

# Advocating for Individual and Collective Agency Through Community

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Agency, as  
defined in this  
survey

**“Agency can be defined as the ability of an individual and/or group to enact power and choice in the surrounding environments. This study explores librarians’ experiences of teacher agency: essentially, the capacity or enacting of agency that teaching professionals experience in their teaching roles.”**

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## Opening reflection

*Please share your thoughts in the shared  
Google doc.*

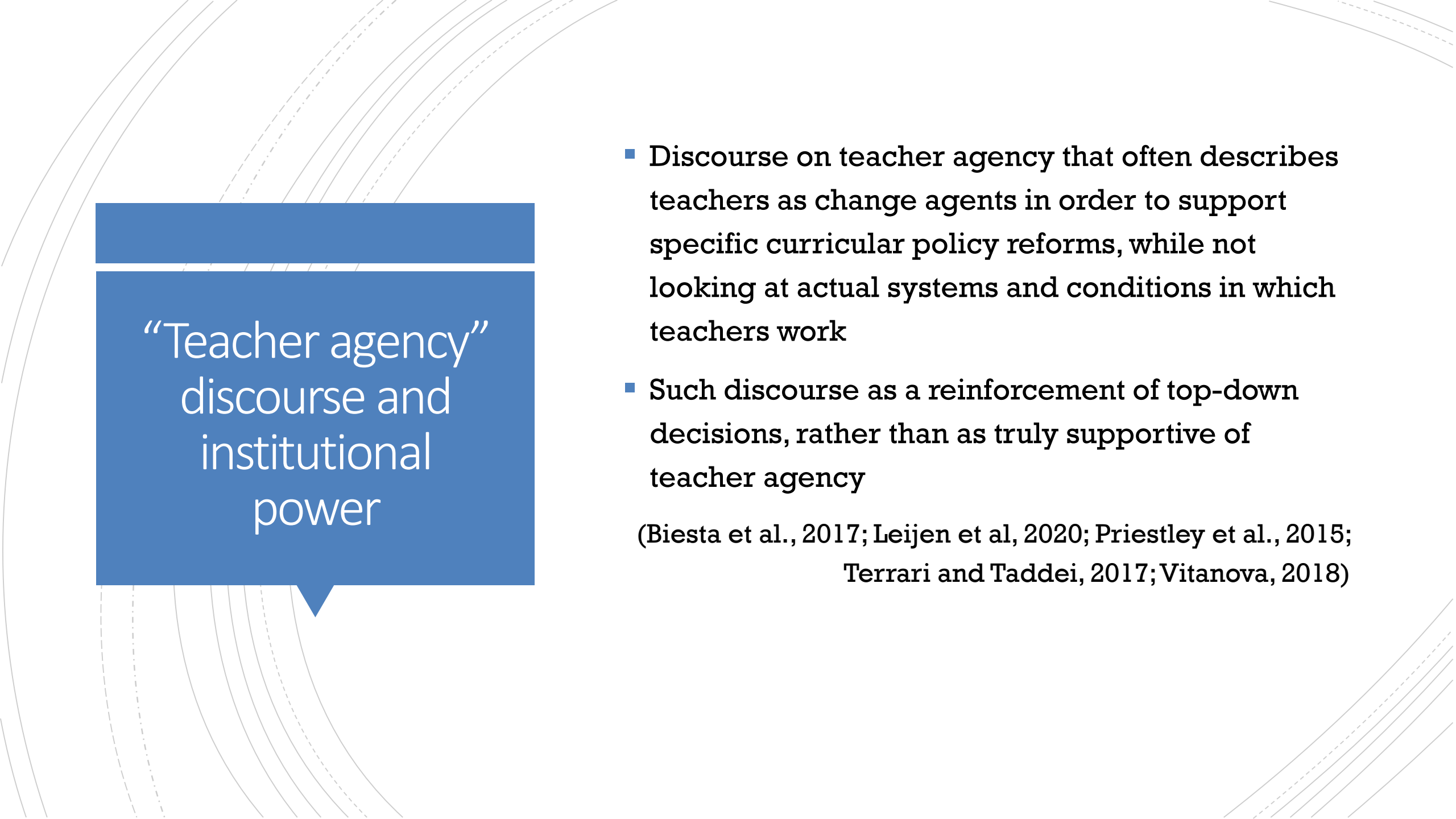
**What comes to mind when you hear the  
term agency, or the term teacher agency?**

