



## CHAPTER 2:

# Teachers' education and professional development: Experiences and perspectives

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This report is one of a series documenting the findings of the *Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009 survey*.  
For additional information, see [www.bctf.ca/TeacherWorklife.aspx](http://www.bctf.ca/TeacherWorklife.aspx).

WORKLIFE OF  
BC TEACHERS  
2009



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# Introduction

Teacher learning is a complex process that cannot be addressed solely by the traditional approaches of conferences with the latest “guru” and PD days made up of a series of workshops. Nor can it be addressed by mandating professional learning community groups and their tasks within a school. Instead, a rich mix of individualized and ongoing learning activities needs to be fostered. (Clark et al., 2007, p. 20)

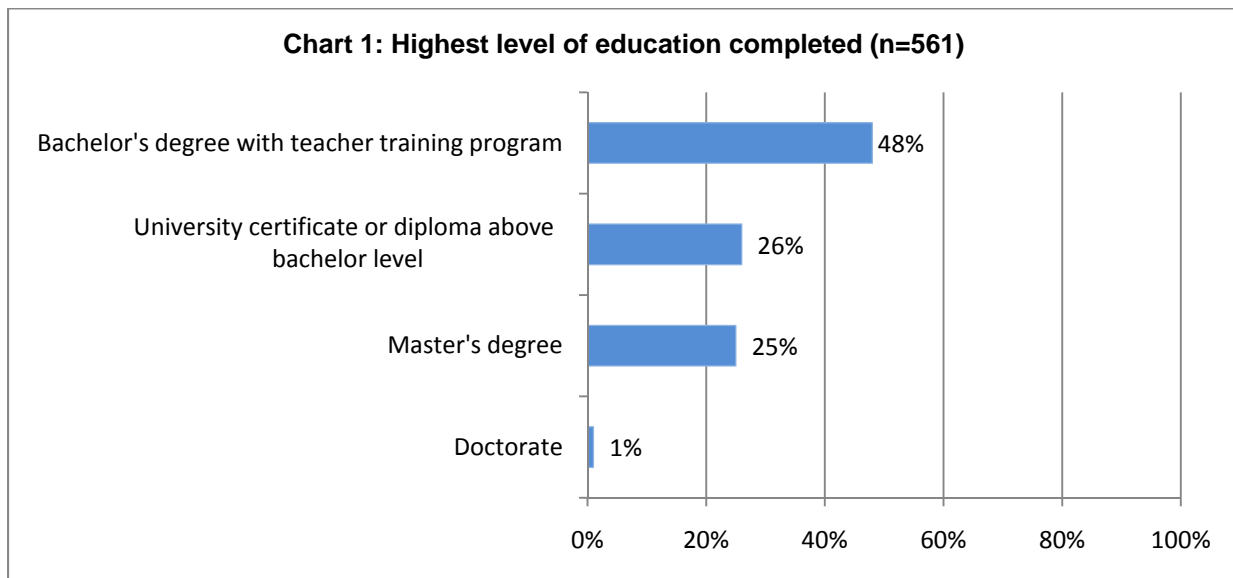
The [Worklife of BC Teachers: 2009 survey](#) asked respondents about their education and professional development (PD) in three areas: formal education in universities, both completed and current, participation in and perceptions of professional development, and interest in participating in mentorship, either as mentor or mentee.

For ease of reading, some numbers have been rounded-off.

