to a woman who worked for the Board of Education and she would go to the principal or the teacher and say it in an appropriate way so that way you're not just unleashing your emotions on people. In Japanese culture, they have something called *honne* and *tatemae*[71] where even if someone had a problem with you, they would still treat you kindly and be willing to help you with anything. So some of the abrasiveness of American culture's been really hard. I just don't know how to do any kind of conflict management. I mean, good lord, I got along better with the people in Japan despite the cultural barrier than I've been getting along with a lot of people here.

Though Alanna was born and raised in the United States, she "became a bit Japanese" during her time overseas, and though her pathway to teaching prepared her to fulfill some of the responsibilities of the profession, it also gave her a set of false expectations about school culture that left her ill-equipped to deal with the abrasiveness and stress that she would encounter in the semester ahead.

Pre-Semester Orientation

At the start of the fall semester, Alanna went through an extensive onboarding process. She travelled to multiple professional development seminars over the summer (even flying across the country to attend one conference), and she was given numerous curricular resources (each of which she studied in depth). Though she felt the stress mounting well before the

[71] When asked, Alanna defined *honne* as "someone's true feelings" and *tatemae* as "a happy, helpful façade put on to keep peace and harmony."

semester started, Alanna welcomed the chance to work hard and remained motivated to do whatever was necessary to succeed:

> So far, it's been all very fast paced, but I really want to work. I really want to work hard. I want to show that I want to be here. I want to show that I can do this job. I want to do this job. I want my students to get the best part of me every day, so that way I can get the best part of them.

Alanna was not deluded about the difficulties of teaching, and she had mentally steeled herself to do whatever it took to fulfill every obligation of the profession. She was driven to succeed at her job and she wanted to improve her craft, primarily for the sake of her students to whom she felt a deep responsibility. Perhaps the greatest evidence of her drive was her excitement about the newly-established mentorship program that her school was piloting. Given the school's relatively recent founding (five years ago), it had just begun to have enough established, veteran teachers to pair each of their new teachers with a mentor who could oversee their growth, offer feedback and advice, and answer any questions they might have. Alanna was thrilled, and as a self-described perfectionist, she felt immensely comforted by the presence of someone who could answer her questions and provide a sense of security.

From the outset, however, the amount of 'support' that was directed Alanna's way proved to be stressful for her:

> So many people have been coming into my classroom even in the first week. My dean of academics and our literacy coach have been popping into my class regularly, and our student services director has actually been in my classroom twice already. It is a lot, but part of the reason why I did come back was because I wanted to become a better teacher. When I was in Japan, I felt like I hit a wall where I didn't know how to grow any more, and I was just getting bored because of it. But here at [my school], they are very clear about their expectations: "You are a first-year teacher, here is what you should do, here are the things we are looking for, here are the ways we are going to help guide you." So, the support of the school has been insurmountable.

Early in the semester, Alanna still had a relatively positive attitude towards the extensive classroom observation and evaluation she was subjected to. She wanted guidance and she

appreciated the clarity of expectations, but the "insurmountable" coaching left her nervous and tense in her own classroom from the very first week.[72] More feedback gave her more things to work on which made her more insecure about her shortcomings. Only a few weeks into teaching, rather than feeling empowered by the number of supports that were provided to her, she instead felt a growing lack of confidence due to persistent over-coaching:

> On the one hand, I feel like – please come in and tell me what I'm doing wrong so I can fix it. But I still sometimes get really flustered, especially right now, cause I'm feeling a lack of confidence. Every time they come into class, I'm like, oh no, straighten up. And I'm sweating and I'm nervous. I know they're here to evaluate, and I need to be as authentic as I can be so that way they can evaluate me the best and so that way they can help me, but I just can't help getting a bit worked up.

Given Alanna's personality, which tended towards over-commitment and obsession, the overwhelming nature of these formal observations ended up perpetuating her insecurities rather than easing her stresses. Feeling constantly "evaluate[d]," (a performative, rather than formative, word choice) caused her to worry, inhibiting her ability to be authentic in the classroom.[73] From the very beginning, a lot was expected of Alanna, and the story of her induction is not one of too few supports, but of too many, as the comprehensive nature of the claims on her time and mental capacity felt more like suffocation than assistance.

Adjusting to the Classroom

Alanna's charter school prided itself on the high expectations it had for its students (its mission statement promoted an "excellent and distinctive education"), but that commitment to rigor created a high-intensity environment for the teachers as well. Alanna responded to this

[72] Even in our first interview, Alanna mentioned her fear of getting fired for doing a bad job: "So I'm pushing through and I'm trying to convince myself to ask for help, but I keep having the thought that if you're asking for help, it means you can't do your job. And then they're going to fire you."

[73] This proved especially true when these formal evaluations were combined with a lack of support. Having just emerged from a Japanese culture where "admin would just wander around in and out and help out," Alanna found it very hard to adjust to the culture her school had adopted of formal evaluative observations with almost no informal help or assistance.

pressure by pushing herself to her limits to create a fun and engaging learning environment for her students, and she experienced a number of initial successes, especially in the area of language acquisition, drawing heavily on her experience teaching English overseas:

> My background has always been language acquisition for non-native English speakers, and this is my first time working with native English speakers. But one thing I found is that my students are struggling with the exact same sounds that non-native English speakers struggle with. Like *L*'s and *O*'s really trip them up and my Japanese kids also really struggled with *L*'s and *O*'s. And even the *TH* sound, which was so hard for my Japanese kids because they don't have that sound at all, is still hard for my native English speakers who are struggling. But because of my background, I know how to target that and I know how to tell them like, okay, make sure your tongue is touching your roof of your mouth, or make sure your tongue is touching your teeth, or make sure that your teeth are touching the bottom of your lip for the *TH* so that kind of stuff is like, I've already taught how to do some of that. So that's been really helpful and just allowed me to really think on my feet a lot more.

Though her preparation was 'alternative,' Alanna was well-equipped for the demands of teaching language arts to her students, as her prior experiences not only gave her a specific set of relevant expertise but also enabled her to design creative interventions. In many respects, Alanna was ideally equipped to teach her students to read, spell, write, and talk, having honed her language learning skills over years of working with Japanese students.

Achieving these successes did not come easily to Alanna. She often stayed late planning, grading, and throwing herself wholeheartedly into the life of the school, and the vast number of responsibilities pressed her to sacrifice much of her work-life balance. While she received lots of coaching on how she might improve her teaching, she received little in the way of tangible help (no teacher's aide, no logistical supports, no lightened teaching load, etc.), and thus she consistently shouldered many obligations and duties. Given her time in Japan, this lack of assistance in the classroom proved to be another culture shock for Alanna, leaving her feeling abandoned and isolated:

> In Japan, having a teacher's aide is actually a requirement, so that was one of the biggest differences between Japan and America. So, [in Japan], if there was a boy or

> girl that was diagnosed with ADHD, they would have a helper sitting right next to them helping them stay on task, helping them with whatever. And even if it wasn't their particular helper, there almost always was another teacher in the room. So it was so startling when I came back to America and I realized that I wasn't going to have any aide and it was just going to be me all the time. And it was so overwhelming. So just having somebody else in the room to help distribute the responsibility would be so helpful. And I bet, just thinking about it now, that it would really help with teacher burnout and retention if I was up there teaching and I had somebody who was helping me.

The combination of an over-abundance of coaching and evaluation paired with a lack of active assistance in her teaching responsibilities proved particularly jarring to Alanna. She had experienced a much more collaborative educational model in Japan where even the administrators would lend a hand in the classroom when they visited. The stark contrast of her new circumstances left her feeling isolated in her United States classroom, overwhelmed by the preponderance of verbal advice and underwhelmed by the lack of substantial supports.

Without anyone with which to "distribute the responsibility" of her high-intensity work environment, Alanna often struggled to juggle all the concerns and obligations of teaching. She felt overwhelmed at the number of 'hats' she was forced to wear on a daily basis, and finally reached a tipping point when she forgot she had to put on her 'fire-drill coordinator' hat:

> It's a lot. I'm a teacher, a mom, a sister, an aunt, a psychologist, a mentor, a nurse, a problem solver, child mind reader, child herder, disciplinarian. It's just so many hats. And then on top of that, oh, data collector, scientist, analyzer. And it's a lot of hats that I'm constantly having to switch around. And I'm like, good lord, I used to complain about just code switching between English and Japanese. Now I'm constantly wavering between – okay, now I need to be a disciplinarian, okay, now I need to try to find a way to make this fun, now I need to teach this subject, now I need to clock that data. And sometimes I know *what* I'm teaching, but I don't know *how* I'm going to teach it. And in America, it's just all about money, so on top of all that, now I've got an email inbox full of things like, "We're going to do this fundraiser, so we need you to collect this money." And this is coming up and that is coming up and this is, I'm like – good lord guys, why, why, why, just why? It's just the cognitive overload is a lot. One day – and this was just the last straw – I forgot we were having our monthly fire drill and the alarm rang and I was just like – I can't keep it together. I know all these things are important to our school, but it's also like one extra thing after another. It's just like – hey, you are juggling all these balls, here's another one!

None of the hats, by themselves, seemed to overwhelm Alanna, but when taken together, they left her with relatively little time to put on her 'teacher hat,' the one she was most comfortable wearing and the one she was most interested in learning to wear well.[74] Alanna understood the distinction between knowing *what* she was teaching and knowing *how* she was going to teach it, often finding herself directing her limited resources towards the *whats* and bemoaning the lack of time and energy to devote towards the *hows*. Overall, Alanna's "cognitive overload" pressed in upon her, increasing her levels of stress and decreasing her levels of rhythm and sustainability.

Learning to Teach Mathematics

While Alanna's apprehension was certainly not limited to a single subject, nowhere was it more prevalent than in her feelings about mathematics. Throughout her life, Alanna had "always hated math," a disposition that was compounded by the self-doubt stemming from her classroom observations, by the heavy responsibility she felt towards her students, and even by the insecurities associated with being alternatively prepared:

> One of the things that has been the most stressful is trying to pass these standardized tests to get my temporary license. Most of these teachers either don't have to take them or got their tests done before they started teaching, but I spent most of my Thanksgiving break studying and then taking them. I passed most of them but I still have to retake the math one. It's always math. I'm not good at math. And there's just some math on the test that I literally haven't looked at in like ten years and as a first-grade teacher, I will never need to know! I'm sitting there trying to remember how to multiply x to the third power and all that kind of stuff. I haven't seen this stuff in forever, and I'm getting old. I can't believe I have to retake it again. It's always math. It's always math that just gets in my way.

Not only did Alanna have to spend her holiday taking these licensure exams, but her failure to pass the math test was demoralizing to her psyche:

> Thankfully, I know I'm a good teacher and I've really been resting on that. I mean, I passed my teaching test. I didn't pass the math sections, but I passed the pedagogy

[74] In another part of our conversation, Alanna told the story of feeling extremely frustrated at having to spend the time and energy getting her class to an all-school assembly when she was feeling behind in her history and literacy lessons.

> part of my test. I can teach, I can read and I can do English, and I can do history, and I can do science. Still forever getting confirmed that math is not it. I can definitely feel that I have these strengths and I want to use them, but I am struggling with math.

Alanna found the material on these tests to be disconnected from the knowledge she needed for teaching first grade. So, the energy she spent attempting to master the laws of exponents and other algebraic and geometrical formulas caused her to feel stretched thin once again by an obligation extremely tangential to her work in the classroom.

Despite her natural feelings towards the discipline of mathematics, Alanna never fully gave up on herself, her students, or the curriculum she was teaching; rather, she remained determined not to let her students develop the same relationship with math that she had. She tried to understand the purposes behind the "confusing" pictures and diagrams (number bonds, place value charts, bar models, etc.), and she looked for exciting and meaningful ways to communicate those purposes to her students. Still, her insecurities in this area crept into her instruction:

> I think my confidence fluctuates a lot. Earlier in each unit I'm a little better, but as it gets later in the unit, I feel less secure and as the problems get harder, I just feel like I'm missing something. Like today, we tried to do subtraction number bonds, and the students went straight to – ooh, this is addition. And I just couldn't even figure out how to get them to realize that number bonds can be subtraction too. And they just want to be able to use their number lines and count and I'm struggling a little bit with giving them the *why*. Because even in my brain it doesn't fully make sense. I know it's supposed to be for them to get the numeracy down, but even when I try to use some of the techniques in my head, it's a lot of stuff to do in my brain. So I don't think that's really supposed to be a mental math thing. So it is a bit of a clash between the math facts that we are trying to do fast but also trying to slow it down and add some of the steps, and I know that's important for them, but it is hard to keep straight.

Alanna did possess a number of strengths as a mathematics teacher – she knew that the students should be encountering the concepts (the "*whys*") behind the processes, she was interested in helping them to develop "numeracy," and she wanted to challenge them to go beyond basic counting techniques – but she struggled to translate those intuitions into pedagogical strategies.

As such, math not only became a major source of stress for Alanna in and of itself, but it also compounded some of her other stresses – feeling insecure about her abilities, feeling guilty for failing her students, and feeling pressed for time to do her job well, among others. Math, for Alanna, served as a sort of stress-epicenter for most of the semester; but it also, eventually, served as a linchpin for her growth, because if she could trust herself to teach math, she could trust herself to put on any other hat she needed to.

Failures in Mentorship

Though Alanna took some significant steps in her evolution as a teacher (learning the complexities of the literacy program, regaining some of the elements of a work-life balance, etc.), due to the constant pressure she was under, it often felt like she was "juggling" the responsibilities in her life. Alanna never wavered in her love for the school and for its mission, but she often experienced exhaustion, fear, and discouragement. Finally, the mounting stresses in her life became unbearable when her mentor, the very support that she was most enthusiastic about at the outset of the semester, began to undermine and attack her. Alanna had already felt disappointed about her mentoring relationship, as her mentor "never once came to watch me teach," but the disappointment quickly escalated into outright fear as the conflict became more pronounced:

> It started when we were in a meeting, and I asked a question about grading quizzes and the literacy manual said one thing, but the school policy was different. And I missed that, because, you know, I had a lot of information thrown at me. And I turned to the lead teacher, and I asked her a question about it and that upset my mentor because she felt like I was going over her head when she had already told me what I needed to do. And of course I'm the kind of person that if you're going to correct me on something like that, I don't like to be singled out in front of the group. I would much rather you talk to me later, but she just yelled at me in front of everyone saying, "You just disrespected me, you're tearing apart this team." In front of everybody! And I felt very attacked and I just said, "Okay. Yes ma'am." So that just put us on rocky footing and I'm not sure why me asking questions angered her

> so much, so I'm guess I'm just going to ask her questions in private? And it's hard because it's like, good lord, now I've got this as well!

Alanna felt that her mentor became upset over a simple misunderstanding about a small aspect of teaching practice, taking certain quizzes for a grade. Such a conflict was particularly damaging to Alanna both because it preyed on her insecurities and because it removed one of the primary avenues she had for relieving those insecurities, namely the chance to ask questions to an experienced mentor. The very system designed to decrease her stress and increase her comfort and confidence had become another ball that she was forced to juggle as she attempted to navigate a difficult interpersonal relationship made even more complex by the mentor-mentee power dynamics in place.[75]

Over the next few months, Alanna worked carefully to repair the relationship, treading lightly around her mentor's mood swings, selecting delicately the questions she would ask, and trying meticulously to follow the commands she received. Near the end of the semester, however, the toxicity of the relationship became intolerable, as her mentor became increasingly demanding and increasingly unsupportive:

> So my mentor and I had been butting heads a lot. We are very much oil and water. We both have very strong personalities and it kept just going up and down – it'd be good and then it would be really bad. She very much likes to power trip. She'd say, "I told you to do this and I'm your mentor so you *will* do this." And, for me, it was very stressful and anxiety-inducing. Still to this day I will sometimes wake up in the middle of the night concerned because I never knew when I was going to say something and she would not understand what I meant and just blow up. So it was very stressful for me, especially being new, and I just felt like – good lord, you're supposed to be my mentor, I don't know how to talk to you, if I don't talk to you enough, you get mad, if I talk to you too much, you get mad, if I don't say things just right, you get mad, you don't understand me at all. I kept trying and it just wasn't working and it wasn't working, and finally, I got so exhausted by it, and thankfully it finally did reach admin. I didn't say anything. She actually went to admin first. I was actually just going to try really hard, just keep my head down, and just continue to teach and just try to get to the end of the year, which would have

[75] To make matters worse, Alanna felt "sabotaged" by her mentor in her ability to bond with her fellow first grade teachers, eliminating another potential source of community and stress-relief.

> kept me in survival mode, which really was not helpful. Anyway, we ended up having a very long conversation with admin, and it like ended with me being removed from her and given to another teacher to be my mentor. And still to this day, it's been literally a month, and she won't even look at me. We had a team meeting today, and she wouldn't acknowledge my presence! And then it kind of sucks because she's actually about to become the lower-school lead, so I really don't know how this is going to go.

This conflict was the low point of Alanna's semester. She was incredibly frustrated by her mentor and this frustration was seeping into the other important areas of her life – her rest, her teaching, her relationship with her administrators, and her mental health – to the point where she did not feel comfortable "bring[ing] my personality" to work. Alanna was haunted by this relationship, not just taking her workplace drama home with her but waking up in the middle of the night worrying about it.[76] What once was a promise of support had now become another burden to be endured, placing her further in "survival mode" instead of empowering her to thrive:

> What's really sad is that because of the mentor that I had, because she did have such a strong personality, I was kind of shrinking myself a lot because I was just trying to survive. And I definitely feel like I haven't been able to bring my personality as much as I would love to.

Instead of growing, Alanna was "shrinking…to survive," suppressing the strengths that she entered the teaching profession with and burying out of fear the questions that might cause growth. Her spirit had been systematically overwhelmed, and she seriously considered walking away from teaching altogether.

For Alanna, perhaps the hardest part of the tension with her coworkers was the negative effects it had on her teaching practices and the guilt which those struggles produced. As someone who was particularly unable to disentangle the various aspects of her life, Alanna found it nearly

[76] Once again, despite Alanna's strong feelings, recall that given the lack of data collected about the other sides to this story, charity and restraint should be exercised in passing quick judgment upon her mentor and her administration.

impossible not to let the constant drama outside the classroom become a source of discouragement and paralysis inside the classroom:

> It’s just feels like constant drama, and I don’t handle that kind of stuff very well. And I'm not kidding you, I was this close to just walking away, and the only thing that really kept me going was these kids. I didn't want to leave my students because I love them, and I couldn’t imagine not being able to see them every day, not being able to laugh with them. I'm their teacher. I don't want to give them to somebody else because that would set them back and that's not fair to them. But really the lowest part was not the drama itself, but how the drama was really affecting my teaching and my students. I mean, I was trying hard to not let it get to me, but when you get reprimanded by your administration and you have to literally go right into your classroom and just be like "Let’s learn phonograms!!" It’s insane. I'm insane. I'm literally insane. And you feel just awful, but you still need to stand up there and just put a smile on your face. And when it was constant drama for two straight weeks and I’ve got all that in the back of my mind and I remember I felt so bad, but I'm standing there and I'm trying to review phonograms and I just couldn't keep them all straight.

The pressure of her workplace drama “really affected” Alanna’s teaching, leaving her unable to focus on her classroom obligations. The constant disruptions in her confidence stemming from her destructive collegial relationships carried over into her teaching practice, deepening her insecurities and causing her to consider leaving the profession. At her lowest moment, however, Alanna did latch upon one real source of consistent support, namely her students and the consistent love for them that inspired her, transforming one of the hardest moments of her semester into a catalyst for growth.

Settling Into a Rhythm

Finally, Alanna’s administration assigned her a new mentor, one who was actually willing to observe her in the classroom and have positive, productive conversations about her teaching dilemmas. These meetings instantly became a source of support for Alanna, not only practically but emotionally as well, providing her with tangible grounds for confidence in her own teaching abilities:

> When I got swapped to my new mentor, we had two or three meetings where I just feel like she straightened me out. I just walked out wondering why didn't I have this information before, because you can read the curriculum and all that, but all the pieces of advice on *how* to do it make a world of difference. I left our meeting with a whole page full of notes that got into the minute details of *how* to teach. Because sometimes people can give 'advice' and not tell you anything about how to actually put it into practice. They'd be like, "Do an intervention." And I'm like, "Okay, but what does that look like? How do I do that? What am I looking for?" And I'd try to ask about something I was struggling with, and they'd respond "Well, what are your interventions, what are your interventions." I know what the word intervention means. I know I need to be doing something. But I need some *ideas*! And I think sometimes when you've been teaching for a long time, you forget that a new teacher might not know *how* to do something.

In the meetings with her new mentor, Alanna was finally able to devote some of her attention to the pedagogical *how* questions that were troubling her. Not only was she set free from the drama that strained her mental energy, but she had permission to ask all the questions she wanted and an expert interlocutor who was interested in helping her. She still felt the burden of wearing too many hats, but with some tangible strategies to help her negotiate her responsibilities, she felt rejuvenated in her efforts to do so: "I feel like instead of juggling a bunch of balls and just feeling exhausted, now I'm still juggling, but I'm going to figure it out." For Alanna, the key to developing a rhythm in her teaching was the combination of the energy to devote to the details of her practice and the tangible ideas that could help her attend to those details.