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# Literature on Agency

# What is agency?

- Essentially, the ability of an individual and/or group to enact power and choice in their surrounding environments
- In Western cultures, often described in terms of the individual
- In sociology and related fields, often discussed in relationship to/in tension with social/institutional structures (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Hays, 1994)
- In psychology, related to self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000)
  - intrinsic motivation as key to well-being
  - needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be met



“Teacher agency”  
discourse and  
institutional  
power

- Discourse on teacher agency that often describes teachers as change agents in order to support specific curricular policy reforms, while not looking at actual systems and conditions in which teachers work
- Such discourse as a reinforcement of top-down decisions, rather than as truly supportive of teacher agency

(Biesta et al., 2017; Leijen et al, 2020; Priestley et al., 2015; Terrari and Taddei, 2017; Vitanova, 2018)

## An ecological model of agency

- Agency in relation to the various environmental factors in a given moment and context.
- “an emergent phenomenon of the ecological conditions through which it is enacted”

(Priestley et al., “Teacher Agency: What Is It and Why Does It Matter?” 2015, p. 3)

## Social structures and librarianship

- The traditional service model of librarianship and more recent calls for librarians to “prove their value”
- The gendering of librarianship, affective labor, and the devaluing of relational work (Sloniowski, 2016; Nicholson, 2019; Arellano Douglas & Gadsby, 2019)
- Institutional hierarchies and interpersonal dynamics
  - Faculty-librarian relationships
  - Library work and organizational culture (Meulemans & Carr, 2013; Ortega, 2017; Fobazi, 2018; Kendrick & Damasco, 2019)
  - The corporatization of higher education
  - Systems of power and privilege
- Evolving information environments and systems



## Why talk about agency?

- Agency as the ability to act with choice and purpose in one's environment
- Key to sustained engagement in work that feels meaningful and worthwhile
- A lacking sense of agency as a strong contributor to burnout (Shupe and Pung, 2011; Affleck, 1996)
- A sense of agency fostered by supportive environments in which people feel valued and can act with choice and intention

## Reflection: Experiences of teacher agency

*Please use a row in the shared Google doc to share your thoughts to any of these questions.*

- How do you experience individual agency in the context of teaching? What fosters or hinders it?
- How do you experience collective agency in the context of teaching? What fosters or hinders it?
- What role/s does community play, or not play, in your experiences of individual or collective agency in the context of teaching?