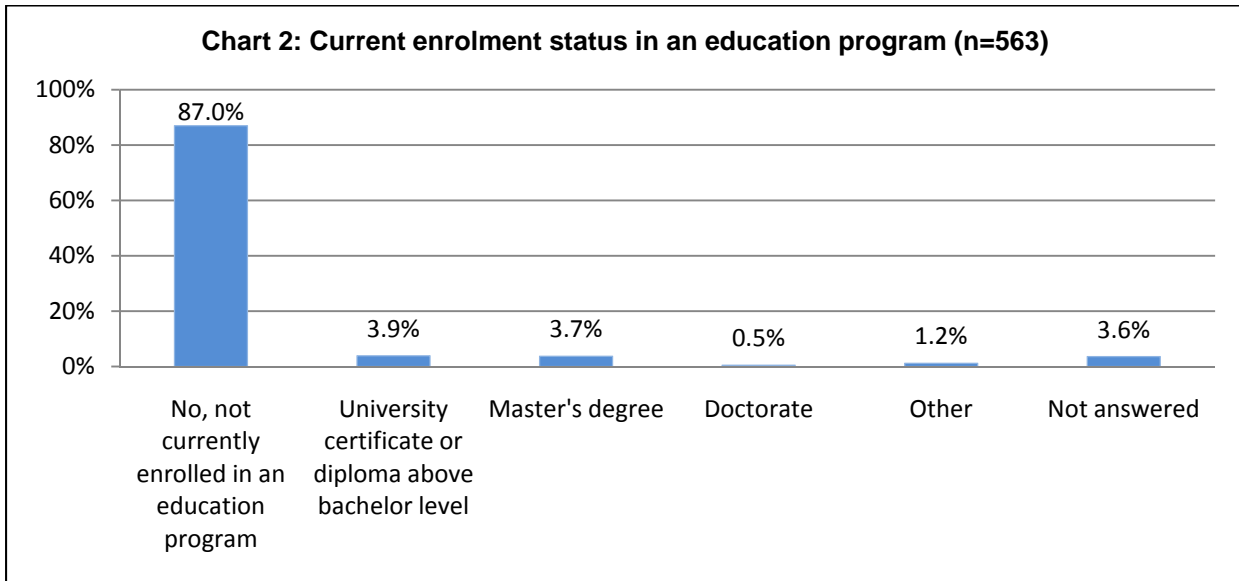
## Teachers' education

### Education

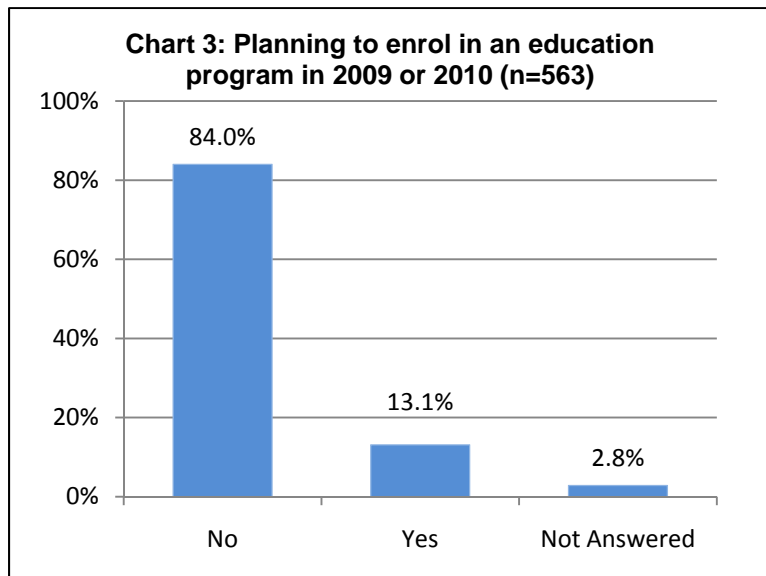
Slightly over 50% of respondents (Chart 1) report completing levels of education beyond the bachelor's degree plus teacher training that are required for certification in British Columbia: 26% had completed a university certificate/diploma, 25% had earned a master's degree, and 1% had a doctoral degree. If samples from this and a comparable survey are broadly representative, then it appears that proportionately more public-school teachers in BC have completed certificate or graduate programs than teachers in most other provinces—a pan-Canadian survey by Kamanzi, Riopel, and Lessard (2007) reported that 43% of its respondents had education beyond bachelor level, compared to the 52% of respondents in this survey.



87% of respondents were not currently enrolled in education programs (Chart 2), and the 7.6% who were enrolled in either certificate or master’s programs were almost equally divided between the two areas, with an additional 0.5% enrolled in doctoral programs.



84% of respondents did not intend to enrol in such programs in either 2009 or 2010 (Chart 3). The three most common reasons were that respondents had already reached their desired level of post-secondary education, they were simply not interested right now, or they had family or financial constraints (Chart 4). A number of respondents indicated that they had difficulty accessing programs, while others stated that they were nearing retirement and therefore additional educational programs were not of interest to them.