Throughout all of her drama, the one constant in Alanna's life was her students. While she had her fair share of difficult moments in the classroom, her students were a source of stability (compared with the adults in her life), and her classroom became a safe space to which she could retreat:

> I just want to make sure you know that, through all this, I have never stopped loving my class. They are the reason why I teach. They are the reason why I got up in the morning. They are the reason why I kept going in. And even on my worst days, even in the midst of the heat of the drama, just knowing that I could go back to them and just seeing their smiling faces and working with them…this is why I do it. They are so sweet, and they've worked so hard, and I just am so proud of them, and I can't sing their praises enough.

Just as her previous stress-induced struggles perpetuated her insecurities, the feeling of satisfaction Alanna experienced when she was able to develop some self-assurance in her teaching abilities renewed her drive to improve her practice. Alanna loved her students, and when she knew that she was doing good things for them (either from seeing the results herself or from her mentor's affirmation), she thrived.

While this growth in confidence bore fruit across all subjects, one of the primary places where it impacted her instruction was in the math classroom. After spending much of the first quarter feeling uncertain about her abilities and about how to help her students, Alanna began to carve out a space for her own math teaching:

> I've just started leaning a lot more on my strengths. For me, a lot of teaching math boils down to having the vocabulary to teach the kids. Because I think what hurt me growing up is that I had much more math-y math teachers and because I was more linguistic, I would just be think – you're using these terminologies and you haven't even taught me what that means! So, I've been trying to lean into things like: what is addition, what is subtraction, and connecting math to language. One of the things that has really helped them was me teaching them some Japanese because they were struggling with understanding that 15 is 10 and 5, but in most languages, Chinese, Japanese, French, Spanish (I think), Korean (I think is also like this), when you say the number 12, you literally actually say "10 and 2." So in Japanese, 10 is *juu* and 2 is *ni*, so if I said 12, it'd be *juu-ni*. So I taught them all the Japanese words for 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, and now I can ask, what do we mean when we say 12, and they can all tell me that it's 10 and 2. So, that was a real aha moment for a lot of them.

When Alanna was able to embrace her own identity as a teacher, not only did some of her fears about teaching the subject melt away, but her intuitions spawned creativity in mathematical curriculum and pedagogy. Instead of feeling crippled by doubt at what she did not understand about mathematics, she leaned on the things she did know: her ability to place herself in her students' shoes and her expertise with language and linguistics. By drawing on these strengths, she was able to take a very difficult first-grade concept (the introduction into the world of place-value) and make it come alive for her students in a new, creative, and memorable way. For

Alanna, then, her ability to design and enact dynamic lessons was proportional to her willingness to trust her instincts in doing so, and one of the best pieces of support that she could have received (even in her most insecure subject) was the self-empowerment necessary to draw upon the resources that she already possessed.

Final Reflections

When asked in her post-semester interview what she was most proud of, Alanna's response encapsulated her transition into the classroom:

> I am most proud of my perseverance. … This job, with all of the stuff that it throws at you, was not conducive to success for me. I didn't want to get up some days and there were some days where I didn't know if I could stop crying, but I put my kids first and I got up and I went and I made sure to put them first and give them what they needed no matter what.

Alanna's story is truly one of perseverance.[77] She was asked to shoulder many responsibilities, and her school-related supports abandoned her to the point where she relied more on her students for encouragement than her coworkers or her administration. Yet, Alanna persevered in her practice, and she ended the semester determined to continue in the profession no matter the cost.

Reflecting on her final few weeks, Alanna described herself as having turned a real corner in terms of her stress and exhaustion:

> So I think that's been my biggest change recently is noticing that I'm not as anxious. My new mentor is helpful, and some of the drama has died down, and I'm not nearly as stressed out about things. I am still very hesitant and I'm still very much in protection mode, but I am also excited to see what the next semester brings. I'm feeling encouraged, that's maybe the biggest change, feeling that encouragement myself. Because, I mean, I kind of had to do that encouragement myself. You know, I felt very alone and isolated, and I didn't feel like I was being seen or understood by a lot of my coworkers. And I think a lot of that was my [old] mentor's doing where I just didn't have the opportunity to really bond with anyone. And now those opportunities are arising, but I'm still keeping up the walls, I'm still mostly just listening, I'm still just trying not to rock the boat.

[77] Despite her mounting stresses, Alanna did not miss a single day of school all year, a fact of which she was immensely proud.

While her overwhelming emotions at the end of the semester were relief, excitement, and hope, Alanna could not completely dismiss the scars she bore from her induction into teaching, "keeping up the walls" and "trying not to rock the boat." Much of what she accomplished was in spite of (not because of) the school's system of supports, and while she worked hard to overcome the challenges she faced, she could not help but harbor some resentment towards her first semester and some reservations about the future. Alanna did feel encouraged at the end – she was "thankful" that her administration intervened in her mentoring relationship, she was "hopeful" that her attempts to bond with her colleagues might bear fruit, and she was "grateful" that the low points in the semester had instilled "wisdom I didn't have before" – but she tempered her expectations and continued to guard her optimism, remaining "very much in protection mode."

Leila's Story

> *I think I feel less naïve. I thought I would feel overwhelmingly fulfilled even on the hard days. I thought I would have this mindset of 'Well, it's hard, but it's worth it.' I don't have that mindset anymore. Instead, I feel like it is hard and I should be having more support than this. It's hard and it shouldn't be. I'm no stranger to hard work. I was ready. I was like – OK, bring it on! Now I'm like – wait a minute, why are we so complacent with letting our first-year teachers burn out? If it's really that hard, why aren't we doing more? Don't bring it on; help me! Grab a shovel!*
>
> -Leila, December 15, 2022

Leila's first semester was a story of growth as she became slowly more confident in an initially uncomfortable classroom and was able to effect real, measurable student learning. But her story was not without obstacles, and while she did have a few important structural supports embedded in her school's operational system, she also faced challenges from the very administrators tasked with supporting her and, as a result, often felt dismissed, patronized, and even undermined. Thus, Leila's story was one of perseverance, of self-sufficiency, and of resilience as she slowly but surely proved to those around her (and to herself) that she was a capable teacher, a valuable member of her school community, and someone deserving of respect.

<u>Pathway to Teaching</u>

Leila's road into the classroom was certainly a non-traditional one, but what she may have lacked in formal qualifications, she more than made up for in ambition, determination, and dedication to her craft. After graduating from an elite college-prep high-school, Leila took two years of community college classes while simultaneously working part-time at a preschool. That summer, Leila was planning to continue her studies in a pre-nursing program, but with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning her collegiate studies by taking online classes at home became a significantly less attractive option. When the local preschools released their COVID-19

protocols, one of the families asked Leila if she would consider creating an ad-hoc preschool from scratch in the basement of their home for their girl and four of her close friends. Leila could not explain what made her accept this offer, but she said yes and spent the better part of the next two years running an in-home preschool for five students, creating curriculum, designing activities, teaching basic reading and math, and gaining valuable experience in early childhood education and development.

In the summer before this study, with COVID-19 restrictions nearly gone and her pre-schoolers headed off to various kindergartens around the city, Leila considered re-applying to colleges; but by this point, she had developed a love for teaching, and after seeing that her alma mater was opening up a second campus across town, Leila inquired about a teaching position despite not having a college degree, much less a teaching license. The school initially asked her to apply for a teaching assistant (TA) position, due to her lack of formal qualifications, but she rejected that path, feeling like she had enough expertise to take on a full-time classroom position. In her words:

> They offered me a teacher's assistant position. And I said no. I just felt like the job was out of my … well … I knew I would be competent and capable as a TA, but I've been teaching for the past two years and reading and studying and writing my own curriculum and doing all these things. The TAs are invaluable without a doubt, such a gift, and they are going to save me this year. But it's not what I wanted to do. I wanted to teach. I remember saying that in my rejection email: "Thank you so much for considering me but I'd actually like to be a full-time teacher and I'm going to be looking into that."

In light of Leila's email, the school reconsidered its offer and eventually invited her in for an interview. After the principal heard her whole story and listened to her vision for the classroom, he offered her a first-grade teaching position on the spot, which she accepted. From the outset, then, Leila possessed a unique mix of inexperience (her lack of formal qualifications) blended with expertise (her work in pre-K education) and self-confidence. This combination of factors

equipped her for many of the challenges of teacher induction but often left her fighting to be understood and respected as a professional, two themes that would persist throughout the rest of the semester.

Pre-Semester Orientation

Once hired, Leila's pre-semester preparation went smoothly, buoyed both by her recent experience running the in-home preschool and by a few key structural supports within the school. Given that she took a job at her alma mater (albeit a new campus), Leila was familiar with many of the procedures and policies, which left her bored during some of the pre-semester training sessions: "I could have taught a good number of the sessions." For the most part, however, she enjoyed the chance to dive into a new curriculum and imagine how the things she had learned over the past two years might translate into her new role.

As she undertook her preparation, Leila found two supports to be immensely helpful: the half-time TA allocated to her classroom and the veteran first-grade teachers assigned to assist and mentor her. Having a TA she could employ for much of the school day allowed Leila to streamline her classroom logistics, plan and execute small group and individual instruction, and divide up the responsibilities imposed on classroom teachers. It also gave her a partner, another set of eyes to help see the needs in the classroom, and another set of hands to help meet those needs:

> My TA has been amazing and we get along so well on a personal level and on a professional level. She's on top of everything, loves the kids, and if I didn't have those little breaks where she takes over, I think I would go crazy. She is easily the most helpful resource – no hesitation there. She is authoritative without ever overstepping. She offers another set of eyes, so I'm not missing things. She'll collect and grade homework. She's so organized and flexible, and I really appreciate that she loves the kids but also knows that they're not perfect and need to be held to a standard of behavior.

As for her mentors, though Leila's specific campus was in its first year, the three first-grade teachers at the other campus had years of experience in Leila's position and were willing to share their lesson plans, teaching tips, assignments, and other resources. Additionally, they set up a weekly mentorship meeting and were always available for questions, to the point where Leila "felt like I was cheating on a test because I ended up copying so much of their work." With this system of supports in place, Leila felt as ready as she possibly could to undertake the task set before her.

But underneath the prevailing confidence she felt heading into the semester, Leila retained an undercurrent of uncertainty, especially as she imagined navigating the expectations and judgments of her administration and the parents of her students, two groups that she felt particularly beholden to. Leila firmly believed she could tackle the difficulties of the teaching profession, but despite this self-assurance, she could not completely shake the lingering doubts as to whether or not she would be respected, given her alternatively prepared background:

> I feel pretty ready for the semester, to be honest. Most of my immediate concerns are actually related to the fact that I am what you are calling "alternatively prepared." I don't have this four-year education degree. And I know there are some parents who deeply value that and who are going to be doubting whether or not I can teach and whether or not their kid is going to learn how to read. I am young and I am alternatively prepared, and I think maybe nervous is a bit too strong of a word to describe my headspace, but I'm just cognizant of that. I do think I deserve this job and I have some confidence from my time doing preschool, but I'm just hypersensitive to the disadvantages I have, and I'm walking in with a little bit of something to prove … a bit of a chip on my shoulder.

Leila's primary fears about teaching were not classroom related. She did not wonder what teaching would be like or whether she could handle the stresses and challenges of the job itself; rather, she worried whether anything she did would be good enough to overcome the stigma she felt she carried. She was determined to earn the respect of the parents and administrators she felt beholden to, but she was unsure whether they would be able to overcome their prejudices.

Adjusting to the Classroom

Despite her previous familiarity with her school context, Leila had a challenging first few weeks as she adjusted to the complexities of her new position. She was given a class with eighteen boys in it, many of whom had never attended an in-person preschool or kindergarten due to pandemic-related restrictions and thus struggled to control themselves around their peers. These discipline issues quickly impressed on Leila that "what worked for my four and five year olds doesn't really work for my sixes and sevens," a realization that left her scrambling to adjust her expectations. In attempting to reimagine some of her teaching practices for this new age group, Leila also had to navigate the reality that ten of her students were on an IEP or a 504 plan, and while a few of her pre-schoolers had been alternative learners, she had never faced the challenge of learning accommodations on this large of a scale:

> I have one student who's not progressing at all.[78] And I don't say that as like, oh, his growth is minimal. I mean like the growth is non-existent – not in behavior, not in academics. And I feel like I'm failing him and that causes me a lot of anxiety. I want to do a good job. I want to be good for the kids. I want to be a good teacher. I want to be respected. And I just get nervous all the time that I'm going to do something wrong. That's probably the biggest stressor for me is that I am going to fail and disappoint the parents who have trusted me with their children.

From her experience as a preschool teacher, Leila knew what growth looked like in students, and while this experience came with its affordances, it also left her hypersensitive to student struggles and more aware of her own failures than a prototypical first-year teacher. Leila was passionate and ambitious, but her drive often functioned as a double-edged sword, increasing her motivation but also increasing her anxiety levels, making her aware of the vital responsibility she had taken on. In Leila's words, she was "getting her butt kicked."

[78] Note once again the deficit language.

Despite these initial bumps in the road, none of the early-semester challenges seemed to faze Leila, and while she may have been working harder than she expected and she struggled to make some of the required shifts in her thinking, for the most part, she seemed capable of adjusting to the challenges of teaching first grade. That began to change when she reached out to her administration for some assistance and found them dismissive and seemingly incapable of providing the kind of support she needed. Though the school was modeled after a long-standing sister school across town, in many respects it functioned as a first-year school, and "things were falling through the cracks." Leila's administration was stretched thin, only able to offer boilerplate recommendations instead of working to meet her specific needs. Given her prior experience, Leila was often aware of problems that were beyond the scope of a typical first-year teacher, but her administrators still just offered her the standard first-year set of advice that proved unhelpful:

> None of my needs are being met. And none of my requests are heard because I'm new and apparently first-year teaching is 'supposed' to be hard. I have a pretty rowdy group of students and especially with COVID wiping out most of their last two years, they just don't really know how to act in the classroom. I have a lot of boys and there's just a lot of male energy, and so I am at a disadvantage because I am small and I wear dresses and I am fun and sing to them, but I don't inspire fear in them and I don't want to. And so, when the principal comes into my classroom and sees kids who feel safe and happy and excited to be there, but they're not nice and neat and they're not always quiet, his reaction is to tell me that I'm doing it wrong. ... And not only is his feedback a lot of platitudes like "Well, you'll just have to learn to manage your classroom," but I feel like I'm not taken seriously. I'm the joke. I'm the little girl who teaches first grade who can't manage a classroom and pretends that it's everybody else's fault. And that narrative obviously is helping nobody. If that actually is true and I can't manage a classroom, give me some helpful feedback, not just platitudes. Show me. Tell me. Help me. It's so unhelpful just to hear "You're doing it wrong." Okay. Then how do I change that? Or I get something dismissive like, "Your first year is always hard. Make it to next year." Somebody even told me the other day the first five years are always the hardest. I cannot do this for five years…the first few weeks have been brutal and it's not sustainable and I need more than just, "You'll figure it out."

Rather than feeling helped or encouraged, Leila felt that her principal dismissed her problems, chalking them up to normal growing pains that would dissipate naturally.[79] For Leila, this represented much more than a simple misunderstanding or difference of opinion; rather, it was indicative of a multi-level divergence in vision. Not only did her immediate concerns go unaddressed, but she felt herself divided from her administration regarding overall classroom vision, the kinds of coaching and support that should be offered, and basic workplace expectations, communication, and professionalism. Leila left this conversation feeling trapped, pigeonholed into a young-first-year-teacher box, unheard, unhelped, and most of all, unknown as a unique individual with unique strengths and weaknesses.

Administrative Conflicts

A few weeks later, Leila summoned the courage to bring another problem to her principal's attention, this time regarding a particular student who was disrupting her class. She needed some strategies for supporting this particular student that had worked for other teachers in the past, but once again she received a set of stock "platitudes" that were "unhelpful and uninformed." Leila did her best to implement the advice she was given, but when the issues resurfaced and she sought out her administration for further counsel, her principal just removed the student from Leila's class and reassigned him to another section. Leila felt dismissed, patronized, unsupported, robbed of an opportunity for growth, and saddled with a "lack of resolution." The administration may have thought they were 'solving' the problem on Leila's behalf, but failing to include her in the solution merely deepened her sense of belittlement and devaluation.

[79] Again, while Leila's concerns here are a crucial part of her story and ought to be interpreted with the gravity they deserve, recall that this story is no doubt two-sided and that the stories, opinions, and actions of Leila's principal are also worthy of consideration.

Finally, in the most serious early-semester conflict between Leila and her principal, the static dismissals and condescension she had previously received escalated into an active confrontation in front of her students and her peers:

> Last week, my principal came in and scolded me in front of my class. Not helpful. And it was because I had two boys go to the bathroom at different times, but they ended up in there at the same time because one was having an accident and one had already taken the pass. And so he came in and just openly reprimanded me in front of everyone like "I told you only one at a time!" What did he think happened – I forgot because I'm stupid? No, they're six! So, yeah, pretty frustrated about that. It's one of those things where sure, pull me aside, give me a reminder. But don't do it in front of other staff members and my class. That undermines my authority. It undermines my position as a whole. I feel like a kid again. Just feeling super patronized. How do you expect me to manage a classroom like you say I'm not doing when you treat me like one of the children instead of an authority figure and then undermine my authority in front of the children. Of course, of course, of course a group of six-year-olds isn't going to follow a teacher who's getting openly scolded by the principal. So frustrating, to say the least.

Not only did Leila feel pigeonholed as a naïve first-year teacher with an overly idealistic vision for the classroom, but she felt victimized by the 'coaching' she did receive. Though he might have been well-intentioned, her principal seemed to go out of his way to ensure that the reprimand was done in front of her students and her TA by seeking her out in her classroom.[80] Leila felt that her principal painted only with a "broad brush," treating all first-year teachers the same way and attempting to subsume them all underneath his single vision for how the classroom should look. This "one-size-fits-all approach," however, left Leila feeling not just dismissed and unheard but attacked. She felt both fearful and frustrated at the sight of her principal, ostensibly an advocate and support, and at this point, she merely wanted to be left alone. Worst of all, Leila's discouragement began to affect her teaching practice as well. She had always possessed a resilient personality that was not easily discouraged or disrupted from the

[80] Leila had no definitive proof of this, but she felt that, at the very least, the principal's timing was "tactless."

mission she determined to accomplish, but the persistent frustration with her principal started to chip away at her self-confidence, leaving her discouraged and burned out, a struggle that would challenge Leila for the rest of the semester.

Learning to Teach Mathematics

As Leila battled a lack of external validation and respect, these discouragements began to impact her confidence in the classroom, leaving her wondering whether or not she could trust her own instincts in the classroom. Nowhere was this more evident than in her learning to teach mathematics:

> I think content-wise, the hardest part has been math. Because we teach a variety of ways to learn the same thing and one of them makes sense to me and to them, but we have to get them to be willing to do it in multiple ways. And I know we are laying the foundation for math for years to come but it's really hard to get them to buy into stuff like: "Yes I know you know what 17 – 9 is and that you can just count backward on your number line, but we are going to learn a new way to do it!!" I know I need to keep remembering that if they don't know how to get to those answers the correct way then they're going to be screwed next year and so I've been trying to be really intentional about preaching things like "Simply knowing the answer isn't enough. You need to know how and you need to know why." But at the first-grade level, getting them to see that is really tricky.

From her experience teaching preschool, Leila possessed a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the teaching and learning of elementary mathematics: she valued mathematical thinking skills, she took the time to promote number flexibility, and she elicited thoughts and explanations from her students. She not only understood the mathematical concepts she was teaching but she remained resolute in her determination to help students engage those concepts. Yet, through the middle of the semester, plagued by the insecurities caused by the belittlement she experienced at the hands of her administration, Leila often found her confidence waning, replaced by hesitation and reservation:

> It's just super tough to have them be learning their math facts and place value at the same time. So like for 17 – 9, they are learning that fact, but then you have to try and get them to ask the questions like "Do we have enough ones to take nine from

> the ones?" and "How do we break apart the ten?" And I'm not sure why would you do that many steps for teaching place value? How do you get them to stop counting on their fingers? And how do you teach them the difference between memorization and thinking? This place value stuff ends up feeling like I'm just asking them to memorize another way to do it where they're like, "I don't understand, like, I'm memorizing either way." You just can't tell a seven-year-old, "I want you to know it and know how you can do it." They are just going to say: "I do know how, I just think."

Leila still understood the task before her, recognizing the important shift required of first graders from counting backwards to utilizing place value ideas, but she also revealed some of the cracks that had developed in her resolve. Prior to the semester, she had unequivocally believed that 1) it was worth persisting through challenges if her students could develop a thorough understanding of a concept and that 2) she was capable of leading them through those challenges; now, Leila found herself doubting both her students' abilities and her own. Leila traced the hesitations that emerged in her psyche and in her pedagogy back to the lack of validation and respect she felt from those in power.