The survey

## Study research questions

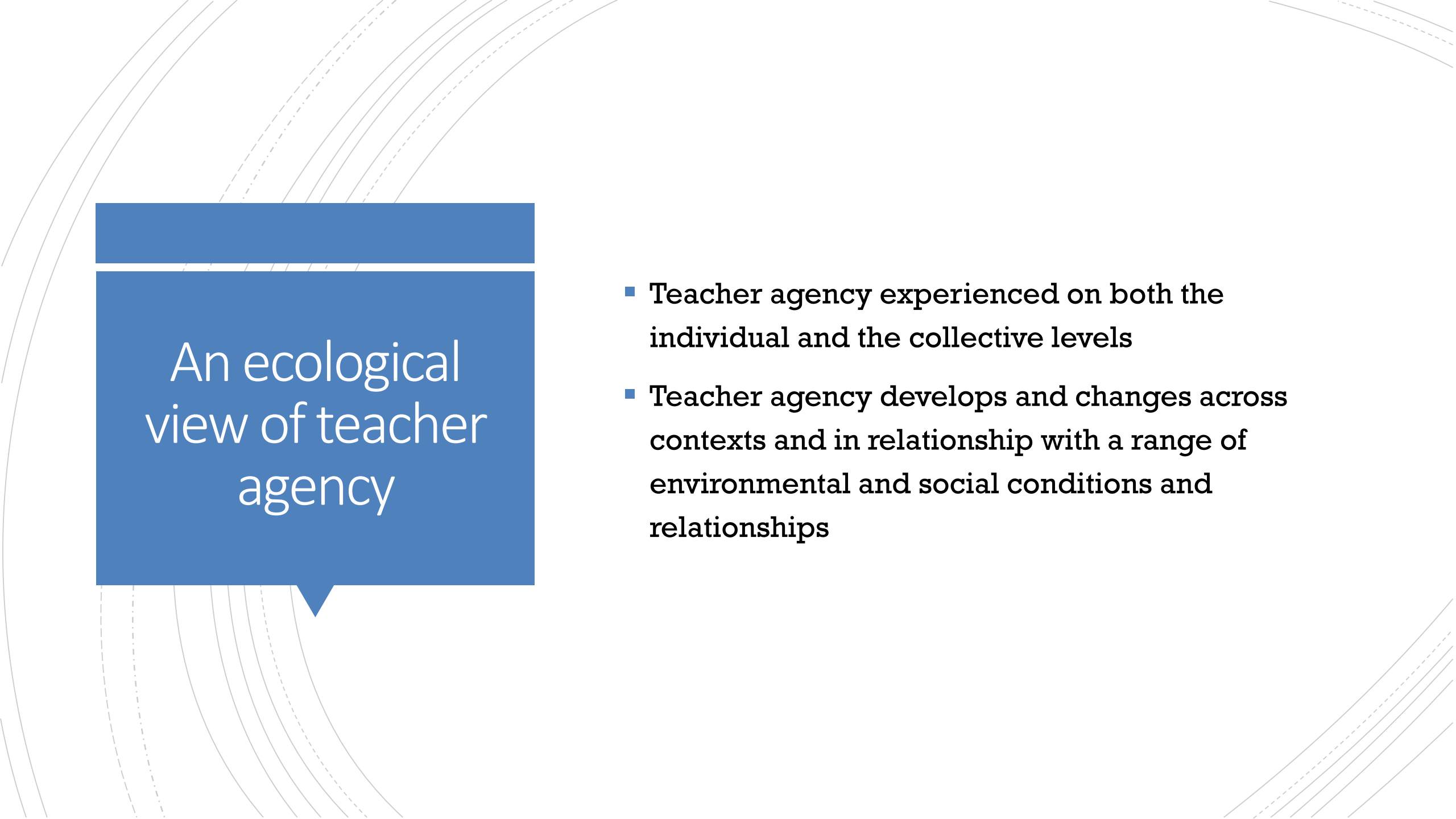
- What themes and variations are evident in academic instruction librarians':
  - **conceptions** of teacher agency?
  - **experiences** of teacher agency?
- What factors influence academic instruction librarians' conceptions and experiences of teacher agency?

## Survey questions

- In what ways do you experience agency in your library instruction work? What factors or conditions contribute to your sense of agency?
- In what ways do you experience lacking agency in your library instruction work? What factors or conditions contribute to this?
- Do certain strategies, approaches, or ideas help you experience a greater sense of agency?
- Do certain strategies, approaches, or ideas help you manage experiences of lacking agency?
- Does the concept of teacher agency evoke for you certain thoughts, ideas, or feelings?

## Current analysis

- Open coding revealed multitude of themes
- Current focus: Conceptions and experiences of teacher agency as an individual and/or shared phenomenon, including in relation to
  - library workplaces and relationships
  - librarian-faculty relationships

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## An ecological view of teacher agency

- **Teacher agency experienced on both the individual and the collective levels**
- **Teacher agency develops and changes across contexts and in relationship with a range of environmental and social conditions and relationships**

## Individual and collective views of teacher agency

- A spectrum of descriptions of teacher agency as individual/collective
  - ~75% described it as both a collective and an individual phenomenon
  - ~25% described it primarily in terms of the individual
- Prominent influences that foster and/or hinder agency
  - Work environment and culture
  - Role of collaborative and independent instructional work
  - Relationships with others
    - Library-faculty relationships
    - Librarian-librarian relationships
  - Interpersonal dynamics and power



# Collaboration and teacher agency

**Key factors to collaboration fostering agency:**

- **shared goals, communication**
- **mutual valuing of one another's expertise**
- **librarians' confidence in their own expertise**

## Key takeaways

- For the majority of study participants, conceptions and experiences of teacher agency exist in close relationship with experiences of meaning, purpose, and self-actualization.
- Almost all participants expressed appreciation for the concept of teacher agency and its relevance to both individual and collaborative pedagogical work. For some the concept was new.
- Conceptions and experiences of teacher agency have an important connection to environmental factors like work culture and relationships.
- Conceptions and experiences influence and shape one another.