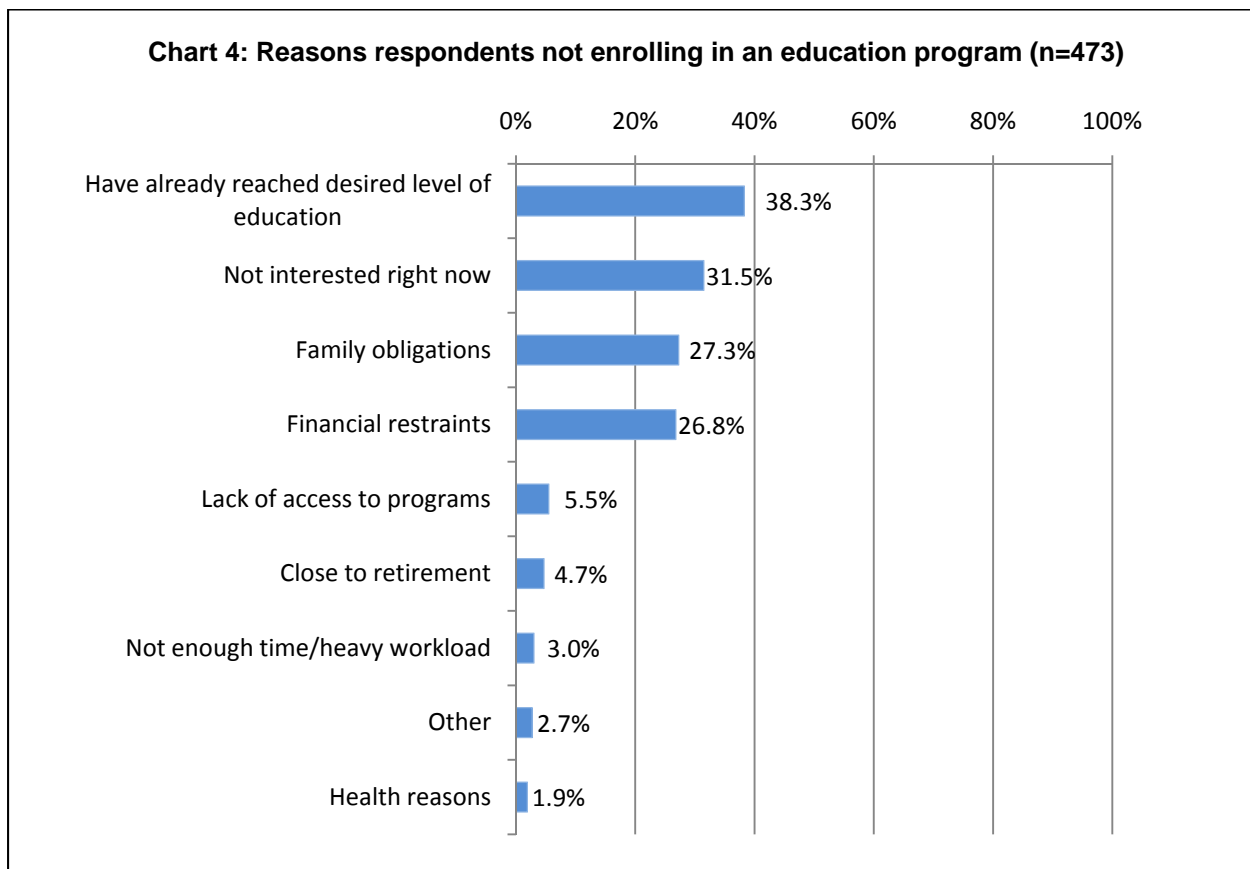


The data may provide a sense that few teachers are participating in or interested in pursuing education beyond the minimum required to teach. However, as noted above, over 50% of respondents have already completed graduate or Category 5+<sup>1</sup> courses. Another aspect to this may be that the survey respondents reflect a somewhat older sample<sup>2</sup> than is representative of BC teachers, so the survey results may reflect a demographic segment of teachers in which more have either already completed post-graduate programs or be nearing retirement, when compared to the BC teaching population as a whole.

<sup>1</sup> See Teacher Qualification Service, TQS Categories, <http://www.tqs.bc.ca/categories.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See [Chapter 1, Demographic and employment characteristics of teachers in the survey](#).

However, almost two-thirds of respondents were not planning to enrol in an education program, due to barriers such as financial restraints (27%), family obligations (27%), access to programs (6%), and workload issues (3%) (Chart 4).



## Gender differences related to non-enrolment in education programs

Analysis of the data by gender shows that there appear to be significant differences to some responses regarding non-enrolment in an education program. In terms of having reached the desired level of education, or current non-interest, responses show no gender differences. However, in most other areas differences do emerge, with proportionately more women consistently stating they were not enrolled because of family obligations (84% of those identifying this as a reason were women), and financial restraints (81%). In terms of those stating that health issues and workload were reasons, all the respondents who provided these reasons were women.

These data indicate an issue that requires further research to determine whether female teachers face barriers to accessing education programs which may be linked to family and finance. Recent research on stress in society and among teachers (Naylor and Vint, 2009; Naylor, 2008) identifies higher levels of stress reported by women than men both in Canada and internationally. In addition, a proportionately higher level of stress-related BCTF Salary Indemnity Plan claims are made by female teachers than their male colleagues. While such evidence suggests that gender differences could be significant, the issue requires a much deeper examination than can be offered here.