Validation and Confidence

Leila never received the kind of coaching and mentorship she desired from her principal, but though her story did not end with some profound reconciliation with her administration, she was thankfully "left alone" as the semester went on. As her frustrations began to decompress, she found validation from another source, namely the student learning growth that she saw all around her. In particular, the benchmark standardized tests that the students took midway through the semester represented a turning point for Leila as the data-driven affirmation that resulted from her students' success on their exams helped her to rediscover her self-confidence:

> I do feel like things are starting to fall into like a rhythm. I know I can teach. And I'm going to teach how I know to teach. And that's been really helpful because I'm no longer so stressed wondering – Am I teaching well enough? Am I doing it right? I know the content. I know how to teach. So I'm just going for it and trusting that I can do it. And just taking that enormous weight off of my shoulders and letting myself just teach has made it a lot better. Probably the most significant thing for that

> was getting my students' standardized test scores back. They took these benchmark tests and a year's worth of growth on our standardized test is seven points and the lowest growth for any of my kids was eight points! So all of my kids have grown by a year's worth of skill in a quarter, and I feel very, very proud and excited and emotional! I don't know about the other classes' growth, and I'm sure it's partially the school and the curriculum and coming off of COVID, but even if it's not attributed directly to my teaching, in a way, it is affirming! And I just feel really, really validated and reassured by that. I'm not setting these kids up for failure. They're not going to go to second grade and be incompetent. They're growing so well and so quickly. And I feel like I am less caught up on people's opinions, including my boss'. I can reassure myself – no, the kids are learning, that's what you hired me to do and I'm going to do it and I'm going to do it well. And I feel like finally, this week, my fake self-assurance, which was kind of a fake-it-til-you-make-it thing has started to go away and I've started to have some real self-assurance. Being stressed about what everybody's thinking and whether or not I'm doing it right isn't working. Instead, I just need to trust myself and love my kids and let everything else be what it's going to be.

Receiving her students' scores on their benchmark tests was an important moment in Leila's development as it dispelled any temptation to consider herself a failure and allowed her to tune out some of the voices (both externally and within her own head) that impeded her own intuition. Seeing evidence of student learning caused her stress to melt away and gave her permission to trust herself. Leila was always able to rely on her own experience and instincts, and she always had a strong set of immediate supports (an excellent TA who smoothed over logistical challenges and supportive mentor teachers who answered any questions she had); what she was missing was the validation and affirmation that allowed her not to be overwhelmed by big-picture stressors.

As she began to trust herself again as a teacher, not only did Leila's confidence soar but so too did her willingness to work through the demanding parts of the curriculum with her students. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the way she thought and talked about the mathematics classroom:

> We just did a unit on height and we just started hinting at multiplication! We were dealing with questions like, "If like this caterpillar is two pencils long, how many pencils would two caterpillars be?" and they were starting to see that one is to two as two is to four. And I got so excited about laying that foundation because I know that this story ends up with multiplication. It's not really about helping caterpillars –

> what we're trying do is reinforce units. I'll be looking at these lessons and seeing the way that they're setting them up for Algebra and geometry and they don't even know what's coming and it's so fun to see the lights start to go on in their head and I love seeing them start to apply it elsewhere. When they're able to start to grasp something, I love seeing it click, because I'm watching common sense click and I'm watching logic start to form. And all of a sudden, you see them start to settle into not just the facts that they're learning, but like math as a whole. Education as a whole. They're settling into what it means to know how to think.

Rather than dread the difficult encounter with the more conceptual side of teaching mathematics (connecting it to the world around her, focusing on thinking and reasoning in addition to calculation and reasoning, working through 'units'), Leila embraced these challenges. Not only did she look ahead at the curriculum and envision its connections to higher-level ideas, she welcomed the chance to infuse those ideas into individual problems and conversations. Leila's instincts for how to teach mathematics were strong, and thus the growth she experienced in her teaching was proportional to her willingness to stop wondering whether or not she was "doing it right" and instead trust her natural ability.

As Leila grew more confident in her curricular knowledge and in her pedagogical inclinations, she was able to refocus her energy on the classroom-management issues that demanded her attention. Without the need to spend time worrying about whether or not her teaching was effective, she devised and implemented new strategies for encouraging her students to develop self-control and respect:

> I started this year by saying I felt most confident in the curriculum, and I stand by that. I know the content, I was taught the exact same curriculum when I was a student, and I already had experience designing a curriculum for the preschool. It's natural at that point, like, I don't even need to think about all the sounds that '*ou'* makes. And I feel really, really thankful for that because I don't think I could have done it if I didn't have the content down. I just wouldn't have had the bandwidth to learn all the content in my first year while also managing a difficult class. Like, it just wouldn't have happened.

The extent to which Leila felt affirmed in her curricular and pedagogical knowledge was the same extent to which she felt free to devote her bandwidth to the other pressing difficulties of

first-year teaching, such as classroom management. She needed a set of teaching-related concerns that she could depend on, as for Leila, confidence bred freedom which bred creativity which bred growth.

Final Reflections

By the end of the semester, Leila seemed to have settled into an uneasy truce with her administration; she was profoundly thankful for the support of her close colleagues; and she felt confirmed and validated in her own abilities as a teacher. She no longer harbored any reservations that this was a profession that she would like to continue in, and she was genuinely excited to see what was to come in the spring. As she reflected on her first semester, however, while she seemed to have let go of much of her bitterness, she still conveyed a sense of regret not only for missed opportunities in her own evolution as a teacher, but more so for her students as they were impacted by whiplash she experienced:

> I think the class as a whole could have been where we are now [in the middle of December] in October. I think like behavior wise, content wise, culture wise, across the board, they could've adjusted better. But when I'm not sure where I stand [with the administration of the school], I don't know if what I'm doing is right or wrong. All I got were these observation evaluations with a bunch of "opportunities for improvement," and so I feel like I'm doing a million things wrong. So then I'm playing this trial and error game with the kids where I'm like, "Does this work? Does this work? Does this work?" And they're not getting a consistent teacher. They're getting a teacher who one day is fun and hands on and all about learning and playing and the next day is all about structure and order and like "No, everybody, there are no questions today." It's just whiplash for the kids and how can they possibly acclimate to a classroom when I am not consistent? I'm such an emotional, words-of-affirmation person so when all the feedback I get is: "Here's what you need to change, here's what you need to do better," all I'm hearing is: "You're not doing a good job." And failing is such a strong word, but it felt like a list of failures, like, here's how you're failing twenty-five kids every day. And I know that I'm young, I don't have the experience of more experienced teachers, I need feedback, I need to grow. And I do want to, but it's hard to want to grow when you feel like a failure. And then when I see this whiplash having negative effects on my students and their learning – then I really do feel like I'm failing.

Looking back on her transition into the classroom, Leila was not disappointed in what she had accomplished or in who she had become as a teacher, but she did wonder what could have been (both for herself and for her students) if she had been given affirmative, constructive, and personal coaching rather than dismissive or generic feedback.

Though she herself was "not burned out," Leila was not surprised that many alternatively prepared teachers burn out of the profession, given how normalized the difficulties she experienced were. She not so much shocked at the difficulty of the profession as she was shocked by the complacency with which her colleagues accepted those difficulties and the readiness with which they dismissed them as regular growing pangs:

> I think I feel less naïve. I thought I would feel overwhelmingly fulfilled even on the hard days. I thought I would have this mindset of – well, it's hard, but it's worth it. I don't have that mindset anymore. Instead, I feel like it is hard and I should be having more support than this. It's hard and it shouldn't be. I'm no stranger to hard work. I was ready. I was like – OK, bring it on! Now I'm like – wait a minute, why are we so complacent with letting our first-year teachers burn out? If it's really that hard, why aren't we doing more? Don't bring it on; help me! Grab a shovel!

At the end of the semester, even after finding a rhythm for herself within the classroom, Leila remained somewhat astonished at the apathy her administration showed towards their first-year teachers' struggles. Her first-year status, far from being an impetus for extra support from her administration, was instead used by her leadership as a cop out, an excuse for dismissing her struggles as routine or customary. In Leila's case, the hardships of teacher induction had become normalized and written off as some kind of a natural "trial by fire" from which there could be no escape.

Bri's Story

> *Coaching comes across so much better when it's not someone coming to you and saying, "Your opinion is not as good as my opinion," but when it's someone saying, "I think it's so great you had this opinion and I love your creativity, but these school policies are in place for a reason, and so we need you to work within this particular space, but what can we do inside of this space that goes along with what you have already thought of."*
>
> -Bri, December 1, 2022

Bri began the semester facing obstacles in her transition into teaching: she had taken no formal education courses, her previous professional experiences were mostly in fields disconnected from education, and she was burdened with a number of extra responsibilities including planning her wedding and going back to school to get her teaching license. Yet, Bri thrived throughout the semester, buoyed by both structural and personal supports. Her administrators were involved and helpful, but they gave her enough space to feel comfortable in her own classroom; her aides and student services team provided her with dynamic support for her high-needs students, but they were careful not to usurp her authority as the lead instructor; and her mentors provided her with plenty of in-moment coaching to improve her craft, but they simultaneously affirmed her natural inclinations and decisions in the classroom. Bri felt uplifted by her community, and while she still experienced her share of challenges over her first semester, her difficulties were mitigated by the number of people who came alongside her and offered guidance, encouragement, and active assistance.

Pathway to Teaching

Bri's pre-teaching experience was "all over the place." After cobbling together a degree in graphic design "a little bit online, a little bit in-person," Bri took an "office job" for five years until the COVID-19 pandemic hit and she was laid off. To make ends meet, she helped a friend

who ran a “preschool daycare” not because she felt called to the classroom but “because it was something to do.” Once she got her feet underneath her at the preschool, she “realized she really enjoyed the teaching aspect of it” and decided to explore education as a career path, applying to the small charter school in her rural Midwestern town:

> So I applied to [my school] be an instructional aide or to help out with student services, but in my interview, while I was explaining my philosophy of teaching, she stopped me and said, “I think you'd be fine at these other jobs, but I really need a second grade teacher.” And I said, “I don't want to be a whole in-the-classroom teacher.” It just wasn’t what I applied for. I knew that I would have to go back to school, I was going to be planning my wedding, and I told them, “I don't have time for this.” And she said, “I get that. That's fine.” Well, the next day she called me and said, “What do I have to do to convince you that you need to be this second-grade teacher?” And she said, “I want to alleviate any preconceived ideas you might have that you have to have years of teaching experience to be a good teacher. That's not what we're looking for. We want people who love children and have a vision for helping them to grow. You have that and we need that in the classroom. We can always help you learn how to teach the way that we do it.” And that’s how I got here.

From the very beginning of the interview process, Bri felt affirmation from her school’s leadership team. Not only did they take the time to get to know her philosophy of teaching, but she felt that they pursued her not out of a desperate need to fill an open position but as someone who was desirable for her particular strengths. Bri felt wanted, not in spite of her background and qualifications but because of them, and she also felt supported, equipped with a promise made by her administration that they would help her to hone her craft. This support and affirmation alleviated Bri’s apprehension, and she felt confident enough to take the leap into the second-grade classroom.

Pre-Semester Orientation

Even before the semester began, Bri’s administration began to actualize the promise they made during her interview, designing a series of activities that welcomed her into their professional community. Every year during the summer, the faculty attended a professional

development conference together at a small liberal-arts college, and even though Bri was not originally registered for the conference (being a new hire), everyone at the school pulled some strings to allow her to attend (with some teachers even volunteering to "sleep on the floor" so there would be room for her). At the conference, Bri was immediately invited into all the educational sessions and extracurricular activities, making fast friends with her coworkers:

> The whole time, everybody was trying really hard to make sure that I felt included. They would find me places to sit nearby. They would drag chairs over so that I could sit with the group. There were so many fun opportunities to just chill or sneak off with people and hang out for an hour. I got to walk down to a coffee shop with teachers that I didn't realize were going to be teaching right next to me all year, and we just got to share experiences together. And they were just there for me. They kept checking in, making sure I was all good. It was just amazing. I got so many people's [phone] numbers that week. And I had so many people who told me, "I would love to be able to be a help to you."

While she appreciated the conference for the professional development sessions, Bri found the social opportunities to be significantly more valuable, highlighting moments at coffee shops and restaurants as key opportunities to build rapport with her new coworkers:

> The very first thing we did was meet up at a Mexican restaurant, and before we even left the parking lot, [the student services coordinator] had come to me and said, "If you need anything, you just let me know." And I just thought – wow, I met you like two seconds ago, and you're already there for me! It was super valuable just knowing that I already had that support. And I think it created this openness between me and some of the other teachers that we could talk more freely. Everybody here is so nice, they just always tell me, "Let me know when you need anything and I'll help you, I'll walk you through it." Everyone. They're so crazy supportive. And it hasn't stopped. They've been amazing.

Bri got the chance to get to know her colleagues and her administration in a low-stakes environment that was far removed from the pressures of the beginning of the semester. Without feeling the need to prove herself, she felt immediately included in the faculty, already accepted as a valuable part of the team. For someone who entered the profession with insecurity given her relative lack of formal teaching preparation, Bri was grateful to be valued and affirmed, a feeling that promoted confidence opening up to her colleagues, sparking a vulnerability that would

persist throughout her transition into teaching. Additionally, the offers of help and support with whatever she might need were a comfort to her, and she headed into the semester secure in the knowledge that she would not be abandoned when things became more stressful.

Above all else, her interactions at this pre-semester retreat assured Bri that she was heard and seen. Not only did her coworkers and administration want to *help* her, but they wanted to help *her*, getting to know her, and hearing her story, her vision for teaching, and even her worries and fears:

> Going on the retreat and getting that extra time to spend very casually with people like [my lead teacher] and [my student services coordinator] and getting to know them more as people before I even really realized what their jobs were was so valuable because we had very normal conversations about education. They really got to know me, so they already had a pretty good handle on my philosophy of teaching by the time I started teaching. So there are ways that they can explain things that I will already understand because they've already kind of gotten my measure. … I was able to get introduced to people and start figuring out who was who, and they were able to see me. And I felt like everybody really took the time to say, "OK, tell me about you. What are your experiences so far? What do you like about teaching?" I got to know everybody in a totally casual way, and then when I got to work with them and see their teaching style, knowing some of the personal stuff about them just deepened my understanding about how they teach or why they teach in a certain way.

Not only did Bri feel like there were people who wanted to support her, but she felt like they wanted to tailor that support to her, providing her not with a stock set of resources and advice, but with assistance that was personalized to her history, identity, and teaching philosophy. With these personal relationships as a foundation, Bri felt free to be herself in the classroom, embracing her strengths and being vulnerable about her weaknesses. This openness allowed her to encounter the challenges in the semester knowing that she could rely on supports that were specifically tailored to her gifts and limitations.

Adjusting to the Classroom

Bri's first few weeks were filled with their share of highs and lows as she adjusted to life in the classroom. She had some affirmational moments getting to know her students, inviting them into the kind of open, warm, informal classroom culture she envisioned and helping them work past some of their initial fears and struggles. And she had some discouraging moments, working through her own confusion about the curriculum, encountering student questions she was ill-equipped to answer, and battling exhaustion. Throughout the semester, the thing that weighed most heavily on Bri was the persistent inability to carve out the time, space, and wherewithal to give individual support to her students with specialized learning needs:

> I wish I had more time and resources to help some of my kids who have more specialized needs. There was this one time where I was helping one of the boys in my class who is on the autistic spectrum and we were having to work through this tough thing and it was taking a while and everybody else was working quietly and I noticed that my little girl with ADHD had her hand raised and I told her, "If you could just wait, I'll be right there." And I got so wrapped up in trying to help [this boy], and I looked up at one point and her hand was still raised and I just said, "Oh honey, I'm so sorry. What did you need?" And she just quietly said, "I'm just still waiting." This is my girl who can't sit still and she had sat there still waiting for me that whole time! It was probably only like two or three minutes, but I should have gone over and helped her super quickly and we could've moved on with the whole lesson but I had to stop everything to help this one kid. And there were others who were still struggling, some of my kids who needed extra help who I wasn't available for. And that was tough.

Almost all of times Bri felt at her lowest were some variation of this story – facing the realization that she could not be there for the students who needed her the most and recognizing the consequences of that failure. Bri felt burdened for the alternative learners in her class, aware of their presence and attuned to their needs, but she often felt either too overwhelmed or inexperienced to provide them with what they needed. Bri did not let these feelings of inadequacy make her feel like she had failed or paralyze her, but the responsibility she felt to her students rarely strayed from her consciousness:

> I would like to have more programs for some of my more special kids. There's just not enough extra accommodations for kids who might need more of that. We have a good time together. But I think that some of these kids are not getting the level of help they really need. Even having kinesthetic learners or kids who are really tactile and need to be touching things to learn about them and can't learn as well whenever it's just being talked at them and they have to talk it back. They need more than that. So we've been sneaking it in through little bits that we can and trying to help out but there's just a couple of cases that could have used a bit more specialized help.

Bri was aware of her students' struggles and she knew that targeted support would help them, but she often felt stretched thin in terms of her time and resources, ill-equipped to meet the needs she saw.

At times, Bri's inability to meet her students' needs caused her to feel guilty about her lack of formal training:

> One of the things that's been a bit of a frustration is there are a few people who have been giving the impression that I'm not qualified to teach because I don't have the teaching degree. I know I don't have a license and I have a great administration who's letting me teach anyway cause I'm working towards it, taking classes. But there's this one parent who keeps challenging me on it. I actually have a great relationship with her daughter in class but I keep getting emails from her mom, things like, "I haven't seen any grades for my daughter yet. Are you going to send those along soon?" And apparently she sent an email to my administration too. It hasn't been that big of a deal but it's just been a back-of-my-head frustration. And I can't do anything about it either.

Even armed with a great support structure and the confidence of knowing that her administration would defend her, Bri could not help but feel insecure about her identity as an APT. At times, she felt powerless, not just ill-equipped to meet all the challenges of the classroom but unable to take any tangible steps to rectify any of her incapacities.

Amidst these struggles, however, Bri did begin to settle into her new role, drawing heavily on her prior professional experiences to bring some semblance of familiarity to her new job, and leaning on her knowledge of the local culture to build relationships with her students. As a longtime resident of the region, though she may not have felt at home in the classroom right

away, Bri felt at home in the community, and she leveraged her knowledge of the culture in her conversations with her students:

> Just being able to talk to the kids about what they did over the weekend has been super helpful – they went to Bouncing Billy's, I've been there, I know what it looks like. I've been able to say, "Oh, did you do this one thing?" Or about where they went to get ice cream, I can relate and tell them, "I love this one flavor from there." And I think that connection with the kids, it goes back to winning their hearts before training their minds, that there has to be some sort of familiarity you have to have – they have to know how much you care before they care how much you know.

Though she may not always have felt prepared for the academic challenges of her students, Bri felt extremely prepared for the relational component of teaching, and she was able to bond with them over shared experiences and create a classroom culture of friendliness and openness.

Additionally, though her prior work experiences were somewhat divorced from the work of teaching, Bri experienced some professional crossover, especially regarding the logistical responsibilities of teaching:

> I was told that the parents were going to be what's hard [about teaching], but I dealt with difficult grownups when I worked in an office. I had to service sales representatives, so I have a lot of experience writing really tactful emails to explain to them why they're wrong and why I need them to do a thing. For example, I already had a parent email asking if the child's reading [homework] for the night could be sitting next to the dad who was playing video games and having the son read off of the video games, and I was able to write a very tactful but still forward email that got my point across and it just kind of rolled off the tongue at that point because I did that for years. I just explained how this is not going to work, I need you to do it a different way, very sweetly. And so that feels really normal to me and I feel like I've got a pretty good professional vernacular. And it helps with the kids too just to be able to come across as in charge of the situation and not really leaving things up for debate about what the expectations are.

Unlike a number of her more traditionally prepared counterparts, Bri was not making the transition into the professional world at the same time as she was making the transition into teaching, and thus, she experienced a smoother induction into the organizational and executive components of teaching. Bri had worked long hours before, she had dealt with a demanding

clientele before, and she had taken charge of complex scenarios before, all prior experiences that translated well into the education world.

Active Support and Advocation

Amidst these initial ups and downs, the support structures surrounding Bri lifted her up, enabling her to help the students who needed her one-on-one attention without abandoning the rest of the class. Across all grade levels, Bri's school set aside one period a day as an 'enrichment' hour, where students broke into small groups and received targeted help in specific subjects. At first, this hour was the hardest part of Bri's day as she needed to be in multiple places at once and could not possibly help all her students simultaneously. After mentioning these struggles to her friends and mentors, however, Bri received multiple overtures of support. Her colleagues offered to come into her classroom and help with a few of the small groups so she could provide more targeted instruction:

> During our intervention block, the student services ladies asked if they could plan some things for me. And I said, "Oh, would you please!" So they planned three of the sessions and then I get to do my own thing with the group which would've been my title-one bordering-IEP kids. So we can split everybody up by academic area and cover what we need to cover, and there are a lot of extra people that come in to help.