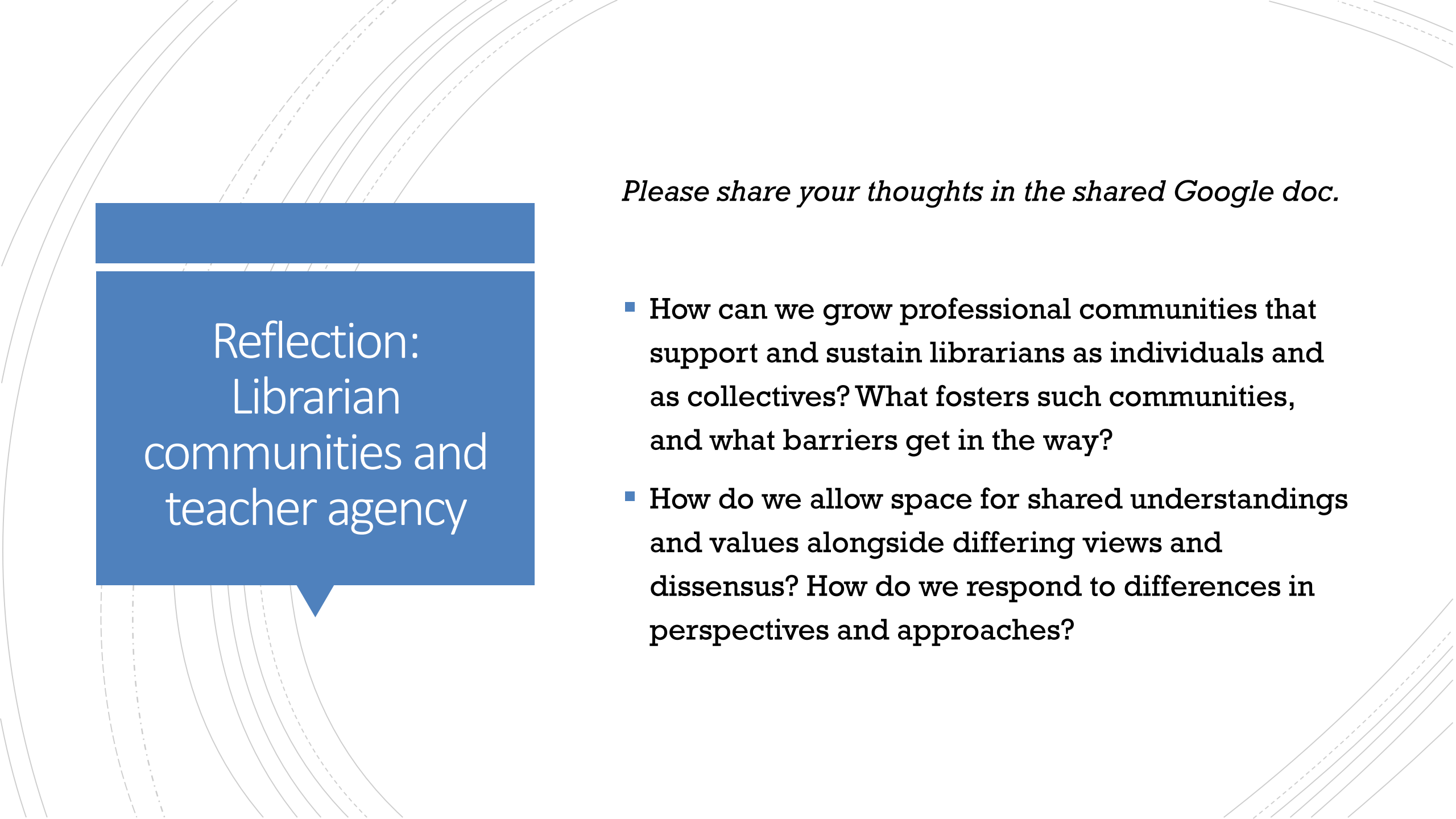
# Implications

Reflections on and discussions about teacher agency may serve as openings for exploring:

- ways to foster both individual and collective agency, and to balance the two
- the kinds of work and teaching environments and conditions that librarians wish to foster
- implicit assumptions that librarians may bring to their instructional work, as well as a wider range of possibilities for how librarians approach their instructional roles and work environments and relationships
- preventing burnout and cultivating communities and cultures of care

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## Further Reflection & Discussion

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## Reflection: Librarian communities and teacher agency

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- How can we grow professional communities that support and sustain librarians as individuals and as collectives? What fosters such communities, and what barriers get in the way?
- How do we allow space for shared understandings and values alongside differing views and dissensus? How do we respond to differences in perspectives and approaches?

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