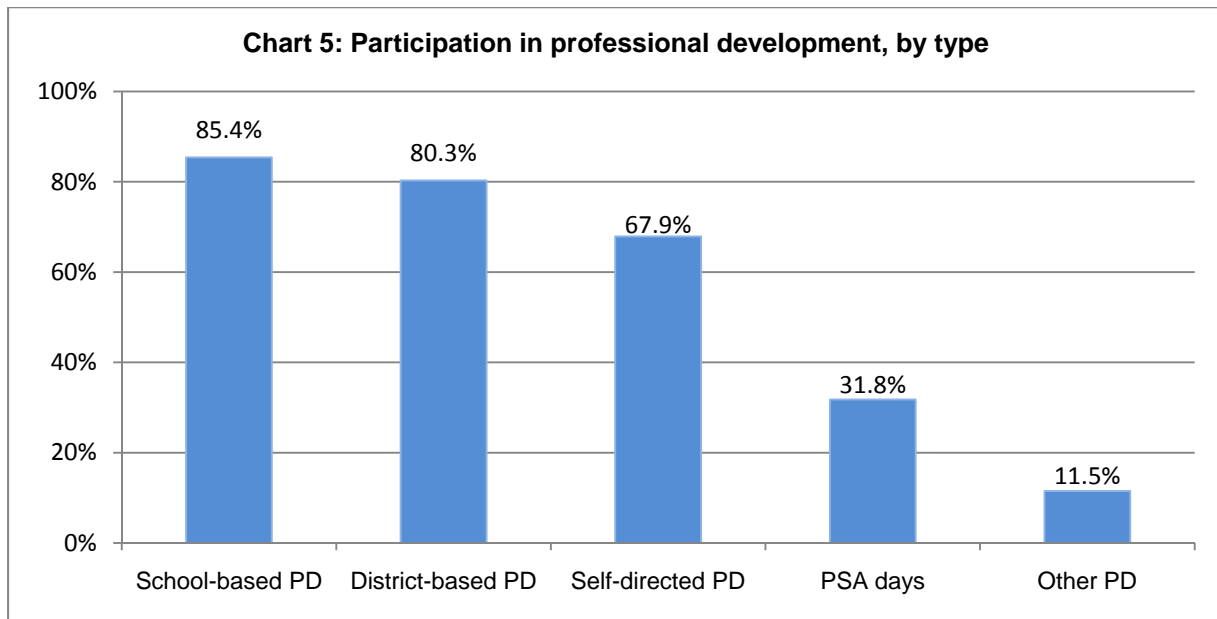
# Participation in and perspectives on professional development

## Participation

“PD is and should continue to be of paramount importance. It is through PD over the years which has changed, influenced and improved my teaching practice. This is a time for colleagues to share knowledge, talk, learn new ideas and implement into classrooms. Variety of delivery is key to appeal to as many teachers as possible. Some will never participate, some will be sick, but the vast majority benefit. PD is time well spent. Planning is imperative. We need to reinforce the concept that the more you interact with a learning community the easier your job, the more support you receive, the better you become.” (survey respondent)

School-based (85%), district-based (80%), and self-directed (68%) professional development are the most common forms of PD undertaken, with participation in Provincial Specialist Association (PSA) days much lower at 32% of respondents (Chart 5). However, it is likely that many PSA PD events are less geographically-accessible to many teachers compared to school- or district-based PD.

These data suggest that respondents participate in several forms of PD during a typical school year, mixing and matching according to preference and availability.



## Perspectives

Respondents are generally, but not uniformly, positive about both school-based and district-sponsored PD, with district PD days rating slightly higher than school-based PD activities. Almost three-quarters of respondents want more PD options, which suggests that many teachers still consider PD as consumers, preferring to choose options rather than create them. There appear to be conflicting data concerning teacher autonomy in professional development. While less than 14% report limited autonomy in choosing PD, 32% state that they experience some direction towards particular sessions. This suggests some encroachment in terms of autonomy rather than a major diminution of it.

When respondents were asked to add their comments on current PD approaches, contrasting perceptions were expressed. Some teachers report satisfaction, while others report an admin-directed approach to PD which they feel does not respect individual teacher needs or autonomy. Two such contrasting views are shared here:

“School-based PD has been very successful at our school. It provides opportunity to develop and improve on common goals through the primary and into the intermediate grades.”

“Professional development when teacher-driven provides a valuable learning and teaching opportunity to share information with colleagues. For the past six years the professional development of our school has been directed by the administration and driven primarily by school goals, not individual need or interest.”