At no point did Bri feel that her struggles were dismissed with generic platitudes or lip-service; rather, the people around her volunteered their time and talents to help her solve the problem, enabling her to channel her energy and efforts towards meeting her most pressing set of responsibilities. With these supports in place, Bri started to love her enrichment hour, looking forward to her chance to work one-on-one or in small groups with her students:

> So with my small intervention group, we were covering a math method that we'd worked on a little bit last week, and I knew it was kind of fuzzy for them. But then I got them all to myself in enrichment time and they were getting it! And especially one of my little girls who has pretty intense ADHD, when she was in the small group, she was all-in, she had laser focus on me and was getting it. And she even said, "I get this, I think I might like math." And there've been several moments like

> that specifically in that enrichment time where I get that smaller group and we get to have more of a one-on-one and really focus on one key thing. And that's been awesome. It's been really great to get those smaller little moments together.

Many of Bri's most fulfilling moments throughout the semester were similar to this story where she found the space to meet with a small group of students and help them clear up confusions and experience academic success. Many of those successful moments were facilitated by the presence of another person or two in her classroom who partnered with Bri's vision of targeted support for all of her students. Her support team knew her strengths in the classroom, they listened to her concerns, and they found a way to empower her in her own classroom. Rarely were the difficulties Bri encountered removed from her purview, but neither was she left to fend for herself; rather, Bri's support team came alongside her, helping her learn to overcome the problems she encountered and pitching in to effect the solutions.

One primary example of the kind of support Bri consistently received from her administration was another episode during her enrichment hour where one of her aides took it upon herself to reach out to one of Bri's students with dyslexia:

> One of the student services teachers has just been fabulous. She has decided she's going to be a huge advocate for one of my students who's severely dyslexic. He really struggles in literacy, and he knows it, so he doesn't even try.[81] And this teacher just sat with him the entire time while she was also running another group and just helped him. And on my break, she came back to me, and she said, "We need to help him. We are going to help him." And she has just done so many little things since then – helping him clean his desk, working with him on organization, checking back with him, giving him kind of an accountability partner that's not just me. It's been awesome, because he's definitely one that I would love to give more time to. And with twenty-seven students, it's just not always possible. And so knowing that he's got this cheerleader, this advocate for him, has just been awesome to see. And then, to see her zeal in it has also been a reminder to me that there's probably stuff I could have been doing better as well.

[81] Note again the deficit language.

Bri found this moment to be transformative in her growth as a teacher, not only because she was freed from the guilt of not spending enough time with this particular student, and not only because she was inspired by this student services teacher's zeal, but also because she felt confirmed in her pedagogical inclinations about how and why education ought to be done. Bri found herself welcomed into not just any community but a community that believed in her same vision for teaching and learning and then worked tirelessly to put that vision into practice. It was this shared vision and shared commitment to lived practice that Bri found most supportive, and it was out of this mutual passion that she was able to endure the trials of her adjustment into the profession, receive coaching with a charitable spirit, and ultimately grow in her confidence and ability in the classroom.

Receiving Coaching

The story that Bri returned to again and again in her thinking as a transformative moment was actually "the lowest I've felt all year," an exhausting day that went from bad to worse, culminating in a rare moment of disagreement with her assistant principal:

> So yesterday, besides the horrible moment with [that parent], I also had my [assistant] principal come in and ask me about the way that I had rearranged the desks and I ended up having to rearrange the way I had rearranged things. I had gotten about four hours of sleep the night before and I hadn't eaten and it was just one of those awful mornings where everything had gone wrong. And [my student services coordinator] had already come in and questioned me about something else and then [my principal] came in and told me I needed to rearrange my desks and I just felt bombarded by everything. And luckily, my kids were at a special, and I was able to take a minute, and I was able to calm down. But it's probably the lowest I've been. It was the first time I thought – Should I really even be teaching? Is this really even something I want to do? Am I even good enough at this to continue doing it?

Though this was ostensibly a small disagreement about seating arrangements, in this moment Bri felt her ability questioned and her creativity stifled. She was trying to respond to a need she perceived in her class with a pedagogical response (a rearrangement of the classroom space), and

instead her ideas were forbidden and she was forced to reverse course, creating exactly the kind of scenario that might generate bitterness by preying on her insecurities.

But a moment that could have ended in feelings of inadequacy and suffocation became a positively transforming moment instead when her assistant principal came back to her later in the day and initiated a helpful and affirming conversation. As a result, Bri felt cared for and supported by her administration, and due to their willingness to follow up with her, found herself responsive to their mentorship:

> But just the way my principal approached me – she was so sweet – really helped me to stay level. Coaching comes across so much better when it's not someone coming to you and saying, "Your opinion is not as good as my opinion," but when it's someone saying, "I think it's so great you had this opinion and I love your creativity, but these school policies are in place for a reason, and so we need you to work within this particular space, but what can we do inside of this space that goes along with what you have already thought of." And it never felt like she said, "Hey you really dropped the ball on this." It was much more of her saying, "These are some thoughts that I had. What can we do to help? Let's, let's talk about it. Let's do this together." … The way that they phrase things and the way that they bring it to the teachers as, "This is something that we need to work on, let's build this back up together," and not, "You failed and now we need to pick up your mess." That's just kind of the support that there is here.

Even at her lowest point, Bri reacted favorably to her administration's criticism due to the trust that had built up between them and the kindness with which the interaction took place. While she may have felt discouraged in the moment, she quickly moved past any feelings of animosity and instead was able to look at the bigger picture and see this as a moment where she could grow in her practice. Bri felt like her mentors were partnering with her in this teaching endeavor, and while she did not always see eye-to-eye with them, she could always count on them for help and support.

As evidence of the powerful effect that such an honest and open relationship with her principal had on her teaching, Bri recalled one story where her principal witnessed an embarrassing and potentially stressful moment in her classroom:

> One of the things that I've really been able to do this semester is be okay with getting things wrong. There was even one day where [my principal] was in the room observing and I was trying to say the five parts of a sentence and I kept getting it wrong, and so I just walked over and stood in the corner and said, "You guys say it without me and then let's just move on." And [the students] thought it was hilarious and we had a great time with it. And I've just gotten to the point where I know that if I'm honest with the kids about stuff, it gets received a lot better. And I was ok with [my principal] seeing that and seeing me admit – you know what, I failed again, I did it wrong, nobody's perfect. And just letting that be normal. It could have been totally humiliating – not just to do it in front of children, but also to do it in front of my administrator – and it wasn't a problem. We just worked through it because that's what I needed to do for teaching at that moment. And it was actually something that [my principal] brought up later and said that I had handled that situation really well. And that was a moment when I was thought – that would've been different a year ago – and it was one time where I realized that I'm growing not just in my intellect but actually as a teacher.

Bri's comfort level with her administration was so high that she was able not just to survive a difficult classroom observation but embrace it as an opportunity for honesty with her principal. Bri was not humiliated by vulnerability; rather, she welcomed the chance to give of herself in the classroom, with all her strengths and her weaknesses, trusting that only growth could result.

Feeling Empowered

Consistently, one of the disciplines where Bri felt most empowered by her community's support was mathematics. Not only did the presence of extra helpers in her classroom facilitate one-on-one and small group instruction, but when she did struggle with her curriculum or her pedagogy, she was provided with additional support structures that freed her to address those challenges:

> I know I need to be better about incorporating the manipulatives. Occasionally I'll pull them out if somebody's struggling with a concept, but they're not my go-to and I know that they're super important in Singapore math. And I want to understand them well enough and be comfortable enough with them that I can pull them out for just about everything so that they have that visual picture to go along with it. Cause right now I am doing more of – well, let's just do another math problem, let's do another equation, see if this helps or makes sense. So [my principal] signed me up for an online course with [a Singapore math trainer] and [my student services coordinator] has actually been coming and doing my carline duty after school so that I can take that hour and take a couple of these classes. So the administration is

> really trying to make sure that we have the resources that we need to really feel successful. And the course has really been helpful, just hearing the history of the curriculum and why they did some of the things that they did and the reasons why the pictures are so helpful and also having a better viewpoint to talk to parents about it as well. Just having more knowledge of the curriculum itself feels a bit more empowering.

When Bri ran into an obstacle, as she did here in her math teaching, rather than just heaping extra responsibilities onto her or telling her what she could do better, her administrators worked with her to find something that she would find helpful and then went out of their way to facilitate her access to that support. Bri was given an extra responsibility – completing an enrichment course – but she was also relieved of one of her prior duties – carline – so that she would not become overwhelmed at the increase in her workload. Bri's administration went out of their way to defend her time and space, making sure she could face the challenging aspects of first-year teaching head on, focusing on her own personal growth as a teacher:

> The only times it feels overwhelming is when they come to me and say something like, "You have this thing that you do but there's also this bigger thing that you could do with it." And I just don't think I have brain space for that yet. Like, on Tuesday, when we had our faculty work day, we were talking about literacy, and the first-grade teachers were getting really excited about all the great potential for this extra thing you could do. And [my assistant principal] leaned over to me and said, "For a first-year teacher with Literacy Essentials, I think you're probably doing as much as you need to. Don't even worry about that. That is not something that you need to put into your brain space. You just keep doing what you can with what you've already got." And that was awesome. But it was definitely one of those moments where they're starting to bring up extra things and I'm just thinking to myself – we are supposed to be doing what?

Bri's assistant principal was familiar with the challenges of adjusting to a new curriculum (being a former third-grade teacher herself), and she intentionally looked for ways to relieve pressure on Bri, defending her from unnecessary obligations and streamlining her attention and effort. This practice of addition-by-subtraction allowed Bri to focus on the essential pieces of the curriculum first, growing slowly and steadily in her teaching ability.

Final Reflections

Bri got married over Thanksgiving, adding an extra layer of stress to her entire semester and depriving her of relaxation on her one holiday in the semester. Bri spent many late nights balancing wedding planning with her online courses with her grading and lesson planning, working herself to the brink of exhaustion time and time again. In the midst of the most stressful time of her year, however, Bri's coworkers and administration threw her a party, making her feel supported not just as a professional but as a person as well:

> This story is not necessarily school-related but they threw a party last month for me and somebody else who was getting married. And it was so great. They had cake and fun little food things and a bunch of people got us gifts. And it was just one of those really beautiful moments where I just felt – you guys are great and I love you and I love working here. And just feeling personally supported, not even just academically, but just knowing how much they care on even that level has been really cool.

Over the course of the semester, Bri found not just a workplace but a home, where she felt comfortable being herself, valued for who she was and what she brought to the table, and partnered with in a meaningful and fulfilling profession. Not only did such a supportive environment dispel any hesitations she might have harbored about her lack of formal preparation, but it gave her the space and the opportunity to develop confidence in her teaching practice.

CHAPTER 6: Discussion

> *The kind of data that the narrative-minded researcher analyzes in her studies is the same as everybody else's: These are stories that people tell about themselves or about others to their friends, teachers, parents, children, and bosses, as well as to researchers.*
>
> -Sfard & Prusak (2005, p. 21)

Stepping into such a complex profession as teaching necessarily plunges new teachers into a host of unpredictable challenges (Cochran-Smith, 2003), rendering each teacher's story unique and imposing prudence and restraint on any kind of cross-story analysis. For APTs especially, given the diversity of their backgrounds and teaching situations (Zeichner & Schulte, 2001), comparing and contrasting their various first-semester experiences must be done with an abundance of caution, protecting the distinctiveness inherent in their narratives.[82] Still, while the above stories preserve a meaning in and of themselves, the juxtaposition of these five APT narratives allows the stories to speak to and with one another, collectively telling a sixth story that, far from reducing the individual narratives to data points in some 'generic APT experience' (if that were somehow possible), provides a window into a heterogenous landscape, opening up a space for these APT stories (and others) to coexist and mutually inform one another (Sfard & Prusak, 2005). This section attempts such a juxtaposition, exploring connections, postulating themes, noting potential similarities and differences, and imagining the betweennesses amidst these stories.

[82] This same point would hold, I expect, for traditionally prepared teachers, as their narratives would most likely possess more uniqueness and variety than might be initially assumed.

APT Preparation

While the APTs in this study encountered numerous elements of the teaching profession for which they were not fully prepared,[83] each teacher also encountered elements of the profession for which they *were* ready, regularly employing in their professional practice resources and insights from their pre-teaching preparation. While this may seem trivial, the APTs in this study were not "unprepared" for teaching, despite their lack of formal qualifications or preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2002).[84] This study did find some evidence to support previous conclusions that APTs struggle more than their traditionally prepared counterparts to implement certain teaching practices (Linek et al., 2012), but it also seemed to support Maxwell's (2014) finding that APTs display particular strengths in the classroom that could be traced back to their alternative preparatory experiences.[85] Participants habitually drew on their formal education (often classes outside of a teacher prep program), their prior professional experiences (often in fields distinct from education), their passions and interests, their identities and dispositions, and even their own past experiences as students. These APTs were not *tabulae rasae* that needed to

[83] Amusingly, the question, "What were you least prepared for?" in the post-semester interview elicited an almost identical initial response from the five participants. They would laugh, look up to the sky, and utter some version of "So many things." Some of the most common responses were specific student behavioral issues, the variety of 'hats' required of a teacher, and understanding and implementing mathematics curricula. Each of these will be touched on below in detail.

[84] Though it may seem obvious, this result problematizes a set of studies that conclude APTs are underprepared or unprepared for the classroom (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2002; Moffett & Davis, 2014), and it directly contradicts another set of studies that begin from the universal assumption that APTs are inferior (e.g., Baines et al., 2001; Cardichon et al., 2020). While the comparison between APTs and traditionally-prepared teachers is complex and worthy of further examination, it seems clear that a simple deficit perspective towards APTs is flawed.

[85] While such a comparison between APTs and traditionally prepared teachers was not the purpose of this study and I did not collect the kind of comparative data to make any definitive claims in this area, there did to be some particular challenges the teachers in this study faced due to their alternatively prepared status as well as some particular strengths that they drew on specifically from their non-traditional background. These particular strengths and challenges are touched on below. Still, I can only speculate here as this study was about listening to the narratives of APTs rather than comparing them to the stories traditionally prepared teachers might tell.

learn how to teach out of nothingness; rather, they were truly alternatively prepared, shaped and equipped for the profession (both positively and negatively) by their pasts. Teaching requires a multifaceted skillset that can never be fully articulated much less acquired from even the most intensive teacher preparation programs (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; 2006), and while induction into the teaching profession exposed some of the deficiencies in these participants' preparations,[86] it also exposed the abilities and advantages they *did* possess, strengths that were often hard-won through prior labor and study.

At times, this prior preparation came from a *specific expertise* developed in a professional context; for example, Alanna's time helping English language learners in Japan imparted a passion for linguistics that proved invaluable when teaching literacy (recall the story about the parallels between native and non-native English speakers) and afforded her specific insights into place value concepts (recall the above story about double-digit Japanese numbers). Alanna was attuned to the nuances of language learning before she stepped into the classroom and was thus able to "think on my feet a lot more," equipped to face the challenge of helping her first graders learn to read, speak, spell, think, and do math.

At other times, this prior preparation came from a previous familiarity with *relating to other adults in a professional context*; for example, Bri, from her time working an "office job," regularly handled difficult emails from "pushy clients," equipping her for a smooth transition into the task of communicating with parents. She relied consistently on her "professional vernacular" that helped her encounter potentially stressful situations with parents with

[86] Teaching tends to have this effect on practitioners. Feiman-Nemser (2006, p. 131) makes this claim eloquently: "Teaching happens in particular situations with particular students around particular content. No amount of preparation can equip teachers with the knowledge they need to respond to the particulars of their teaching situation. Teachers can certainly learn subject matter and acquire knowledge of children, learning, and pedagogy in a variety of settings, but learning to use such knowledge in teaching depends on knowing things that cannot be learned in advance or outside practice."

communication that was “tactful but still forward” and caused her to feel “in charge of the situation.” Bri’s experience working a job seemingly disconnected from the world of teaching helped transform one of the more stressful aspects of teaching into a strength, leaving her with one fewer thing to worry about and building a self-confidence that bled into her classroom pedagogy.

At still other times, this prior preparation was derived from a particular *familiarity with the content or methods of teaching*; for example, Leila relied heavily on her prior knowledge of the curriculum she used as a preschool teacher (and remembered from her time as a student). She never felt the need to relearn the content she was teaching, describing it instead as “natural at this point,” a strength without which she “wouldn’t have had the bandwidth” to survive her first semester. Throughout her narrative, Leila was often able to predict the progression of the curriculum, helping her to recognize and draw upon the moments, especially in her mathematics classes, where the textbook foreshadowed upcoming concepts.

At other times, this prior preparation came as a result of a teacher’s *disposition or character*; for example, Grace had experienced firsthand how a teacher might be an agent of healing for a student experiencing brokenness, giving her a particular empathy for her own students and facilitating her ability and willingness to place herself in their shoes. Grace always framed her role as a teacher in terms of her overall goal of “mission and service,” leaning heavily on her empathy for her students to give her the inspiration to “be a presence in their life.” And despite the challenges that presented themselves, Grace remained missionally driven throughout her semester even as her external supports were crumbling, and she drew upon the inner strength that emerged from her desire for her students “to feel loved and known by me.”

And at still other times, this prior preparation merely arose from taking a job at a school in a *familiar location*, providing an awareness of the surrounding culture and a point of connection with the students; for example, Bri grew up in the same town as her students, allowing her to relate to many of their experiences. In casual conversations with her students about what they did over the weekend, Bri was often able to say "I've been there" or "I know what that looks like," allowing her, in her words, to "[win] their hearts before training their minds." Bri employed her "familiarity" with her students, a relational catalyst that became fundamental for her overall teaching vision: "They have to know how much you care before they care how much you know." In this particular area, Bri even frequently compared herself favorably to one of her traditionally prepared colleagues who went to college across the country, grateful for the affordances her own background provided.

In each of these cases, the participants drew upon previously acquired knowledge, skills, or advantages, invoking their experience, their familiarity with aspects of the teaching profession, and their identity. Rarely did the APTs in this study regret their preparatory experiences or blame the difficulties they encountered on a lack of preparation. At times, as they found themselves repeatedly facing a persistent challenge, they did express a desire for more expertise; for example, Grace wished she had some prior experience or knowledge she could draw on to help with her classroom management struggles, desiring to have taken "a class" on the "common behaviors that you'll get from kids," believing that if she had "gotten instruction on this before" she would have been "more equipped to take it on." At other times, however, when they encountered something they did not feel ready for, they questioned whether it was even possible to be ready for such a challenge, hypothesizing along with Feiman-Nemser (2006) that no amount of pre-service preparation could have sufficed. For example, recall Leila's story

of the challenges she faced in knowing how to help a student with a learning disability in which she concluded that "no amount of experience or anything is going to help in this setting" after inviting the observation of a more experienced teacher who was equally at a loss. In this difficult moment, Leila was not prepared to effectively balance the needs of a particularly disruptive student with her responsibility to the rest of her class, but rather than rue her lack of formal preparation, she ascribed it to the inherent complexity of the profession itself, believing that "the trial by fire is inevitable." Some of what might be learned in a traditional preparation program might equally be learned via some of the above non-traditional methods (e.g., Alanna's language acquisition expertise), and some of what is necessary to enter the teaching profession would be difficult if not impossible to learn in any formal capacity (e.g., Grace's endurance of student disrespect) (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). As seen in this study, well-prepared teachers can emerge from a variety of preparatory experiences, lending support to the suggestion of Grossman and McDonald (2008, p.195):

> Continuing to classify and design research studies based on the gross categories of alternative or traditional, despite differences in state and local contexts and without consideration of similarities and differences in organizational structures and practices, will provide an inaccurate picture of teacher preparation.

The aspects of teaching practice that the APTs in this study were prepared for (and unprepared for) seemed to depend on their particular pre-professional experiences rather than on their formal certification or preparation status.

Types of Transformational Moments

While they drew extensively on their prior preparation, none of the APTs in this study ended the semester unchanged; rather, they found teaching to be transformative, effecting shifts in their identity, their thinking, and their practices (Lampert, 2010). Such transformations can be

considered as *incremental* – the slow, gradual, comprehensive shifts that take place over time[87] – but they must also be understood as *epochal* – the specific disorienting moments that had drastic or long-lasting effects (Mezirow, 2000). Each of the five participants in this study seemed to hone in on certain episodes and stories as particularly transformative. Often, they would tell a meaningful story and then cycle back around to it, even months later, sharing a further set of reflections, reinterpreting the original episode, or interpreting other moments in light of the original experience. Such moments (whether positive, negative and/or neutral) became keystones of their narratives, unforgettable experiences that eventually came to encapsulate and synthesize their semester-long experience as a first-year teacher. While many of these transformational moments were shared in their entirety in the narratives above (and thus will not be repeated here), it is worth noting the *kinds* of transformational moments that seemed to reoccur throughout the stories.