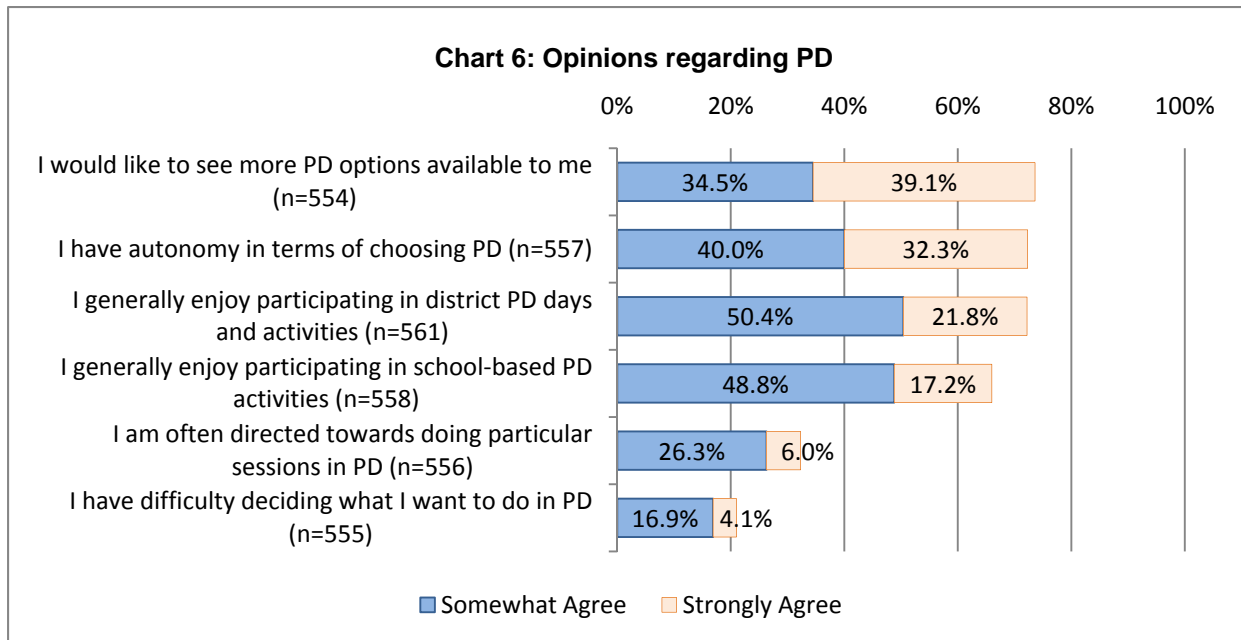


Chart 6 depicts respondents' generally-positive perspectives on professional-development options and experiences. They report high levels of autonomy and enjoyment of both school- and district-based PD. Yet, in apparent contrast, respondents indicate that they want to see expanded options available to them—an area explored in the following analysis of qualitative data.

In terms of respondents' comments on PD options and issues, several themes emerge from analysis of the qualitative data:

**1. A significant number of respondents have specific ideas on changes they'd like to see, mainly in terms of:**

**a. A preference for more opportunities to observe and collaborate**

A number of teachers state that they had participated in self-directed observation with other teachers and would like more opportunities to observe and collaborate with peers:

"I appreciated having a couple of self-directed days; it allowed me to go and observe other teachers. The best way to learn!"

"I am most stimulated and inspired by PD that allows me to work with other teachers and gives us the autonomy to discuss topics relevant to our classrooms and situations rather than prescribed topics of conversation."

The overall impression from the data is that while in some cases teachers are able to use PD time to observe and/or collaborate with peers, in others there exists a level of external control that limits teacher autonomy, choice, and access to self-directed, autonomous professional development focused on peer observation, discourse, and collaboration.

**b. A need for more funding and time to make PD accessible**

Many respondents are clearly dissatisfied with the level of funding (for workshop fees, travel, childcare, teacher-teaching-on-call (TTOC) coverage, etc.) and the amount of time available for professional development. Sometimes the combination of the lack of funding, limited time, and geography (location) either limits opportunities, or makes them inaccessible to teachers:

"I am often unable to attend PD opportunities...that are offered after school/evenings, due to our distance from town (located 1½ hours from town); I would never make it in time. Also, there is limited school funding available to compensate for travel/registration costs."

"I find that our district does not provide enough funding to cover the costs of most PD activities that aren't hosted by our own district. In the future I would like to see more districts having the same PD days so that teachers can go to something offered by a different district and not have to pay TTOC costs."

While many respondents express dissatisfaction, many also state that similar issues of low levels of funding and limited time actually block them from participating in professional development. Lack of funding extends to limited capacity to pay for TTOC coverage while accessing PD. For many teachers living outside of the Lower Mainland metropolitan area, the concentration of opportunities on the south coast adds to the perception of limited access:

"As a high-school teacher in a specialized area, I find district and school PD as often lacking relevance. Being outside of Vancouver, the cost of pursuing individual PD is somewhat prohibitive, as are the time constraints."

"Often there is very little of interest for senior math teachers in the [Fraser] Valley. The cost for travel to the coast for provincial conferences is too much. Driving...to Vancouver in October and February is often difficult, too much snow."



Models of PD funding vary across the province. The Delta Teachers' Association's *Professional Development News* (May 2008) stated that its members could apply for PD funds up to \$500, and, for teachers who had been DTA members for a period of four years or more, \$1,500 could be accessed from a fund for attending national or international conferences, presumably for a limited number of applicants. In other districts and locals, PD funds are shared equally among teachers, usually resulting in a very low allocation of approximately \$120 for each teacher.

Whatever the approach, many respondents are dissatisfied with low levels of funding for professional development.

**c. A greater focus on and access to self-directed PD**

Some respondents state a preference for self-directed PD:

“I have chosen to use a self-directed approach to PD. It is nice to have flexibility and options.”

Others suggest that some school districts are skeptical about its utility:

“I feel too much emphasis is placed on attending yet another workshop with not enough time given to teachers to work towards familiarizing themselves with ways to implement new ideas in the classroom. Self-directed PD is often considered as doing your own thing and not really as professional development. I would like to see more opportunity for self directed PD.”

The preference for self-directed PD largely appears as a reaction to what many respondents see as PD with limited relevance or PD with high levels of Administrative Officer (AO) or district influence. Thus the opportunity to focus on topics of interest, often with other teachers, rather than attend a packaged workshop, appears to attract a number of respondents:

“I have sat through many speakers with a primary or elementary focus and found that most of what they were teaching didn't apply to Kindergarten. For that reason I try to choose PD activities with a K/1 focus so more of what I learn is relevant. I tend to do more self-directed lately and get together with K teachers from other schools to gain new insights.”

“Best PD sessions are put on by practicing teachers who understand the nuances of the job.”

Some respondents state a preference for forms of collaboration and learning communities:

“Finally, our district is heading towards self-directed PD and teacher collaboration. On February 27, 2009, I had one of the best PD days collaborating with teachers in my district.”

“The way of the future is in-school or in-area professional learning groups that can do inquiry-based learning on a topic of mutual interest. Now that is exciting and relevant PD.”

As outlined in Chapter 3<sup>3</sup>, almost one-half of teachers (44%) are involved in a professional learning community or other forms of collaboration outside of the regular workday, spending an average of 1.5 hours per week on this activity. There are no differences between elementary and secondary teachers relating to participation in this activity.

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<sup>3</sup> See [Chapter 3, Workload issues for BC teachers](#).

For many, the ideal PD includes combinations—some things from which to choose, others self-directed; but whatever the preference, funding is usually an issue, limiting choice and access to PD:

“I like participating in a variety of PD activities throughout the school year. I like the choices of school-based, district-based, PSA day, and self-directed PD days. I would like the opportunity to attend out-of-province conferences but the cost is prohibitive.”

“I think single-day PD is of limited usefulness. I would like to see more accessible (i.e., in my area or online, and free or cheap) PD that is meaningful and ongoing (something like Teacher Inquiry projects that I have heard about).”

There is a growing literature which argues for a shift in terminology from “professional development” to “professional learning,” a discussion promoted in part in the Ontario Teachers’ Federation’s *Beyond PD Days* (2007). This distinction, which was not solicited in the survey, also does not appear in the large bank of qualitative data responses to this survey. While this may suggest that most BC teachers still view PD in a somewhat traditional way, there are some data which show that some teachers appear to be increasingly interested in self-directed PD, reflecting a potential shift away from accessing available PD towards building approaches to professional learning that engage teachers and are created, rather than consumed, by teachers.

## **2. Influences on PD from district- and school-based administration are significant, eliciting some positive respondent views, but a greater number of concerns**

While many respondents are positive about both school- and district-based PD, there are many expressions of concern about the pressures on teachers as both district management and school administrators try to influence teachers’ choice of professional development:

“Professional development should help me teach in my classroom, not help administrators manage the school.”

“The district tries to steer PD via the Administrative Officers. There’s often a new buzzword or theme they want us to explore. Teachers must be forceful in order to have any autonomy at all. This is hard for beginning teachers or teachers on temporary contracts. They feel they must go with the flow the admin is steering us towards. I’d prefer the admin do their own thing and let us do our thing.”

“At present our school’s PD direction is driven by School Goal Plan and a decidedly narrow view of literacy by current admin. This approach definitely detracts from...PD days of collaboration/sharing and reflecting about where we are at, where we are going, and how we can support each other to get there.”