Tone-Setting Moments

Before the beginning of the semester, each of the participants were required to complete some initial professional development sequence. While these preliminary trainings served the overt purpose of preparing new teachers to enter the classroom – detailing logistics, establishing routines, setting up policies, and providing explicit instruction in curriculum and pedagogy – for the APTs in this study, these initial experiences (and the attitudes and postures that emerged from them) seemed to set the tone for the entire semester. The teachers in this study understood these pre-semester moments as an opportunity for administrators and school leaders to welcome their teachers into a culture of support (or not), to demonstrate their commitment to getting to know their teachers on a personal basis (or not), to establish clear expectations (or not), to

[87] These more incremental transformations related to 'habits of mind' (Mezirow, 2000) are discussed later in this chapter.

provide them with some initial affirmation (or not), and to initiate a set of productive mentoring relationships (or not). Taking advantage of these opportunities seemed to make an impression on the teachers in this study, providing a sturdy foundation that they returned to again and again especially in moments of crisis. Failing to do so, however, seemed equally memorable, causing an immediate relational instability that was hard to overcome as the semester wore on (Peters & Pierce, 2012). This study echoes the conclusion of Fredricks (2001, p. 47) that "a school's administrators set the tone," locating these potential tone-setting moments at the outset of the semester, in hiring conversations, professional development sessions, and other first impressions.

One striking example of the transformative power of an affirmational tone-setting moment was Bri's pre-semester retreat. Not only did multiple members of her administration take the time to get to know her and offer her support for "anything she might need," she also felt valued as more than just a needy first-year teacher but as a partner and co-educator, who was already capable of contributing to the work of the school in a meaningful way. Bri often referred back to moments from the retreat, interpreting both the coaching and support she received throughout the semester as natural continuations of the initial culture she was welcomed into. Though Maya felt similarly welcomed into a culture of collaboration, where she could rely on her administration and coworkers for affirmation and motivation, her initial training was also marked by a noteworthy absence of pedagogical and practical support. Maya found this strange immediately, but as the semester progressed and she continued to feel like "there really is no guidance," she often reflected on her first few weeks of training, aware of the pattern this had set and resentful of the missed opportunities for support. Similarly, Grace's early professional development was marked by a notable lack of curricular support, made even more glaring by the presence of five weeks of classroom management training and role-play, something that Grace

believed, looking back, “should have been a red flag.” For Grace, the amount of time spent learning classroom management techniques should have alerted her to the massive responsibility the school intended to place on its teachers to keep order in the class and the lack of in-semester support in this area she would receive from her administration. Lastly, while Leila did not find her week of professional development to be particularly memorable, she returned often in her thinking to her initial hiring process, noting the immediate disrespect she felt and the “chip on [her] shoulder” that it left her with. When she applied for the job, Leila felt like her administration did not take her qualifications for the position seriously, painting her with a broad brush in offering her a TA position she felt overqualified for. While her administration eventually reconsidered her application and hired her as a classroom teacher, she often felt dismissed with generic platitudes and nonspecific coaching throughout the semester, feeling more like a cog in the machine of the school rather than someone with unique talents and struggles. Looking back, Leila felt she “should have known” this would be the case “given the way I even got the job.”

In each case, the earliest moments in the semester tended to be some of the most memorable, establishing whether teachers felt affirmed or dismissed, mentored or abandoned, valued as individuals or plugged into a system, supported or overwhelmed. For these APTs who had little experience in and around schools (no approximations of practice, no field experiences, etc.), the first impressions they had of the school, the administration, and the faculty remained transformative in their thinking long after they took place.

Scarring Moments

While many of the difficult moments faced by the APTs in this study were taken in stride as a natural part of the transition into teaching and even (at times) an impetus for growth, a few

of the participants faced particularly disturbing moments in which multiple challenges occurred simultaneously and the support system that was in place not only failed to provide assistance but became part of the problem itself. As might be expected, these disturbing moments – some genuinely traumatic, others almost routine – tended to linger in the consciousness of the teachers, leaving unresolved bitterness, uncertainty, and fear that permanently affected their willingness to trust the supports that had let them down. Early-career teachers are particularly impressionable (Huberman, 1989), and the early-career APTs in this study were no different, as the disturbing moments that occurred in their narratives tended to leave a set of lasting scars, especially when they undermined the very supports upon which the teachers had grown accustomed to rely.

Grace's scarring moment was initially traumatic – being reduced to tears by overt student cruelty – but it was not until she found multiple layers of her administration unkind and unresponsive to the pain she experienced that her trauma hardened into a scar. Grace felt left adrift, without anyone to rely upon and without a clear plan in place, and such an unmooring bred not just anxiety but a genuine dread of returning to that particular class.[88] Not only did Grace feel pushed to her limit in the classroom, but she had come face to face with the reality that she had no safety net, leaving her feeling "a little beaten down," causing her to "sacrifice good pedagogy just to keep control," and giving her such a traumatic memory that she questioned whether she had "what it takes to teach at this school" and (as of this writing) planned to leave her school entirely at year's end. For Leila, though the moment itself was less initially hurtful – a reprimand from her principal about enforcing the school's bathroom policy – the obliviousness, coldness, and indifference with which it was delivered caused her to recategorize a potentially supportive relationship as a source of adversity. Looking back on this moment at the

[88] Rightfully so, it turned out, as she experienced something similar the very next time her co-teacher was not present.

end of the semester, while the public scolding still bothered Leila, she was much more upset at the ignorance on the part of her principal that what he had done might have upset her. Leila felt unseen, dismissed as a mere executor of the principal's policies rather than a co-educator, and she remained disturbed throughout the semester by her principal's indifference. For Alanna, her scarring mentorship experience began with a disturbing moment when her mentor lashed out at her in the midst of a team meeting, but the truly hurtful injury occurred when she tried to repair the relationship with her mentor and, instead of resolution, found a pattern of repeated grievances. The reversal of what was supposed to be a support structure combined with the powerlessness to effect any positive change left Alanna feeling so anxious that she struggled to sleep at night, burdened with the stress of a toxic relationship. Even after Alanna was reassigned a new mentor, the scars that remained from her first experience kept her "very much in protection mode," hindering her ability to bond with a new source of support.

In each of these cases, the APTs experienced a similar confluence of factors: a difficult initial event exacerbated by the failure of a support structure to fulfill its purpose combined with a lack of awareness from mentors or administrators regarding both the severity of the problem and the need for resolution. And in each case, the result was the same: a transformational moment that left the teacher scarred: unmoored by the unknown, fearful of the future, and desensitized towards a potential solution. There was, however, one exception. Bri's story of being reprimanded for rearranging her desks in a way that was against school policy possessed all of the factors of a potentially scarring moment: it came on the heels of a difficult set of classroom experiences, it stifled her creativity, and it involved an administrator becoming an encumbrance instead of a support. Yet this moment, rather than scar Bri, ended up being positively transformative, as her mentor recognized how Bri might feel, sought her out, cleared

up any confusion, initiated resolution, and demonstrated kindness throughout the process. Like the scarring narratives above, Bri returned to this moment again and again in her thinking but not as a source of discouragement or fear; rather, it became a powerful example of the ways in which, even at her lowest moments, her administration was aware of her problems and committed to supporting her through them. While potentially destructive, these scarring moments – if identified, acknowledged, and resolved – seemed to offer an opportunity for mentors and administrators to demonstrate the depths to which their support could extend.

The ways in which failed supports tended to scar the teachers lend credence to studies like Johnson et al. (2019) who describe the most common supports provided to ECTs as having a "dark side" (p. 119). In this study, difficult moments with students or curriculum were seen as challenging, but they did not seem to leave a lasting scar. Rather, scars emerged when the teachers were promised a support (time, a safety net, mentorship, etc.) only to be disappointed or abandoned when they needed it the most. One of the most enabling forces for the APTs in this study was trust – trust in their support structures, trust in their school leaders and mentors, trust even in themselves – a finding that echoes a number of studies that postulate trust as the key to collegiality, efficacy, and retention (e.g., Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2015). But this trust was fragile. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2016, p. 1796) found that teachers tended to leave the profession after experiencing a "lack of supervisory trust," but the stories these APTs told seem to indicate the reverse may be true as well: early-career teachers may be inclined to leave the profession when *they* lose their trust in their supervisors. The trust the APTs had in their mentors and supports was essential, but when it was broken, it was not easily repaired.

Affirmational Moments

In contrast to these scarring moments that left the APTs disturbed and disoriented, each of the participants experienced encouraging moments that proved to be touchstones for their growth, inspiration, and willingness to persist in the profession. Such moments, more often than not, were moments of *affirmation* where they received some kind of positive feedback or encouragement. APTs felt most supported when they were most valued, and they tended to recall specific moments of affirmation as proof that they were capable of doing the work of teaching, that they did not need to worry about failure, and that they were respected members of their learning community. While many of the scarring moments were large in scope and complex in nature, the majority of the affirmational moments were relatively small and came from even the simplest of sources: a kind word from a mentor, a fruitful interaction with a student, or a moment of solidarity with a colleague or friend. These "little things" (Kitching et al., 2008, p. 54) seemed to make a significant difference in the teachers' self-efficacy, and ultimately their job satisfaction.

For Leila, the turning point in her tumultuous semester occurred when her students scored significantly higher than expected on their state benchmark exams. Though she had a tight-knit first-grade team that provided her with plenty of practical help, Leila did not receive much affirmation from her administration, so seeing numerical evidence that her students were indeed learning gave her the confidence she at times lacked. From that moment on, Leila was able to develop a kind of tunnel vision, staying committed to what she now knew was working in the classroom and steering clear of the unhelpful clichéd advice she often felt she received from her principal. With the affirmation from her students' learning, she became "less caught up on other people's opinions," overcoming her fear of inadequacy and "just going for it and trusting that I

can do it." For Bri, her semester was filled with affirmative moments, from the opening team-bonding retreat to the wedding shower her coworkers put on for her, but her most consistent source of affirmation came from the positive feedback of her mentors. Bri was surrounded by a true professional learning community (Vescio et al., 2008), and the steady stream of people entering her class to help afforded her consistent, open, encouraging conversations that centered around her real teaching practices. She received plenty of suggestions for improvement, but they were delivered in the context of a schoolwide culture of affirmation that helped build and sustain her confidence. Lastly, for Maya, this affirmation came not from her administration or her mentors (for all practical purposes, she felt isolated in her classroom) but from her friend, coworker, and roommate Evelyn. Though they were equally inexperienced and thus could not really coach each other, Maya and Evelyn were a mutual source of solidarity, providing encouragement to cut through crises of confidence. Maya often found it "hard to feel validated at this job" and often became discouraged at "the lack of appreciation" that "can just creep into your head." But the moments that Maya counted on the most throughout the semester were her Friday night dinners with Evelyn, where they would celebrate the completion of another week, laugh away discouragement, and reaffirm to one another the meaningfulness of the work in which they were engaged.

Given their lack of formal experience in and around the classroom, APTs often found themselves struggling with anxiety, distrustful of their own inclinations in the classroom, skeptical of their own attempts to improve, and generally hesitant in their practices. Maya kept wondering "if [she was] doing something wrong;" Leila felt "like [she was] doing a million things wrong;" and Alanna consistently questioned "if [she was] missing something." Receiving some affirmation then, regardless of the source, tended to be transformative in their teaching

practice, grounding them amidst the overall uncertainty that pervaded their first semester of teaching. In identifying affirmation as a fundamental need of these early-career APTs, this study supports the recommendation from Squires (2019) that effective mentoring relationships "are built on these positive and affirming interactions, where trust develops and challenges are seen as learning opportunities" (p. 257). Each of the APTs in this study craved affirmation, not just as an antidote to discouragement but as the central component of accepting and embracing their alternative preparation as an asset in the classroom.

Persistent Challenges and Enduring Supports

The above transformative moments offer insights into the *kinds* of experiences APTs found meaningful, but such moments, whether tone-setting, scarring, affirmational, or otherwise, can also be considered *thematically* by focusing on the challenges and supports that consistently wove their way amidst the narratives. These challenges and supports tended to come in pairs, with each challenge corresponding to the absence of a potential support and each support representing the elimination or overcoming of a challenge.

Targeted Student Support

One of the most persistent challenges the APTs encountered throughout their introduction to teaching was the difficulty of providing targeted support to students that needed one-on-one or small-group instruction, amidst the responsibility they felt towards the rest of the class as a whole. This challenge echoes the findings of Herbst and Chazan (2011, p.450), placing emphasis on the "individual obligations" that involved attending to the "behavioral, cognitive, emotional, or social needs" of students, and the findings of Keller-Schneider et al. (2018, p. 269), underscoring the difficult professional demand of "teaching tailored for individual students' needs." The teachers in this study often felt stretched thin, pulled between their broader set of

obligations – lesson planning, whole class instruction, keeping order in the classroom, assessment, etc. – and their obligations towards the individual needs of specific students. As shown by Chin and Young (2007), one of the primary motivations (80 percent of surveyed respondents) for APTs entering the classroom was the "opportunity to help students gain a sense of achievement and self-worth" making this challenge particularly poignant for this cross section of APTs.

Bri's story provides a powerful example of the kind of intense responsibility the teachers in this study felt towards their students with specialized learning needs. While some other struggles did emerge in the interview process, when Bri was asked what she found to be most difficult in each of the three mid-semester interview, she immediately gravitated to the challenge of providing targeted support to her students. Bri was always conscious of the students who were "not getting the level of help they really need" or who "needed extra help who I wasn't available for." She repeatedly articulated the desire for "more time and resources" or "more programs" in order to "help some of my kids who have more specialized needs." When she had the opportunity to spend some one-on-one or small group time with her students with learning disabilities, she often found herself up to the task of providing this targeted support, but "with twenty-seven students," it was "just not always possible" to consistently carve out the time and space to do so without sacrificing her other responsibilities.

Unlike some of the other challenges that tended to dissipate over the course of their transition into the classroom, the task of providing targeted support to students remained a persistent struggle before, during, and after the semester. Maya went into the semester concerned about this issue already, citing a "child really failing or struggling" as her primary worry. Maya was afraid of feeling helpless, scared that she would try to "alter her teaching" but that nothing

would work. She even framed this fear in terms of "parent criticism," worried that they might think she was "incompetent" or "young" due to her inability to help struggling students. Leila entered the semester with more confidence, but once she encountered students she felt ill-equipped to support, the feeling of powerlessness weighed heavily upon her. Leila had one student in particular who she never felt showed signs of progress, describing his growth curve as "non-existent." Leila took this responsibility upon herself, believing that she was "failing him" and describing the situation as her "biggest stressor" that "causes me a lot of anxiety." Alanna described this challenge as the primary thing she was still anxious about heading into the spring semester. Especially coming from a culture where every student with a learning disability had a designated helper who was present in the classroom with them, Alanna found it "overwhelming" that it "was just going to be me all the time" and there would not be an aide present to "distribute the responsibility." She longed for "somebody else in the room" identifying this support as the primary thing that would "really help with teacher burnout and retention."[89]

As hinted at here by Alanna, the kind of support that seemed to alleviate these challenges was not verbal; rather, it required some kind of direct personal assistance by an experienced classroom aide or intervention specialist.[90] No amount of mentorship, coaching, or advice seemed to move the needle in this area; instead, the support must be tangible, an investment of time and personnel. This investment could take the form of someone coming into the classroom

[89] The persistence of this struggle does not imply that there was no growth in this area. All of the participants did show signs of improvement in addressing their students' needs. But, as their abilities to provide assistance and interventions grew, their awareness of the depth and breadth of their students' needs tended to grow at a similar rate. Each need that they met seemed to spawn the awareness of further needs, leading them to describe this struggle as persistent.

[90] Maya's story here is particularly instructive. At times, she felt grateful to be left alone by an administration that did not intervene unless she was "on fire." But when it came to the task of providing students with one-on-one support, Maya often felt frustrated at the lack of tangible support: "I'm doing okay, I guess….I just don't think they've been explicitly interested in how they can help."

to assist a few students, freeing the teacher to focus on their whole-class instruction, confident that their students with learning disabilities had the help they needed. Maya did not receive much support from her first-year school, but she described the one hour per week the intervention specialist was in her classroom as a "breath of fresh air." Maya "purposely scheduled" her most difficult subject during that hour, trusting that her assistant could "give them the kind of one-on-one support that I can't give them." With this kind of support, not only was Maya "not worried" about her "struggling students," but she felt free to "go around the room" and work closely with some of the other students that did not typically get her focused attention. Alternatively, the support could take the opposite form, with the interventionist coming in to teach a whole-class lesson, while the primary classroom teacher was freed to walk around and provide targeted support to students who needed help. Bri, who was always concerned about her students with learning disabilities, appreciated this approach, especially in her intervention block where members of her student services team came in and planned lessons for the majority of the students, enabling Bri to provide specific support to her "title-one, bordering-IEP kids." Bri had "a lot of extra people that come in to help," transforming what was initially a chaotic period of the day into the class she looked forward to the most because she actually had the time and space "to get those smaller little moments together" with the students she felt most called to teach. Both the instructive aide approach that freed the teacher to do the support work and the supportive aide approach that freed the teacher to focus on whole-class instruction seemed to be effective in alleviating the pressure these teachers felt to help their students and empowering them to provide the kind of targeted support they yearned to do.

In addition to supporting the obligation-related findings of Herbst and Chazan (2011) and Keller-Schneider et al. (2018), these stories also provided evidence to support the

recommendation of Schaefer et al. (2012) to shift the conversation around teacher attrition to focus on the various supports that sustain and retain teachers. When the APTs in this study did not have these tangible, present supports to help their students with learning disabilities (as in the case of Alanna), they tended to feel like they were failing and questioned their career choice. But when their mentors and administrators were able to recognize this need and allocate the resources necessary to provide a system of support (as in the case of Bri), the teachers not only felt that a large burden was removed from them but they told the kind of "staying stories" that reinvigorated their drive to teach (Craig, 2014, 2019; Schaefer & Clandinin, 2019). Being empowered to provide targeted support to the students that needed it was a staying story for the APTs in this study, providing a positive motivation that sustained them in their teaching and inspired them to persist in the profession.

Responsibility Overload

Though each of the teachers in the study found the responsibilities directly related to classroom teaching – lesson planning, instruction, classroom order, student relationships, etc. – to be strenuous, they rarely lamented these tasks;[91] rather, the majority of their complaints about being overwhelmed or overworked centered around a set of responsibilities they found to be tangential or even inessential to the profession of teaching. These tangential tasks took a variety of forms – some logistic, some administrative, some that just felt frivolous – but each required a large time commitment and did not seem to directly impact classroom teaching and learning. First-semester teachers had little time to spare and what few rhythms and routines they did develop were both hard-won and extremely fragile, making them particularly susceptible to

[91] This point is taken up further in the below section entitled "Challenges as Opportunities for Growth."

disruptions caused by additional responsibilities, unexpected duties, or other added obligations.[92] Such findings echo the multitude of studies (Kutsyuruba et al., 2019; Schuck et al., 2018, etc.) that correlate teacher burnout and attrition with the overwhelming number of responsibilities thrust upon them, but the stories these APTs told seemed to divide their responsibilities into two categories – some burdensome and some acceptable – perhaps lending support to Cavanaugh's (2000) distinction between 'hindrance-stressors' and 'challenge-stressors.'

Each of the participants described being overloaded, with phrases like Leila's "just trying to keep my head above water" or Alanna's "the cognitive overload is a lot" occurring frequently throughout the interview process, but the truly stressful moments that seemed to push them over the edge were rarely connected directly to the classroom. These hindrance-stressors were loosely associated with teaching but often seemed irrelevant to student learning, from Grace's district mandated professional development ("hour-long zoom sessions" that were not "always very helpful") to Alanna's school sponsored events and fundraisers ("American schools" are "all about money" leaving her with "an email inbox full of things") to Bri's struggles with data collection and reporting ("grading is one of the areas you can quickly fall behind"). In each case, the particular challenge was not too difficult to overcome in and of itself, requiring only the teacher's time and intentionality, but such an investment did not bear immediate fruit in the classroom and disrupted the fragile work-life balance the teachers had worked so hard to carve out.

[92] This particular point (along with many others) may be more applicable to first-semester teachers than to second-semester teachers. As addressed in the study limitations below, I conducted my last interview with each participant over winter break and thus was unable to capture the second-semester experiences of these teachers. The second semester of teaching presents different challenges and affords different opportunities for support than the first semester, and thus this study's observations and conclusions are limited in scope. A more longitudinal study is needed to track the narratives and themes of early-career APTs into their second semester. Particularly, in the case of the responsibility overload observed here, a number of the participants mentioned their ability to develop a "rhythm" near the end of the semester, perhaps rendering this challenge a little less pertinent in the second semester.

Supports in this area came via the intentional actions of an administrator or aide to release the APTs from some of their time-intensive logistical work, freeing them to direct their time towards the tasks that were directly related to instruction. Leila's half-time TA epitomized this kind of support, as she monitored recess, graded worksheets, walked the students to their specials, collected permission slips, and generally handled a number of the logistical concerns that threatened to overwhelm Leila and draw her attention away from student learning. While administrators themselves did not seem to have the bandwidth to provide this kind of active day-to-day support, they could still remove some of the stressful logistics from the purview of their teachers. For example, during a literacy professional development session, Bri felt that it was "about to get super overwhelming," but her principal told her "not to even worry about that," calling it "not something you need to put into your brain space," freeing her to "keep doing what you can with what you've already got." Here, her principal recognized that some school-sponsored initiatives might be valuable for experienced teachers but might be both time-consuming and overwhelming for a first-year teacher, offloading some of Bri's responsibilities and providing her peace of mind.