Thus, some tensions about who controls or influences PD are stated, but the tensions are not common. As with the quantitative data, respondents seem to be stating that there are some pressures but in most cases they are able to exercise autonomy.

## **3. Both positive and negative perspectives on PD are stated**

“All PD is great! Appreciate autonomy in choosing my PD. Would like more opportunity to collaborate with my departments.”

“Professional development days are a waste of time, talent, and resources. Any business organization that used the BC-teacher model for staff professional

development would realize the process is fatally flawed. The sessions do nothing to improve teacher effectiveness.”

These comments reflect two contrasting points on a continuum regarding perceptions of PD, with one very supportive and the other highly critical. The first statement reflects the perspective of a teacher actively choosing PD and using her or his autonomy to do so; the second comment appears to reflect a “consumer” attitude to PD, in which the teacher views the available approaches and options negatively while not appearing to exercise autonomy in engaging in some form of preferred PD.

The vast majority of respondents are more positive than negative concerning PD, and most recognize the need for PD to be a part of teachers' professional lives.

#### **4. Professional development opportunities offered by the BCTF are rarely mentioned, and then not always favourably**

“My least favourite PD presentations have been those put out by the BCTF. They all seem to follow the same tired recipe approach, and rarely does the presenter seem to be an ‘expert’ in the field.”

It may be of some concern that few respondents mention the BCTF as a source of professional development, and of those who do, some are critical of the BCTF's content and approach.

#### **5. PD preferences differ depending on career stage**

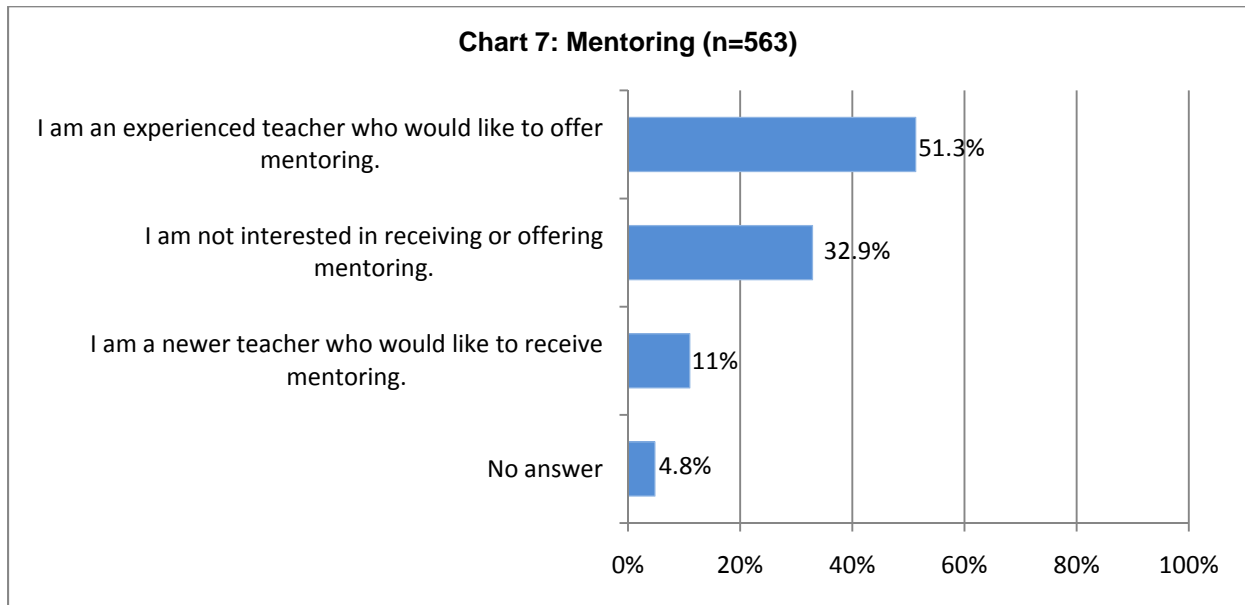
“I am interested in round table discussions of the big ideas: philosophy, poverty, attachment issues, etc. I am at the point in my career where I don't need any more strategies or material; I need stimulating, intellectual, meaningful conversations.”

“So much of PD becomes redundant for teachers who have been working for more than five years. It would be nice to have PDs geared for different seniorities for different specialities. Also, based on my experiences with illness these past few years, [PD on] proactive health and wellness strategies, in the entire health spectrum, seems prudent for the majority of teachers and non-teaching staff.”

The literature on professional development suggests that teachers at different stages in their careers prefer different approaches to professional development. In this literature, teachers new to the profession want “how to teach” sessions, with resources and strategies to apply in their classrooms. More-experienced teachers prefer a reflective, conversational approach which allows for an exchange of ideas with peers. Simons (1999) articulated two kinds of impact of professional development on teachers: “near” and “far” transfer. “Near” transfer involves a close relationship between the professional development experience and the application of whatever has been the focus of the professional development session. Many new and inexperienced teachers find the greatest utility in approaches that can be directly and immediately utilized in the classroom—a new curriculum unit, an adapted material, a lesson plan. The notion of “far” transfer implies a greater distance between the professional development experience and any application. “Far” transfer may be of greater utility to experienced teachers who do not need lesson plans or curriculum units but who may wish to discuss or reflect on more general issues—teaching styles, groups of learners facing difficulties with current approaches, the nature of collaboration with peers. “Near” transfer supports dealing with immediate difficulties, while “far” transfer is linked to greater professional growth, and is therefore of more utility over a teacher's career than the short-term need for “something that works with my class tomorrow.”

# Mentoring

Almost two-thirds of respondents indicate that they would like to participate in mentoring, as either mentors or mentees (Chart 7). The proportion of newer teachers who would like to receive mentoring is high. Although only 15% of all survey respondents were aged under 35<sup>4</sup>, 11% of respondents (almost three-quarters of all respondents aged under 35) indicate that as newer teachers they would like to receive mentoring. This suggests a very high level of interest in mentoring, an interest currently unfulfilled. There are few mentoring programs accessible to teachers in BC, and no provincial mentoring and induction programs, such as the ones developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education<sup>5</sup>. With BC lagging far behind provinces such as Ontario in terms of teachers' mentoring opportunities, these data provide some sense of both the demand for mentoring and a potentially rich source of mentors from teachers who clearly want to offer support to newer teachers.



# Discussion

Data from this survey illustrate that many teachers engage in considerable formal education beyond the minimum required for certification. Yet there are indications that for some, barriers of cost, family responsibilities, workload, and access still exist, limiting their ability to access certificate and graduate university courses. These barriers appear to disproportionately disadvantage female teachers.

In terms of professional development, a majority of teachers enjoy school-based and district-based PD, and exercise considerable autonomy in terms of choice and participation. A smaller number of teachers express concern about administrator/district control. Most teachers who responded to this survey appear to be frustrated by severe financial limitations which reduce their access to many types of professional development, though no respondents suggest that this low level of funding should be considered a priority in the next round of bargaining. In terms of

<sup>4</sup> See [Chapter 1, Demographic and employment characteristics of teachers in the survey](#).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teacher/induction.html>

mentoring, the data suggest both strong demand from newer teachers, and a willingness to offer mentoring on the part of experienced teachers. This bodes well should mentoring be provided across the province. Sadly, there appears little evidence that such provision is likely in the near future, as there is no information from the BC Ministry of Education to indicate any upcoming mentoring/induction support at a provincial level.

The overall sense from these data is that while some teachers are opting for self-directed professional development, the majority still appears to consider professional development opportunities from the perspective of a consumer, choosing options that are offered rather than creating options with peers. A possible direction for the BCTF may be to further explore ways to increase autonomy through self-directed PD by expanding and documenting initiatives and approaches such as teacher inquiry, collaborations, and professional conversation approaches. Some of these approaches have been developed by the BCTF in recent years with the expansion of the Program for Quality Teaching Inquiry projects<sup>6</sup>.

One area noticeably not addressed by respondents in relation to professional development is technology. While many state that geography and access are problems, none mention technology as either a utilized or possible solution. Only one respondent makes any mention of technology connected to considerations of PD. Inquiry regarding the use of technology linked to PD could be an additional focus for future surveys.

It is clear from analysis of the qualitative data that many teachers are actively engaged in professional development, and that the vast majority consider PD to be essential to their work as teachers. A recent analysis of teachers' professional development (Webster-Wright, 2009) offers some similarities to these survey data in terms of findings, and a message of hope and optimism in terms of future directions:

Much of the research reported here reveals most professionals as enthusiastic learners who want to improve their practice. Let us listen to their experience and work to support, not hinder, their learning. Rather than deny, seek to control, or standardize the complexity of professional learning experiences, let us accept, celebrate, and develop insights from these experiences to support professionals as they continue to learn. (p. 728)

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<sup>6</sup> *The BCTF's Program for Quality Teaching (PQT)/Teacher Inquiry Project 2008–09: A report to the BCTF Executive Committee*, <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/TeacherInquirer/PQT-TIP-Report2008-09.pdf> and *Teacher Inquiry in the BCTF: A focus for supporting teachers' professional development A report to the BCTF Executive Committee from the Teacher Inquiry Work Group*, <http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Public/Publications/TeacherInquirer/archive/2008-02/BCTFTeacherInquiryWGReport2008.pdf>

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