While the potential for responsibility overload is substantial for all first-year teachers (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016), it may be especially prevalent for APTs who often are negotiating the responsibilities they have to alternative certification programs on top of their teaching responsibilities. While Maya, Grace, and Leila took jobs that did not require them to pursue certification, both Bri and Alanna were forced to take classes and pass exams throughout their first semester. Bri described "fitting [her classes] into ten-minute widows" in her day, watching bits and pieces of video modules with every break she had, and Alanna spent most of her Thanksgiving holiday studying for and taking her temporary licensure exams. Given these

additional demands, APTs can sometimes be stretched even thinner than traditionally certified teachers, making every extra logistical obligation an even more significant challenge and making every bit of help to relieve those pressures an even more significant support.

Though they may seem insignificant to administrators, it was these extraneous obligations – jumping through administrative hoops, navigating logistical obligations, planning and executing special events, etc. – that the APTs in this study regretted spending their time on and wished for someone to intervene on their behalf. Leila described this feeling as a mindset shift from "it's hard but it's worth it" to "it's hard and I should be having more support than this," a shift that would lead her to wonder: "Why are we so complacent with letting our first-year teachers burn out. If it's really that hard, why aren't we doing more? Don't bring it on; help me! Grab a shovel!" Each APT in this study felt overwhelmed and ill-equipped to meet the demands of the profession, and every extra commitment that they perceived as not directly impacting their classroom instruction weighed heavily upon them. The more creative ways that mentors and administrators found to relieve these peripheral responsibilities (perhaps taking up Foote et al.'s (2011, p. 420) suggestion of a "less-demanding first-year teaching schedule" that would leave more time for new teachers to "collaborate with and observe more experienced mathematics teachers"), the more energy and time the APTs could redirect towards their primary responsibilities, and the more they felt supported in their practice.

Self-Efficacy

Given the affirmational moments they often found to be transformative, many of the persistent challenges that plagued APTs throughout the semester were self-efficacy related. These struggles with self-efficacy took a number of familiar forms – constant self-assessment, emotional drama, self-esteem issues, etc. – that might be expected from any first-year elementary

teacher (see Hong et al., 2018; Intrator, 2006; or Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016), but the participants in this study also tended to have a set of doubts related to their preparation that caused them to mistrust their own strengths in the classroom and to be more self-conscious around parents, administrators, and colleagues. Such findings provide evidence that APTs may benefit from intentional opportunities to investigate and construct their professional identities (Schultz & Ravitch, 2013).

The APTs in this study did not have the formal qualifications to fall back on as confirmation of their expertise, and thus tended to feel insecure either around seasoned educators, like administrators or experienced colleagues, or around non-educators who expected them to display teaching prowess, like parents.[93] Without a college degree much less a teaching license, Leila felt consistently plagued by self-efficacy related insecurities, expressing fear that people were judging her because "I don't have this four-year degree" and "I am … alternatively prepared," describing these apprehensions as a "pretty immediate concern" that gave her "a bit of a chip on my shoulder." Like Leila, Bri also experienced identity-related struggles stemming from her lack of qualification especially given her school's requirement that she take classes online to get a second degree in education. While Leila's struggles were more internal, Bri's took a more tangible form through a conflict with a parent who sent an email to her administration "giving the impression that I'm not qualified to teach because I don't have the teaching degree." Being criticized for her status as an APT by a parent weighed heavily upon Bri as a "back-of-my-head frustration," causing her to disparage herself and question "if I deserved to have this position." Both Leila and Bri found support in battling these concerns, Leila from her students'

[93] This finding does not imply that traditionally prepared teachers might not have their own reasons for also feeling insecure around parents or experienced colleagues, but the teachers in this study seemed to associate their insecurities with their lack of formal certification or preparation, something that a traditionally prepared teacher would not need to worry about.

academic success which allowed her to develop "some real self-assurance" and Bri from the affirmation she received from her "great administration" that "went to bat" for her, defending her against parental criticism.

Other struggles with self-efficacy centered less around the APTs qualifications and more around their uncertainties in the classroom. As seen above, the APTs had plenty of informal preparation to draw on, but they did not have a set of tested, reliable methods learned in a classroom setting that they could depend on, leaving them unsure whether their basic teaching instincts were well-founded or effective. As such, without some affirmation or confirmation that what they were doing was working, they struggled to believe in their own abilities. Maya described feeling like she had "no idea whether or not anything I did was working," and Alanna even struggled to "ask for help" because she was worried it would display her weaknesses and lead them to "fire me." Leila struggled with uncertainties in her practice, unable to "figure out what's typical versus atypical, what's concerning and what isn't." She often felt like she was playing a "trial and error game," and she worried she was "doing a million things wrong." Without the chance to study research-based teaching methods in a formal teacher preparation program and without the chance to engage in cycles of enactment and reflection in a field experience, the APTs in this study often felt they were flying blind, causing them to blame themselves when things went poorly and triggering concerns about whether or not they truly deserved to be in the classroom.

Reimagining Mathematics Teaching

Underneath the overarching challenges and supports listed above, the APTs also experienced a set of specific struggles that centered around the teaching of mathematics. No subject was immune from the difficulties of first-year teaching, but math, for the teachers in this

study at least, both exacerbated the overall challenges and provoked unique challenges that were not present in other disciplines. Four out of the five teachers in this study identified math as the most difficult discipline to teach (Leila excepted), and as such, math became a focal point where both the greatest challenges were triggered and the greatest opportunity for mentors and administrators to provide support and encouragement was presented.

Given that prior research suggests the subject of mathematics is particularly difficult even for traditionally prepared first-year teachers (Bursal & Paznokas, 2006; Jong & Hodges, 2013), this set of results may not be surprising, but it remains noteworthy that APTs do not seem to be exceptional in this area. Like their traditionally prepared counterparts, APTs struggled with mathematical self-efficacy, curricular knowledge and implementation, utilizing representations and manipulatives, and encouraging student thinking. While some of these struggles were more evident than others, on the whole, their experiences adjusting to teaching elementary mathematics seemed to align with previous studies investigating traditionally prepared teachers (Burkhauser & Lesaux, 2017; Roth McDuffie et al., 2018; Webel & Connor, 2017.

Curricular Challenges

Many of the difficulties the APTs encountered in the teaching of mathematics centered around understanding, interpreting, and leveraging the curriculum they were given. Each of the APTs in this study found their curriculum to be complex and nuanced, a realization that ran contrary to their initial expectations of mathematics and mathematics teaching as simple formula memorization and execution.[94] None of the teachers struggled to identify this complexity, understanding immediately that the curriculum called them to expand their conception of mathematics beyond rule-following, formula-use, and calculation, but they struggled to

[94] None of these APTs (even those who earned a minor in education) had taken either an elementary mathematics content course or a mathematics methods course in their collegiate studies.

comprehend and embrace such an expansion. Maya struggled to "understand what [the curriculum] is supposed to do" leaving her overwhelmed at the "little things to the curriculum that I know I'm not getting right" and doubting whether she could "trust this program." She struggled to negotiate the "more organic way" her curriculum "wants you to do it" that conflicted with her inclinations as a "rules person" who "relied on the method or the formula." Alanna also felt uncertainty with the approaches recommended by her curriculum, feeling "less secure…as it gets later in the unit" and often believing that she was "missing something." Even Leila, who often described herself as enjoying her math classes, found the curriculum to be the most difficult aspect: "Content-wise, the hardest part has been math. … We have to get [the students] to be willing to [solve a problem] in multiple ways." These APTs recognized the nuances of the curriculum, but they grappled with the unfamiliarity of those nuances; they knew the curriculum wanted them to do 'more,' but they were not sure what that 'more' needed to look like.

One particular tension in the curriculum that plagued the APTs in this study was the distinction between the mathematical concepts themselves and the methods by which they should be taught. Grace articulated this tension the very first day she stepped into a mathematics classroom: "I do know how to do the math, but I was super unsure of how to explain it – that's completely different." This tension proved to be particularly difficult when the curriculum encouraged understanding over procedural fluency; for example, Leila often understood that her curriculum wanted her students to problem solve but struggled knowing "*how* [to] teach them the difference between memorization and thinking." Alanna too, often felt overwhelmed with the "minute details of *how* to teach" that added a second layer of complexity that went beyond the initial task of re-learning the mathematics itself, and she often found herself "struggling a little bit with giving them the *why*." The dual function of a curriculum – specifying a set of content to

teach and prescribing a set of methods by which it might be taught – was foreign to the APTs and proved difficult to comprehend and negotiate.

In the face of these uncertainties, the APTs often found themselves lacking the training, resources, and support necessary to grow in their curricular knowledge. In particular, the mentors and coaches assigned to facilitate their teaching tended to dismiss curricular difficulties, imagining elementary mathematics to be simple and straightforward. When Grace asked for help teaching mathematics (a foreign discipline to her), her administration dismissed her concerns, telling her that "it's sixth grade math, it's easy, you'll be fine." When Alanna asked her mentor for advice, she was told merely to "do an intervention," which Alanna described as "advice that [does] not tell you anything about how to actually put it into practice." And Maya was so abandoned in her attempt to understand the curriculum she was given that she had no idea who she might even ask for help: "Nobody at the school knows anything about Singapore math." Often, it seemed that the administrators tasked with supporting the APTs in this study imagined the elementary mathematics curriculum to be self-explanatory, believing that selecting and supplying the curriculum would provide the teachers with all they needed to understand it and use it well.

In contrast to these stories, Bri's narrative of administrative assistance in the area of curricular knowledge represents one of the key areas in which her support structure encouraged her growth as a teacher. Bri too struggled with the curriculum and brought her struggles to the attention of her administration. Far from dismissing these concerns, however, one of her mentors made sure she had "the resources that [she] need[ed] to really feel successful," volunteering to cover her carline duty so that she could take an online course on incorporating manipulatives into the Singapore mathematics curriculum. Bri found it immensely "helpful" to have some insights

into “why [the curriculum writers] did some of the things they did,” and she could not help but notice the transformation these insights had on her teaching, exclaiming that “having more knowledge of the curriculum itself feels a bit more empowering.” Bri’s administration knew that the elementary mathematics curriculum was complex, and they took her struggles seriously enough to design and provide her with supports, increasing her comfort with the curriculum and facilitating her growth as a mathematics teacher.

While none of these challenges understanding and implementing mathematics curriculum seem unique to APTs, such findings provide important narrative confirmation that APTs also often find themselves adrift amidst a “rapidly changing landscape of instructional materials in elementary education” (Drake, 2021, p. 136). As such, much of the scholarship in the field investigating teachers’ use of curriculum materials (see Lloyd et al., 2009 for one overview of this field) seems to be just as relevant to APTs in their early-career experience as it is for traditionally prepared teachers.

Mathematical Self-Efficacy

In no discipline were the overall struggles with self-efficacy that the APTs experienced more evident than in the discipline of mathematics (Bursal & Paznokas, 2006). When difficulties arose in other subject areas, the most common response was some variation of “It’s hard” or “My students aren’t getting it,” placing the locus of the problem externally, on the curriculum or on the learners. When difficulties surfaced in mathematics, however, the APTs were much quicker to blame themselves, responding with things like, “I can’t do it” or “I don’t know how to teach this.” These feelings of guilt and self-doubt often stemmed from experiences in their own math learning and led three of the five APTs – Maya, Grace, and Alanna – to describe themselves (without prompting) as “not a math person,” a self-skepticism that impacted their pedagogy. The

association between the teaching practices of APTs and their mathematics beliefs and self-efficacy echoes the litany of studies investigating these connections for traditionally prepared elementary teachers (e.g., Drake, 2006; Wilkins, 2008). The instructional practices of the teachers in this study were profoundly impacted by their history with mathematics, their beliefs about the subject, their mathematics anxiety, and their mathematics identity, providing some evidence that Drake's (2006, p. 580) finding that "narrative can also be used to understand systematically teachers' practices" is also true for APTs.

For Maya, these mathematical self-doubts manifested themselves primarily as feelings of hypocrisy as she asked her students to engage in practices that she herself struggled with: "I feel a bit out of my comfort zone…like I'm holding them to standards that I don't meet myself sometimes." The experience of not being able to solve one of the word problems in the textbook weighed on Maya as she became tentative in her teaching, afraid of imposing some kind of double-standard on her students. For Grace, her struggles with mathematical self-efficacy were often identity related, causing her to feel that math teachers were members of some exclusive club that she was not (and could not) be a part of: "I am not a math teacher! I don't know how you guys have the patience for teaching math!" Despite doing the work of teaching math on a daily basis, Grace still did not feel like she belonged, identifying herself to be lacking some of the qualities required to become a 'math teacher.' For Alanna, her mathematical self-efficacy crises served as focal points for her more general self-efficacy crises, as she returned again and again to her feelings of failure in math: "It's always math. I'm not good at math. … It's always math that just gets in my way." Even when she attempted to identify her strengths as a teacher, she went out her way to create a special exemption for mathematics: "I know I'm a good teacher and I've really been resting on that. … I can teach, I can read and I can do English, and I can do

history, and I can do science. Still forever getting confirmed that math is not it."[95] Though each APT struggled with mathematical self-efficacy in their own way, these struggles all stemmed from the common tendency to quickly find fault with their own identities and abilities, causing a downward spiral that spawned bouts with distrust, uncertainty, and doubt.

Reframing Mathematical Concepts

While these curricular and self-efficacy struggles were pervasive, each of the five APTs also experienced breakthrough moments in their teaching of mathematics, due largely to an increase in their willingness to see mathematics as a connected discipline. The connections of mathematics (among multiple mathematical ideas, between different representations of the same idea, and relating mathematical concepts to real-world contexts or ideas from other subjects) have long been understood as one of the key tenets of student learning (NCTM, 1989, 2014), but they are frequently listed among the most difficult parts of learning to teach (Chapman, 2012; Nicol, 2002). For the APTs in this study, however, the recognition and employment of such connections seemed to emerge from their background, perhaps lending some credence to the idea that APTs tend to be well-equipped to understand and use mathematical representations and connections (Maxwell, 2014).

The participants in this study repeatedly found themselves dissatisfied with disconnected teaching strategies including repeated student practice, teacher explanations, and formula dissemination. Bri felt herself limited by her go-to response to student struggles: "Well, let's just do another math problem. … See if this helps it makes sense;" Grace "hit a wall" in her teaching,

[95] Alanna's fear of being fired was always connected to her fears about mathematics. The quote mentioned earlier in her individual story continues by associating her feelings of failure to her struggles to teach mathematics: "So I'm pushing through and I'm trying to convince myself to ask for help, but I keep having the thought that if you're asking for help, it means you can't do your job. And then they're going to fire you. And I know that they are supposed to be here to support me but these are the kind of things that I've been worried about because my area of weakness is math. I mean, it just has been a lifelong struggle with math. I was, you know, I was definitely very concerned about teaching math. I've never taught math."

finding no traction in "explaining it again and again and again" when her students were "struggling over and over;" and Maya lamented the monotony of re-explaining the same concept, "I don't even know how many times I've explained bar modeling in word problems, but it's too many." In each case, returning to the same disconnected method of teaching a concept or just trying the same technique again and again proved to be ineffective, leaving the teachers casting about for alternative explanations, creative perspectives, and new methods.

The breakthroughs that did take place seemed to occur at times when the APTs noticed and utilized the connectedness of mathematics to provide an alternative way for their students to conceive of the problem. Bri found success with physical representations, "incorporating the manipulatives" when "somebody's struggling with a concept." Leila experienced growth by connecting the mathematical concepts to other subjects and scenarios, finally seeing "the lights start to go on" in her students' heads when she encouraged her students to "start to apply [math] elsewhere." And Maya was able to motivate her students to re-imagine bar modeling simply by incorporating their interest in personal stories, rewriting "all of our word problems" to include "Roberto and Francisco" (her chicken and fox). In each of these examples, the catalyst for the mathematical breakthrough arose through a reframing of the mathematics, stepping away from the straightforward numerical explanations, exploring the borderlands of mathematics, and leveraging the intersections between mathematics and other disciplines as fertile pedagogical soil. Some of these reframings were encouraged by the curriculum (Bri's use of manipulatives comes to mind),[96] but others were extra-curricular as the APTs drew on their own lived experiences to generate fresh perspectives on teaching mathematics.

[96] Notably, Bri was the only APT in this study who received concentrated support from her administration in helping her understand and explore the curriculum and the different representations it encouraged.

One moment that epitomized the power that the APTs found in reframing mathematical concepts is Alanna's breakthrough "teaching [her students] some Japanese." As seen above, Alanna battled math anxiety throughout the semester, finding it seemingly impossible to teach her students something that "even in my brain doesn't fully make sense." After consistently struggling with the techniques she was given by her curriculum and by her coaches, Alanna finally had "a real aha moment" with her students by "leaning a lot more on my strengths" and "connecting math to language" using her expertise in linguistics to teach place value concepts through the Japanese words for double-digit numbers. Instead of trying to become one of the "math-y math teachers" she struggled to understand as a child, she drew upon her other knowledge bases to re-envision the math, interpreting it in a way that made sense to her and assisting her students out of the depth of her own expertise. For Alanna, and for the other APTs in this study, embracing the potential connectedness of mathematics – to story, to language, to reality, and to other subjects – became the key to growing in their ability to teach it.

Challenges as Opportunities for Growth

Though the challenges detailed above added obligations, uncertainties, and anxieties to the APTs' lives, all of the participants in the study viewed some of the challenges as opportunities for growth rather than distresses to be avoided. Even when the difficulties were at their most severe, the teachers saw many of them as growing pangs, and far from wishing for the struggles to be removed, they wanted to encounter, endure, and overcome them. By and large, they did not want to be shielded or protected *from* the difficulties of teaching; rather, they wanted to be supported *through* the challenges, grounded in an understanding community, buoyed by encouragement and mentorship, and equipped with sufficient resources. This finding disrupts a simple negative correlation between stress and job satisfaction (e.g., Klassen & Chiu, 2010) and

supports the growing body of literature which distinguishes between positive stress (often eustress or challenge-stressors) and negative stress (often distress or hindrance stressors) (Cavanaugh et al., 2000; Mujtaba & Reiss, 2013). The APTs in this study rarely expressed the desire to be freed from the challenges of teaching; instead, they hoped that their school leaders would believe them capable of tackling the hardest challenges head on, perhaps strengthened by the support of those around them, but standing on their own two feet.

This willingness to embrace the challenge-stressors in their lives manifested itself in a variety of ways. Many of the teachers, especially Maya and Alanna, craved observation (despite the vulnerability it took to seek out) and critical feedback (despite the effort it took to implement). They wanted to know "what they were doing wrong," and they wanted to be "held accountable" to good teaching practice. For Alanna, the amount of coaching and advice she received was overwhelming, she had a stressful relationship with her mentor, and she became anxious every time she even thought about someone observing her teaching, but she remained committed to the mentoring process as an important means of growth. For Maya, it was the reverse: she bemoaned the lack of coaching she received, though it made her day-to-day practice easier, because it robbed her of the opportunity to challenge herself and improve her pedagogy. At other times, the teachers identified difficult moments as major catalysts for growth. For Bri, this arose as a result of a direct conflict with her administration over a decision that she made in her classroom. The critical feedback Bri received was difficult to accept at first, yet it was instrumental both in her growth as a teacher and in her willingness to trust her mentors. Bri was told that she needed to "work within this particular space" which constrained her creativity and challenged her vision for the classroom, but the "way [her] principal approached [her]" and the feeling that her administration wanted to "build this back up together…inside of the space"

caused her to feel secure that her mentors would support her and made her more willing to be vulnerable with other aspects of her teaching practice. Even Grace, who was called unspeakable names by her students in the classroom and was then ignored by her administration, described "these bad moments" as the very thing that "has actually made me more rooted." For Grace, "having pushed through" the challenges made her stronger and equipped her with a kind of "emotional constancy" that became her steadying force in a school culture of chaos. While Grace did wish for someone to alleviate some of her classroom management responsibilities, she acknowledged the growth and strength that came from accepting the challenges and persevering through them.

In this study, however, the central story regarding these challenge-stressors, however, belongs to Leila, who went to her administration for advice regarding a particularly difficult student. The first time she brought up her problems, her principal was under-supportive, offering her boilerplate solutions but largely dismissing the issue as unworthy of his consideration. The second time she brought it up, however, her principal intervened heavily, immediately removing the child from her class without her consent and reassigning him to a different section. Though it relieved some of her day-to-day adversities, Leila found this both insulting to her teaching capability and unsupportive of her teaching practice. She did not want her problems to be solved for her, positioning her as some kind of a second-class teacher who could not handle the complexities of the classroom; rather she wanted to be equipped with the resources and mentorship to solve the problems on her own. She did not need protection; she wanted to learn from the experience, building a set of skills and developing a set of knowledge that would prepare her for similar experiences in the future. Even months later, Leila remained bitter about this situation, feeling like there had been "no resolution" and believing that her principal owed

her an apology for demeaning her as a teacher and robbing her of an important opportunity for growth.

For Leila, then, and for others in this study, the challenges that the teaching profession presented were connected to their self-efficacy (Klassen & Chiu, 2010). None of them imagined that teaching would be easy, but none of them wanted to be coddled or overprotected when the difficulties emerged. They wanted to feel respected by their administration and to be treated as capable of meeting the challenges of the teaching profession even more than they wanted their daily work to be smooth. They recognized their own incapacity to meet the demands of teaching, but they found it enabling to be treated by the school leadership not as second-class teachers who needed special protection because of their alternative backgrounds but as co-educators who could be trusted to do the work of teaching. Not only did the APTs crave the challenges of teaching as a crucible for their own refinement, but they craved them as an opportunity to test and prove their mettle to themselves and to their colleagues. Part of the support that they needed, then, was their administration's belief that they could be equal to the difficult task of teaching, not freeing them from adversity but trusting them and equipping them to overcome it.

While this study makes no claims as to the various factors that distinguish the challenge-stressors from the hindrance-stressors for APTs (more studies in the vein of Mujtaba & Reiss, 2013 would help in this project), it provides evidence that the framework proposed by Cavanaugh et al. (2000) is a worthy methodology for the teaching workplace. Some of the challenge-stressors seen in these stories were surprising (e.g., difficult student behaviors, constraints placed on creativity), and more research is needed to discern the kinds of things that early-career APTs would appreciate being removed from their list of obligations from the kinds of things that they would appreciate the chance to confront on their own.

Mentorship

While a number of the above findings were notable due to the similarities seen across multiple APT stories, the various mentorship experiences were notable due precisely to their diversity. Each of the participants seemed to value the opportunities that mentorship provided (even Maya, who had no mentor to speak of, strongly regretted this deficiency), but for none of them was it a smooth or simple process, and for none of them was it an absolute good. Such a finding strongly echoes studies like those of Long et al. (2012) and Shanks et al. (2020) which found mentorship quality and effectiveness to be mediated by a variety of factors including the time spent together, the mutuality of the conversations, and the surrounding culture of collaboration. In this study, mentorship was not a silver bullet to be trusted in and of itself as a solution to the problem of APT induction. Rather, mentorship, seen in the experiences of these APTs, was a complex, relational practice (not unlike teaching itself) that was often fragile, that depended heavily on the personalities of both mentor and mentee, and that required constant tending and attention (Long et al., 2012). It functioned much less like a stable, consistent support structure; rather, it was a dynamic, volatile practice, possessing the affordances of activity and flexibility but also the drawbacks of irregularity and unpredictability.

While there were a few (relatively self-evident) common qualities that seemed to provide a baseline for a helpful mentor – a willingness to observe their mentee, the experience necessary to give practical advice, the opening up of a space to listen to the teacher's concerns, etc. – productive mentoring relationships tended to be found in a variety of places and take on a variety of forms. Leila found a mentorship model based on co-teaching to be tremendously helpful, enjoying the chance to "copy the answers" from a mentor who was teaching her same grade level, while Grace found the same model to be discouraging, as she did not see eye-to-eye with

her co-teacher and often felt misguided by his advice. Bri found her school's attempt to facilitate an entire culture of mentorship (instead of a singular relationship) to be ideal, feeling supported on all sides no matter who she turned too, while Grace and Alanna found that more mentors often led to more busywork and more stress. Alanna found an older mentor to be helpful while Grace gravitated towards people who were closer in age to her while Bri appreciated having both a more experienced mentor who "has been at the school from the beginning" and a second-year teacher who "hasn't forgotten what it is like to be in my shoes." For mentoring, the structure within which it took place was significantly less important than the people chosen as mentors and the actions taken by both parties to develop a fruitful relationship. The dangers associated with not implementing any kind of mentorship were real (recall Maya's story), but merely structuring mentorship into the logistics of the school did nothing to ensure that it would serve its purpose.

Perhaps the most illuminating story in the area of mentorship belonged to Alanna, who experienced concretely both the affordances and drawbacks of mentoring relationships.[97] Mentorship was central to Alanna's first semester teaching experience: it was one of the main reasons why she took the job in the first place, as it represented a potential avenue for the kind of growth she never experienced in Japan; it proved to be one of the primary challenges in her semester, causing daily anxieties that left her spiraling downward into discouragement; and in the end, it offered her a path forward, providing a "life raft" that she could rely on. For Alanna, mentorship was relational, and the shift from her first mentor who was "like oil and water" and sometimes "wouldn't acknowledge [her] presence" to her new mentor who she "just vibe[d] with" provided Alanna not only with relief from stress but a space where she could receive

[97] The number of times Alanna brought up mentorship in the interviews was more than all the other four participants combined.

helpful coaching. Alanna found the mentoring space to be a naturally vulnerable one, and she needed to feel free to bring her personality to the mentoring relationship instead of having to "shrink [her]self a lot" in order "to survive." Though her administration did finally intervene and reassign her to a new mentor,[98] the length of time she was left in the care of someone who "like[d] to power trip," who "butt[ed] heads" with her often, who "never once came into [her] classroom," who she "[didn't] know how to talk to," and who caused her to "wake up in the middle of the night concerned" eroded Alanna's trust. Alanna was ready and willing to be mentored, as evidenced by her pre-semester excitement and her productive relationship with her second mentor, yet even with such an eager mentee, mentorship qua mentorship was not an absolute good and quickly spiraled into something destructive, causing Alanna to retreat to "survival mode."

By and large, the mentoring observed in these narratives afforded APTs with the opportunity to accept coaching, receive encouragement, and develop self-assurance, echoing a number of past studies on mentorship (e.g., Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Foote et al., 2011; Wong, 2004). Yet, the mentorship failures in these stories seem to imply that the opportunities of mentorship were merely opportunities and must be actualized by careful, intentional practice (Long et al., 2012; Shanks et al., 2020). Administrators could not just institute mentorship policies as some catch-all solution and then wash their hands of the issue; rather, they needed to stay vigilant in tending the mentor-mentee relationships, checking in with both parties, providing spaces for relationship building, and intervening quickly if the relationships soured. Mentorship was found in a variety of places and spaces (recall, even Maya developed something of an ad hoc co-mentoring relationship with her fellow first-year teacher, Evelyn, providing further anecdotal

[98] Though it took a complaint from the *mentor* to cause them to even consider this intervention.

support for the kind of ‘teacher collaboration’ advocated by Foote et al., 2011), but it was always a variable practice (not a static structure), and it needed to be treated as such by all parties involved.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

The influx of nontraditional and alternatively certified teachers into the nation's classrooms will continue as long as demographic and economic factors support the need for new teachers. Their growth into effective teachers and their retention in the profession depend in large part on the support these teachers receive from their principals.

-Salyer (2003, p. 26)

Witnessing a story, especially one that includes some level of suffering, impresses an obligation upon the witness not just to share the story but to advocate for those who are in distress (Hansen, 2017).[99] Thus, having listened to and analyzed these APT stories – of Maya being abandoned, of Alanna putting up wall after wall out of fear, of Grace blaming herself for being called a whore in her own classroom – I find myself pondering ways to "animate the conscience as well as the consciousness of those in positions to lead" (Hansen, 2017, p. 20). Change takes place slowly, and rash overreactions can be ill-conceived or disproportionate, but merely observing, recording, and wondering about teacher attrition will have "serious financial, structural, and educational consequences for America's educational system" (Ingersoll et al., 2021, p. 26). Listening to these APTs means taking up their charge, articulated by Leila: "I should be having more support than this. … Why are we so complacent with letting our first-year teachers burn out? If it's really that hard, why aren't we doing more? … Grab a shovel!" Moved by this call, then, I hope to consider the implications of these stories, taking up a 'shovel' to support first-year APTs in their transition into the profession.

[99] The word "witness" often carries a beautiful dual connotation, that of observer and that of speaker. To fully witness, in all senses of the word, imposes a responsibility on the witness to testify to what they have seen in the hope of effecting change. Hansen (2017, p. 20) puts it well: "I believe there is a place on the larger horizon of educational research for the witness' inside/outside viewpoint. The witness may not add brand new knowledge, as such, to policy considerations. But the witness can remind those in a position to influence education of the necessity of wisdom, and of remembrance, in conducting such a profoundly human undertaking, in which the very persons we are and are becoming is at issue."

Implications

The questions addressed by this study sit within a system of interconnected factors. To pull on one thread, as this project has done with APT induction, is to disturb the whole network of threads. As a study about first-semester teachers, it sits at the nexus of teacher preparation and teacher induction; as a study about supporting those teachers, it lies at the intersection of the teachers who require the support and the administrators, mentors, and systems tasked with providing it; and as a study about alternatively prepared teachers, it touches upon both policy and practice. The findings of this study, while they do not provide comprehensive answers to questions within a single field, do carry implications for questions that lie between fields and across multiple fields. These five stories and the themes that run through them are limited, contextual, inconclusive, and embedded in their own particularities, yet as APTs make up more and more of the teaching force (NCES, 2022), they are stories that have a wide-ranging impact.

Implications for APTs

The success the APTs in this study experienced in the classroom when they drew upon their prior knowledge and expertise might provide a model for other APTs, both those already in the classroom and those who may be considering the transition into a teaching career, to embrace what preparation they do have, informal though it may be. The more that the participants in this study were able to value their prior proficiencies as a reliable source of inspiration for the work of teaching, the more they felt empowered and the more they settled into the rhythms of the classroom. And the more they tried to deny their past and force themselves into some kind of preconceived notion of what teaching was 'supposed to be like,' the more they felt inhibited by uncertainty and anxiety. The various unique experiences and knowledge bases of the APTs proved to be strengths rather than weaknesses, with stories like Alanna's use of Japanese double-

digit numbers providing a powerful witness to the value of a nontraditional background. For those APTs who are already in the classroom, the narratives of the teachers in this study provide examples of the empowerment that can result from embracing their alternative preparation, and for anyone who might be considering the teaching profession despite lacking formal qualifications, these stories provide encouragement that they may be more ready to meet the challenges of teaching than they believe themselves to be.

In particular, the hopeful story that Bri told of her first semester provides a vision of what a smooth induction experience might look like and offers guidance into a set of criteria for selecting a place of employment. Bri's experience stood out from the other narratives as one in which the overwhelming influx of support she received helped her to overcome the challenges she faced and grow in her knowledge and love of teaching.[100] Bri's administrators and colleagues created a culture where new teachers were valued for their strengths, pardoned for their weaknesses, defended to the public, helped when in need, trusted in the classroom, and celebrated for their work. Such a culture allowed Bri to feel a sense of belongingness, of honesty, and of affirmation that framed her work, lending sweetness to her joys and solidarity to her sorrows. For APTs, finding a supportive environment was essential, and while it may not be possible for everyone to find an such an ideal workplace culture, even imagining the possibility of ending the first semester saying, as Bri did, "You guys are great and I love you and I love working here!" could inspire hope.

[100] This by no means implies that the other participants in this study should not inspire hope. Every teacher in this study experienced growth, joy, and a sense of accomplishment, and in some sense, the other four stories might be seen as more hopeful, as narratives of endurance and persistence amidst and through challenges. Still, Bri felt regularly lifted up by her school community, something that was not consistently true for any of the other four participants.

Implications for Mentors and Administrators

The positive impact of the close-knit mentoring relationships in this study (and the negative impact of the insubstantial or destructive relationships) points to the importance of mentors, administrators, and other parties responsible for supporting first-year APTs to learn as much as they can about the backgrounds, habits, and beliefs of their mentees (Shanks et al., 2020). The APTs who felt known felt mentored (recall Bri's pre-semester retreat where her administrators had "gotten my measure"), and the APTs who felt abandoned by their mentors attributed that abandonment to being unknown or pigeonholed (recall Grace's accusation that her mentor "didn't know me or my teaching"). Especially for APTs whose nontraditional backgrounds were both a potential source of strength and a potential source of anxiety, a mentor's knowledge of that background allowed them to sympathize with the pressures their mentee felt and to provide specific recommendations that drew upon their mentee's individual strengths. Leila's experience, in particular, stands out as a powerful witness to the destructive impact of administrators attempting to force APTs into a singular mold with stock "one-size-fits-all" platitudes. Novice APTs are not blank slates, devoid of any teaching skills or instincts, and they must be encouraged to *draw on* the resources they do possess and approach new challenges by relating them to their own individual prior experiences (Long et al., 2012). In this vein, the recommendation of Rose and Sughrue (2020, p. 34) that APTs receive "increased, differentiated professional development opportunities that support classroom performance, resulting in retention and student achievement" seems especially worthy of credence and pursuit.

In undertaking the task to discover and affirm the uniquenesses of APTs, the initial hiring and professional development sequence seems to present a unique opportunity for administrators not just to provide APTs with some preliminary training but to exemplify and embody the kinds

of supportive structures and relationships that can embed themselves into the consciousness of a vulnerable first-year APT. First impressions mattered to the teachers in this study, and their initial perceptions of the relational dynamics of their workplace tended to persist throughout the rest of the semester (compare the "chip on my shoulder" that Leila developed before the semester to Bri's feeling that she "already had that support"). Thus the 'orientation seminars' advocated by Smith and Ingersoll (2004) function, whether school leaders intend them to or not, as a kind of invitation into the support culture that set the tone for APTs' expectations for the course of the year.

Surprisingly, the most effective mentors and administrators did not always work to make their mentee's life easier, removing every obstacle and challenge from their path; rather, they looked to remove the hindrance-stressors and leave the challenge-stressors (LePine et al., 2005). The APTs in this study did appreciate having some of the tedious and burdensome obligations removed from their purview (e.g., Bri's administration taking her carline duty, Leila's TA handling some of her logistical tasks), but they did not want to be treated as needy, inferior, or unable to handle the demands of the profession. Maya wanted accountability, Leila wanted to keep the disruptive student in her class, and even Grace wanted to be challenged, despite encountering significant student disrespect. The APTs in this study did not need to be saved, coddled, or treated as second-class; they needed to be supported and empowered to meet and overcome the challenge-stressors, taking advantage of the opportunities for growth they encountered.

Lastly, the mentoring relationships in this study needed tending, implying both that mentorship in and of itself is not an absolute good and that administrators need to do more than merely provide early-career teachers with a mentor. Instead, administrators need to find ways of

ensuring (as much as possible) that the mentoring relationship is a fruitful one (Johnson et al., 2019; Wong, 2004). Mentorship is not a panacea. It has relational power not structural power. It is only as good as the bond between mentor and mentee, a bond that needs time, space, and tending (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). As such, administrators ought to provide opportunities for relationship building both within professional contexts and outside of the boundaries of the workplace; they ought to check in regularly with mentors and mentees to assess the relational dynamics at play (allowing opportunities especially for mentees to voice their honest opinions); and they ought not to hesitate in making a change if one is needed or requested (Shanks et al., 2020). Alanna's story serves as a haunting warning of the dangers of a toxic mentoring relationship, as she was "shrinking myself a lot because I was just trying to survive," providing anecdotal evidence to support LoCasio et al.'s (2016) finding that, for APTs, "an inconsistently implemented program had more negative effects than having no program at all" (p. 103).

Policy Implications

While questions of policy are inescapably fraught with ideological and party-political intricacies, it seems clear from this study that there are at least some uncertified individuals who have the preparation required for elementary teaching. Many policy-related studies begin from the assumption that APTs are inferior teachers (e.g., Cardichon et al., 2020),[101] an assumption that deserves to be problematized given the stories seen here. Teaching requires expertise that not everyone possesses (Cochran-Smith, 2003), but expertise for teaching can be acquired from a variety of sources. As such, it seems appropriate to think creatively about enacting policies that

[101] This study opens with the following line: "Decades of research show that fully certified and experienced teachers matter for student achievement" (Cardichon et al., 2020, p. 1). While there are certainly some studies that might be cited to support such a claim (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2005), there are also a number of studies that seem to conclude the opposite (e.g., Decker et al., 2004). Even if such a claim were true in the quantitative sense, it is misleading on a qualitative level, as seen in the narratives described in this study.

recognize non-traditional knowledge sources and welcome people into the teaching profession who have 'graduated' from these 'programs.' APTs, at least as evidenced by the participants in this study, are not unprepared (as seen in Darling-Hammond, 2002 and Moffet & Davis, 2014) and are not always even underprepared (as seen in Baines et al., 2001 and Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2002), and ought not to be treated as such. In the policymaking process, lawmakers must find ways to remove the barriers between talented candidates and the classroom and actively incentivize them to take up teaching as a profession. And, in the hiring process, those in charge of talent acquisition must retrain themselves to look beyond a teaching candidate's paper qualifications and consider the resources, capabilities, and background knowledge they might draw upon in the classroom.

Additionally, given the number and variety of demands and obligations placed on first-year teachers, policymakers should exercise prudence in the additional certification-related claims placed on the time and energy of APTs after they enter the classroom. While some of these requirements may be helpful or necessary for APTs (and all new teachers), others seem to be glorified hoop-jumping that drains precious resources from an at-risk group of teachers. Many APTs are required to pass exams (e.g., Alanna), take classes (e.g., Bri), and attend additional professional development workshops (e.g., Grace), all in addition to fulfilling the other responsibilities of full-time teachers. While some sustained mentorship has been shown to be helpful (Humphrey & Wechsler, 2007), many of these extra obligations were seen as particularly burdensome by the APTs in this study, especially those responsibilities that seemed divorced from the tasks of classroom teaching (e.g., the requirement placed on Alanna to pass an Algebra exam). Teaching is stressful, particularly for APTs who are unfamiliar with the profession, and

as such, policies that relieve pressure (rather than add to it) seem particularly promising pathways of support.

Implications for Alternative Preparation Programs

As complex as teacher preparation questions for traditionally prepared teachers have repeatedly been shown to be, teacher preparation questions for APTs remain equally complex (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014). Additionally, while the majority of traditional teacher education programs work with preservice teachers at a similar stage of life, APT preparation programs must navigate the complexities of a diverse population with a wider variety of pre-professional experiences and knowledge bases (Boyd et al., 2008). Given these obstacles, the stories of early-career APTs can provide useful guidance for preparation programs in noticing the challenges that APTs often face and tailoring their programs to try to preempt such challenges (Drake, 2006). Here, the recommendation of Humphrey and Wechsler (2007, p. 523) seems particularly poignant:

> As [alternative certification] programs mature, they tend to establish a set of requirements and activities while neglecting the individuality of the people they serve. An appreciation and more careful assessment of participants' backgrounds and existing skills and knowledge are likely to contribute to the creation of more tailored programs.

APT preparation programs were established on the belief that non-traditional teaching candidates might thrive in a non-traditional training context, a belief that seems worthy of reconsideration, given the narratives presented here.

While the variety of programs that prepare teachers without traditional certification to enter the classroom is extensive (from more formal certification-granting programs requiring multiple years of summer classes to local pre-semester professional development that might only

take a few days), every program is pressed for time and must choose which topics to prioritize.[102] Responding to Grossman and Loeb's (2008, p. 27) call to "organize coursework around the core practices of teaching," this study's results suggest the importance of APT preparation programs taking up the following topics:[103] providing targeted support to students with learning disabilities, teaching mathematics (especially the methods for doing so), managing the variety of professional obligations, interpreting and utilizing high-leverage curricula, and navigating relational complexities. Additionally, given the self-efficacy struggles faced by many of the APTs in this study, it may behoove APT preparation programs to take up such questions as a part of the preparation process, equipping APTs to face identity-related challenges and, if possible, providing them with initial sources of affirmation and encouragement (Schultz & Ravitch, 2013).

Curricular Implications

Even by the end of their first semester, the APTs still considered the demands of the curricula they were given (especially their mathematics curriculum) to be among their greatest challenges. These struggles shed some light on the kinds of resources that might have been helpful in easing this transition. First, the participants in this study seemed to find some success when they were able to connect the curriculum (for themselves and for their students) to real-world contexts or to other academic disciplines. While the majority of the connections made in this study were extra-curricular (recall Alanna's connections between place value and Japanese linguistics), curriculum developers might look to incorporate such connections within curricular

[102] Some APT preparation programs are quicker than others, but almost all APT preparation programs are intended to provide an expediated pathway into teaching and are therefore more pressed for time than a traditional teacher preparation program.

[103] To make this list as helpful as possible, I have attempted to rank these topics in order of relevance to the teachers in this study. While I did not conduct a survey of the participants and thus acknowledge this to be my own interpretation, I hope that the data presented in the previous sections might give the reader with some explanation for my 'ranking.'

materials, presenting as many opportunities as they can to encourage early-career teachers to explore the relationships between mathematics and language, science, history, or literature. Second, many of the APTs found it difficult to understand and trust some of the more complex decisions made by the curriculum regarding pedagogical strategies, scope and sequence, and resource use. While the APTs seemed to believe that the curriculum had some rationale for its choices, they struggled to understand why different strategies were important, why some concepts needed to be taught before others, and how their particular grade-level concepts connected to previous and future concepts. While these ideas may seem second-nature to curriculum developers, they might strive to be as explicit as possible about the reasons for their curricular decisions, helping ECTs to notice, interpret, and capitalize on some of the intentions behind the curriculum's design. Last, the teachers in this study, by and large, understood *that* the curriculum wanted them to do something, but they struggled to discern *how* it might be done. They knew *that* the curriculum emphasized manipulatives but they did not know *how* to incorporate them; they knew *that* they should not be blindly teaching formulas, but they did not know *how* to go beyond memorization and repetition; and they knew *that* multiple solution pathways would be worth exploring, but they did not know *how* to find or implement them. These specific struggles should encourage curriculum developers not to assume that their materials are going to be combined with high-leverage teaching practices, but to go out of their way to enable teachers to engage with methods-related questions, helping them to catch a vision for *how* the concepts might be brought to life in the classroom.

In addition to supports woven directly into the curricular resources, having a curricular expert who was available for consultation in moments of need was immensely helpful for these APTs. This knowledgeable authority could be someone within the school (recall Leila's fellow

first-grade teachers who had taught the curriculum for many years) or it could be an outside consultant (recall Bri's manipulatives coach). But when there was no one to consult or collaborate with, the teachers tended to flounder and become overwhelmed with the curriculum enactment process (recall Maya's complaint that "nobody at my school knows anything about Singapore math" led her to give up trying to understand the curriculum until the following summer). While such collaboration could be done through some kind of global curricular support staff or hotline for ECTs, the finding that "teachers' mathematics life stories help us to understand how and why teachers interpret and implement curriculum materials in particular ways" (Drake, 2006, p. 600) might encourage schools to provide such support locally through mentorship, tailoring their curricular support directly to the stories of the teachers.

Implications for Research

While there are certainly exceptions, the research literature surrounding APTs is dominated by evaluative studies that pass judgment on APTs' performance or critical editorials like Baines et al. (2001, p. 36) who described alternative pathways into teaching as "iatrogenic," as a temporary solution for a school "clamoring for a warm body," and as "three giant steps backward for the profession."[104] Such attitudes in the research community are troubling, especially when they threaten to poison an APT's induction process before it even has the chance to get off the ground, as posited by Salyer (2003, p. 25): "Antagonism toward [alternatively

[104] The full quote here is illuminatingly scathing: "In medicine, the term iatrogenic identifies an illness or injury that has been caused by the treatment itself. While political leaders trumpet their desire for high-quality teaching and achievement, their changes in teacher certification undermine these goals. Placing an inexperienced alternatively certified teacher in a classroom may solve momentary staffing needs in a school clamoring for a warm body, but the iatrogenic consequence of this quick-fix mentality is that student morale and achievement may suffer. A teacher who has no idea what to do on Monday, how to break up a fight, how to get a troubled student some help, or how to perform a teacher's myriad other tasks is at a decided disadvantage.…What a student needs to learn to become an effective teacher cannot be delivered in two weeks. It cannot be delivered without hands-on experience in the classroom. The proliferation of alternative certification programs in Texas, Georgia, and Florida represents three giant steps backward for the profession. These programs devalue the art and science of teaching at a time when the need for experienced, knowledgeable teachers has never been greater."

certified teachers] on the part of experienced teachers who were traditionally certified may doom a mentoring relationship from the start." Early-career APTs are an at-risk population (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019), and instead of investigating how they might be equipped to succeed and supported in their teaching endeavors, the field of education research can itself be a source of the antagonistic biases.

Rather, this study finds Miller et al.'s (1998, p. 174) hypothesis that "carefully constructed induction programs may be a good means of including a broader, more diverse teaching population than limiting all avenues of entrance to the profession through [traditional] preparation" to be worthy of pursuit. Designing, implementing, and studying such induction programs is by no means an easy endeavor, especially given Johnson and Birkeland's (2008, p. 127) finding that "school district administrators should recognize that alternatively certified teachers…will require ongoing support." But the endeavor of investigating APT-specific supports must be undertaken nonetheless, and it must be done in all its complexity, resisting the temptation to treat APTs reductively and instead committing ourselves to listen to their stories, in the hopes that we might learn from their experiences.

Methodological Implications

While this study drew upon a variety of sources for its methodology, it also explored a somewhat rare methodological terrain, employing a few noteworthy combinations of ideas that proved essential for excavating these APT stories. First, the combination of narrative inquiry alongside a singular non-evaluative data source seemed particularly effective in providing a space in which the participants felt free to be honest and authentic.[105] While limiting the study to

[105] I have no definitive evidence for this claim, but there were multiple moments in the interviews where the participants said things like "I probably shouldn't tell you this" or "It's a good thing you aren't talking to my principal."

merely teachers' stories restricted my ability to tell a multi-sided narrative, it also enabled the participants to tell the stories that they wanted to tell, without fear of being fact-checked, evaluated, or reported. I have no evidence of how anyone else (students, administrators, colleagues, mentors, or parents) felt or thought about these APTs, but in making it clear to the participants that I was only interested in *their* perspective, I was able to gain a more complete sense of how *they* felt and thought about their first semester. While there are certainly more sides to the stories in this study, this particular methodology, in sacrificing those other sides, provided increased clarity to one important perspective, namely that of the teachers themselves.

Second, while it did employ some questions from previously used interview protocols (Meister, 2018; Simmons, 2004), the semi-structured protocol used in this study primarily relied on my pilot-study-like conversations and collaborations with a first-year APT. While another interview protocol that was co-constructed with an early-career APT may exist, I was unable to find one in my research, and thus this may serve as a methodological contribution to those who might undertake similar studies. While I have no concrete evidence to support its effectiveness, its combination of required, generic, open-ended initial questions with optional, specific follow-up questions seemed to allow the participants to steer the conversation while equipping me with enough structure to prompt them towards deeper reflections when they waned in their ability to describe or contextualize their experiences.[106]

Finally, the combination of transformative learning theory and narrative inquiry, though seemingly an odd pairing, proved invaluable in navigating the discrete moments in the participants' stories alongside the continuous narrative arc that wound in and through those

[106] Again, this is not a claim that I can possibly prove, but the protocol's success might be judged on the authenticity of the narratives that emerged. While many of the stories were told as participants deviated from the protocol's semi-structured questions, the guidance from the protocol proved essential in data collections.

moments. On the surface, these two concepts seem somewhat incompatible: transformative learning theory tends to center singular experiences as a site for growth, often detaching them from more gradual or contextual conceptions of learning (Mezirow, 2000), while narrative inquiry tends to center holistic descriptions that attempt to preserve the entirety of a synthetic, three-dimensional meaning-making process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a researcher attempting to employ both ideas, I felt continually pulled in opposing directions, with transformative learning theory prompting me to notice discrete particularities and narrative inquiry prompting me to consider the context and connections of those particularities within a larger story. Together, these two methodologies helped to hold me in some kind of productive tension, equipped with the tools to resist narrative fragmentation on the one hand and narrative smoothing on the other, attending to the important moments but committed to stitching them together into something holistic.

Revisiting Positionality

Given the profound effect that witnessing and telling these stories has had on me, I would be remiss not to revisit my own positionality at the end of this study. In many respects, the opportunity to interview and write about these five teachers has been a transformative moment in my own thinking, effecting a shift both in my habits of mind and my points of view. Observing the myriad obstacles these teachers faced and the strength they showed in meeting them has left me strongly convinced that APTs are worthy of support and affirmation both as they pursue the teaching profession and as they enter the classroom. My previous uncertainty as to the merits of alternative pathways into teaching abated almost entirely over the course of the study as I watched the participants draw upon their prior knowledge and resources. Watching Alanna spend her whole Thanksgiving break studying to pass an Algebra exam, or seeing Bri take online

classes in ten-minute intervals while her students were at recess left me feeling determined to advocate for these APTs, exposing the barriers placed in their path.

Still, the ways in which the challenges experienced by the participants in this study seem to overlap with many of the challenges experienced by traditionally prepared first-year teachers has left me questioning entirely the dichotomy I assumed between traditional and alternative preparation. While I do feel the responsibility to advocate for APTs, that responsibility stems not primarily from their status as 'alternatively-prepared' but from their status as 'teachers.' The task of teacher preparation and retention is a tremendous one that is truly only as strong as its weakest link, and it is the responsibility of everyone involved in preparing and supporting teachers, both alternatively and traditionally prepared, to be aware of the challenges new teachers face and to empower them to meet those challenges. In general, then, my study has left me less concerned for the preparation and support of APTs specifically but more concerned for the preparation and support of early-career teachers as a whole. My concluding position is thus one of distress at the fragile and turbulent culture that has become normalized for first-year teachers, but it is also one of hope, having seen the perseverance of the teachers in this study, and one of gratitude, having been given the privilege to tell their stories.

Study Limitations

While this study was limited by the factors discussed below (and potentially others), I hope that the discussion of these limitations may prove fruitful in directing and inspiring future research, just as the limitations of the purely evaluative studies of APT experiences inspired this study.

Scope

First, given this study's commitment to depth rather than breadth and given the wealth of backgrounds APTs possess as they enter the teaching profession and the variety of schools and educational settings that they might be working in, the narratives that emerged from this study should in no way be interpreted as a representative sample of APT experiences. Even in attempting to recruit participants who fit each of the categories laid out by Chin and Young (2007), five participants cannot hope to capture the abundance of pre-service experiences present in the population of APTs, to say nothing of various demographic factors that this study did not take into account. Rather, these stories are but a few voices from a vast and diverse landscape, stories that may provide touchstones for the examination of other APT experiences but should not be projected onto the individual stories of other APTs as empirically generalizable data (Patton, 2014).

Narrative Petrification

Second, recall that narrative as a form is necessarily dynamic and fluid, and as an exercise in attempting to capture a frozen-in-time narrative, this study was thus somewhat of an exercise in futility (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ricoeur, 1995). It is likely, perhaps even certain, that if this study were extended over a longer period of time, the narratives the participants would tell would evolve as their perspectives shifted, their identities developed, and their understandings and practices deepened. In particular, the challenges associated with second-semester teaching and the supports that might mitigate those challenges may be markedly different than those associated with first-semester teaching, rendering any type of a projection of this study's observations onto the entirety of a teacher's first-year experience to be purely hypothetical. In my own case, such a shift in thinking over time has certainly proven to be true,

as I no longer think about my induction experience with the same bitterness as I did during my first semester in the classroom (though the bitterness has never entirely dissipated). These stories are thus "in the midst" and ought to be read and interpreted with the temporality and locality that they carry with them (Craig & Huber, 2007, p. 268).

An Interpretation of Faith

Last, the narratives that emerged from this study were made up of the stories that these teachers told of themselves. As a researcher, I afforded myself with no means of verifying the validity of these stories (nor did I want to do so),[107] and thus, there may be embellishments or fictionalizations that are woven into the narratives. While this was done intentionally – self-fictionalizations do become, after all, part of the narratives that come to shape us – I approached this study with the perspective of an *interpretation of faith* (Josselson, 2004; Kim, 2015; Ricoeur, 2007). Such an approach took the stories told by participants at face value in order to "represent, explore, and/or understand the subjective world of the participants and/or the social and historical world they feel themselves to be living in" (Josselson, 2004, p.5). Perhaps to a fault, I trusted the participants in this study, presenting their beliefs in full, opening itself up to inaccuracies, exaggerations, and even direct fabrications.[108]

[107] The rationalization for this was similar to the reasons listed for only utilizing one data source, that is, I wanted the teachers to be completely free to share any and all stories they might tell without fear that I would be evaluating those stories or checking up on how they "are really doing." I cared about how they are thinking, feeling, reasoning, etc., and even if their stories were "cover stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996), they provided important insights into the narratives they told of themselves (note the wording of Research Question 1). See the above Data Collection section for further thoughts.

[108] As seen in some of the footnotes above, this study necessarily opened itself up to underrepresenting some of the other sides to the narratives, most notably the mentors and administrators who were tasked with supporting these teachers.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given the results, discussion, and implications listed above as well as the limitations present in this project, this study seems positioned to make some recommendations for future research on early-career elementary APTs.

Non-Evaluative Research

First and foremost, the limitations of scope experienced by this project should provide a direction for future research in expanding the range of non-evaluative studies investigating the APT population. It seems clear from this study that listening to APTs describe their experiences is a worthy endeavor for researchers in that it sheds light on important issues like teacher preparation, curriculum, mentorship, and teacher attrition. In continuing this commitment to listen to APTs, future research might sample different cross-sections of APTs, attending to various demographic factors including race, age, sex, education, socioeconomic background, and school context.[109] Other studies might compare the stories of traditionally prepared teachers to alternatively prepared teachers, placing their teaching experiences side-by-side to investigate the differences and similarities in their induction narratives. Building on the results of this study, still other researchers might focus more explicitly on the growth and development of teacher identity in APTs or on their mathematics teaching experience or on their relationships with their various mentors. What is needed in each of these cases are studies that assign agency to the APTs using non-evaluative data sources to tell their stories from their perspectives.

[109] Among these factors, attending to the "school context" might prove extremely fruitful based on the results of this study. Multiple participants brought up contextual factors as important, providing unique challenges or affording particular supports. Maya's "first-year" school, Grace's "urban" school, Alanna's "rigorous" school, Leila's "alma mater" and "college prep" school, and Bri's "hometown" school all factored into their respective first-semester experiences. None of these contextual descriptions, in and of themselves, seemed to be either supportive or prohibitive, but they had an undeniable impact on the challenges that were faced and the supports that were available.

Longitudinal Research

While simply increasing the quantity of non-evaluative APT research would be beneficial for the field, a more sustained longitudinal study that tracks the narratives of APTs across multiple years of their teaching career might prove to be a particularly valuable mode of inquiry. As mentioned in the limitations listed above, 'freezing' the stories of these teachers in time at such a mercurial moment in their career runs contrary to the spirit of narrative inquiry, a methodology which benefits from a longer, more sustained set of data. In taking up these longitudinal studies, researchers might draw on Craig's (2014, 2019) narrative inquiry where she followed the career of a novice traditionally-prepared teacher for six years, tracing the 'stories to live by' and 'stories to leave by' that shaped the teacher's continuously evolving understanding of the teaching profession. While my study has unearthed some 'stories to survive by,' few studies have followed APTs long enough in their career to produce the kinds of results Craig arrives at for traditionally prepared teachers, a gap to which future researchers might attend.

Design Research

Lastly, though listening to APT stories represents a step in the right direction, it must be complemented by design research into the development, implementation, and evaluation of formal and informal supports for APTs as they transition into the classroom. Here, creativity is needed in designing interventions that can target some of the challenges faced by APTs. In devising these design research studies, researchers may test out various mentorship models, curricular resources, support structures, administrative trainings, professional development offerings, or timely interventions at various points in the induction process. It has been evidenced in this study that APTs value not just any support but a particular kind of support, and work is

needed to experiment with potential aids to advance our knowledge of the kinds of assistance and encouragement that can sustain APTs through the early stages of their careers.

Final Reflections

Despite the ongoing teacher shortage and the rising attrition rates (Sutcher et al., 2019), teaching remains a heavily gatekept profession. The barriers for entry into teaching are high, and the incentives for entry are low (Podolsky et al., 2019). While there are valid reasons for this – children being both valuable and vulnerable – such a high bar can prevent candidates who have the expertise and identity to be excellent teachers from even considering the profession, much less entering it. Fewer and fewer students are enrolling in traditional teacher preparation programs, and fewer and fewer are graduating, leaving the field of education in need of alternative solutions (Sutcher et al., 2019). As seen in the implications listed above, welcoming APTs into classrooms raises a loaded set of questions that touch on complex issues including policy, curriculum, teacher preparation, professional development, and mentorship. Yet, there can also be no doubt that there must be a means by which teachers like Maya, Grace, Alanna, Leila, and Bri ought to be encouraged to take the leap into the classroom and supported in their endeavor to do so.

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APPENDIX: Participant Interview Protocol

Interview 1 (Before Semester)

General Follow-Up Questions
1) Why did you find ____ to be so meaningful/significant?
2) In what ways did ____ impact you?
3) Do you have an example or story of ____?
4) How does ____ fit into your overall understanding of teaching/yourself as a teacher?

1) Tell me a bit about yourself.
    a. Demographic information.
        i. Gender you identify as
        ii. Age
        iii. Ethnicity
        iv. Degrees held
        v. Prior work experiences
        vi. Family
    b. Describe your own schooling experiences.
        i. Experiences as a student
        ii. Any formal education classes
        iii. Other experiences that you think have prepared you for teaching
        iv. Stories that stand out from any of these experiences
    c. Why did you choose to enter into the teaching profession?
        i. When you knew you wanted to be a teacher
        ii. How you came to the decision you wanted to be a teacher
        iii. Personal motivations for becoming a teacher
        iv. Moments in your past that shaped your motivation to become a teacher
        v. Goals you have for your teaching

2) How are you feeling about teaching?
    a. What do you imagine the classroom will be like?
        i. Students
        ii. Curriculum
        iii. School culture/administration
        iv. Families/caregivers
    b. What kind of teacher do you think you will be/hope to be?
        i. Stories from previous teaching-adjacent experiences
        ii. Traits in other teachers you hope to emulate
    c. What do you envision will be some of your strengths as a teacher?
        i. Character traits you imagine being helpful in the classroom
        ii. Experiences from your past you imagine being able to draw upon
    d. What do you envision might be some of the challenges you will face as a teacher?
        i. Weaknesses or deficiencies you see in yourself
        ii. Relationships with students, parents, administration, community, etc.
        iii. Personal health – time management, self-care, etc.
    e. How do you expect to be supported in addressing these challenges or encouraged in your growth/development as a teacher?
        i. Formal professional development
        ii. Feedback, mentorship, coaching
        iii. Collegiality, community, friendship

Interview 2 (During Semester)

General Follow-Up Questions
1) Why did you find ____ to be so meaningful/significant?
2) In what ways did ____ impact you?
3) Do you have an example or story of ____?
4) How does ____ fit into your overall understanding of teaching/yourself as a teacher?

1) How is teaching going?
    a. Walk me through an aspect of your teaching life
        i. Your planning process
        ii. Your support network
        iii. Your daily/weekly routine
        iv. Your habits/practices in the classroom
    b. What have you found to be difficult?
        i. Resources you might be missing
        ii. Policies that are restrictive
        iii. Obligations that are overwhelming
        iv. Anything that has been particularly challenging/stressful/burdensome
        v. Any moments where you were unsure of what to do
    c. What have you found to be easy?
        i. Anything that has been particularly helpful/encouraging
        ii. Any moments where you found affirmation in a decision you made
        iii. Resources that have been helpful
    d. What are some of the thoughts/ideas/reflections you keep coming back to?

2) What's a story or two that sticks in your mind from the past few weeks?
    a. Kinds of stories
        i. Something a student did/said/made
        ii. Something that you tried/succeeded in/failed at
        iii. Interaction you had with student/parent/coworker/administrator
        iv. A day in your life
        v. Significant event: parent teacher conference, professional development experience, teaching evaluation/feedback received, etc.
        vi. Stories that you tell to friends who ask how teaching is going
    b. Details of stories
        i. Describe contextual factors
        ii. How did it make you feel?
        iii. Why did this story stick out to you? Why did you find it meaningful?
        iv. How does it relate to other stories/other factors?
        v. What impact has this story had on you/your teaching?
        vi. How do you imagine this story affecting what you do/think in the future?

3) Compare how you are feeling now with how you felt last time we chatted.
    a. Anything that you feel has changed
        i. Beliefs/Feelings
        ii. Practices
    b. Anything that you feel has stayed the same/been confirmed
        i. Beliefs/Feelings
        ii. Practices

Interview 3 (After Semester)

General Follow-Up Questions

1) Why did you find ____ to be so meaningful/significant?

2) In what ways did ____ impact you?

3) Do you have an example or story of ____?

4) How does ____ fit into your overall understanding of teaching/yourself as a teacher?

1) How did the semester finish up?
    a. How does it feel to be done?
    b. What things are you proud of?
    c. What things are you relieved to have a break from?
    d. Any meaningful stores from the last few weeks?

2) Any stories that stick with you about the semester as a whole?
    a. What was the best piece of advice you received?
    b. What was the first moment when you really felt comfortable being a teacher?
    c. If you could pick one quintessential story that encapsulates this semester, what would it be?
    d. What was the thing that happened over the semester that was the most surprising to you?

3) When you look back on the semester as a whole, what are some of your reflections?
    a. What would you tell pre-semester you about teaching?
    b. What would you say was the biggest change you felt/saw in yourself over the semester?
    c. How did it compare to your expectations going into the semester?
    d. How did you feel your preparation experiences helped you over the semester?
        i. What were you most prepared for?
        ii. What were you least prepared for?
    e. Talk about the meaningful challenges and supports you experienced
        i. What was the resource you found most helpful this semester?
        ii. What was the biggest challenge this semester?
        iii. What obligation was the most stressful?
        iv. What relationship was the most supportive?
        v. What is your favorite thing about teaching?
        vi. What is your least favorite thing about teaching?
        vii. What is your greatest strength as a teacher?
        viii. What is your greatest weakness as a teacher?

4) How are you feeling heading into next semester?
    a. Transformations you are hoping to make
    b. Opportunities for growth
    c. Goals for future