



# CHAPTER 5:

## BC teachers talk about satisfaction and stress in their work: A qualitative study

Charlie Naylor, Ph.D.  
Senior Researcher, BCTF Research

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  
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# Introduction

In this chapter of the study we report on both the satisfaction teachers derive from teaching, and the stress that they experience. Some teacher-worklife surveys, including those that BCTF Research has previously produced<sup>1</sup>, catch the pain but not the pleasure of teaching, because they tend to focus on those issues troubling to teachers and their unions while in some cases failing to capture what satisfies teachers in their work. In this survey we asked BCTF members what provided them with professional satisfaction. In posing this invitation to share what satisfied them in their work, we are not ignoring those troubling issues of workload and intensity—indeed, there appears to be evidence of duality. In many cases, teachers are at the same time excited by and stressed from their work. If we want to capture the essence of BC teachers’ “work lives” (which suggests experiences that could include the positive) rather than “workload” (which often stresses the negative), then in this research we find and report those aspects of teaching that engage and excite teachers in their profession, as well as those aspects that cause teachers stress.

## The satisfaction in teaching: What BC teachers say about the positive aspects of their work

It is clear from the survey returns that many teachers gain considerable satisfaction from teaching. Some comments embrace a wide-ranging view of the enjoyment of teaching:

“I enjoy teaching very much. I feel that I’m doing something very important, e.g., teaching critical thinking and literacy. I’m very enthusiastic about all facets of social studies and continue to read books, watch films and movies, listen to music and find art to bring into my classroom. I enjoy the creative opportunities of teaching. I enjoy all the time I spend preparing classes and units. I enjoy inviting students to be interested and motivated as I stand in front of them. I state my boundaries and expectations very clearly in September and I’m firm when these are tested. I find that my classes are generally well-behaved and recognize students’ need to test. I enjoy all my contacts with students.”

“...making learning meaningful; hearing a child read for the first time; reading a piece of writing the child has written; helping immigrant parents navigate the school system, paper trails, accessing support for their kids; finding funds to subsidize field trips, materials for the class; having a parent request for you as a teacher—this tells you, you must be doing something right.”

“...happy, satisfied students who look forward to coming to class and who leave happy. Students who learn to like themselves because they discover they are good at something...positive student feedback...motivating students, observing their success and watching their confidence grow. Students who choose to confide

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<sup>1</sup> *Worklife of British Columbia teachers in 2001*, <http://www.bctf.ca/IssuesInEducation.aspx?id=5648&libID=5720>.

because they know they can trust you. Being respected by students and treated well by them.”

“...my students and the connections made with them. When on my three courses I have time to really get to know my students. It is wonderful to be able to help them learn and inspire them to be curious. It is an honour when they remain in contact after the course is over and after they have graduated from high school.”

The single greatest source of satisfaction stated by respondents to this survey is the teacher-student connection, interaction, and relationship. But relating to others in the education system was also important to many respondents’ sense of satisfaction.

Responses in terms of student connections and other relationships included three main areas:

### **1. Teachers want to engage students in learning, and gain satisfaction when it occurs**

This may seem so obvious as to be hardly necessary to state, yet the vocation of teaching is partly epitomized by this statement, and the daily work of a teacher appears enriched when it occurs. So it is important to find that many BC teachers report immense satisfaction from this fundamental aspect of teaching:

One Science teacher respondent articulated six ways that this occurred:

1. “When a student struggles with a concept and then, in an ‘AH-HA’ moment gets it and you know you helped them get there!
2. When students develop an interest in science they didn’t have before.
3. When students develop an interest in science and say that you’re the reason.
4. When students have fun doing a lot and are excited about what happens and you hear them talk about it to their friends in the hallway.
5. When students help each other to understand.
6. When a student says “I never do well in science, I’m too stupid” and then they do well and are so proud of themselves.”

Such moments were reported by many respondents, including the following Music teacher:

“I still get tremendous satisfaction working with the kids. I love when I get to experience their ‘ah-ha’ moments. I still get tingling in my knees when they hit all the right notes with their recorders, or their voices come together in harmony. I love when my Grade 7s feel inspired and get involved in great discussions.”

Another teacher stated:

“The most satisfying aspect of my jobs is getting to interact with the students at my school and in particular to get to know my 30 students and create strong, trusting relationships with them where they feel free to talk to me about anything they need to and they know I am there to listen and support them no matter what the issue is.”

### **2. Teachers gain satisfaction when they feel that they are a positive influence on students’ lives**

Respondents spoke of “being a positive influence in a child’s life and making a difference.” This, in part, includes the engagement in learning, but also encompasses a wider belief that teachers felt that they sometimes made significant and positive differences to a child’s development and life experience:

“I love teaching and making a difference in the kids’ lives most of all.”

“I love working with my students and can’t imagine doing anything else, even though it is a very challenging job. I love knowing that I have made a difference in my students’ lives and helped them to view themselves as capable and successful individuals.”

“...making a difference in the lives of individual students, knowing they like to come to your class and are learning.”

“I teach because I get the opportunity to build relationships with wonderful people. I know the impact that my teachers had on my life and I consider it a great privilege to be able to build into students’ lives in the same way.”

Respondents were clearly stating that a key factor in their satisfaction with teaching is positively influencing and impacting children’s development and children’s lives. Such views reflect more than just satisfaction—they touch on the nature of teaching as a vocation that relates to the description offered by David Hansen:

Despite a host of common obligations and practices, no two teachers have the same personal and moral impact on students. For better or for worse, every teacher has a unique and varying influence on students’ orientations toward learning, toward knowledge, and toward other people. Moreover, those differences have to do with a lot more than overt dissimilarities in personality and teaching style. They have to do with the ethos of the person, his or her characteristic conduct when in the presence of students, his or her reputation, expectations, hopes, fears, worries, and more. The relationship between a teacher and his or her students is invariably a moral one, even if that relationship is cold or impersonal or aloof—for those qualities themselves constitute messages about how to interact with others and how to regard and treat the products of human experience and effort. These claims support the notion that a person thinking about becoming a teacher may indeed have something to offer that nobody else can provide—even if he or she may not appreciate (as yet) what that “something” might turn out to be. (1994, para. 15)

### **3. Teachers gain satisfaction when they have positive and productive relations with colleagues and parents**

While relationships with students are central to many respondents’ association with job satisfaction, their relationships with peers and parents are also significant. Many respondents listed the various aspects of their work which gave them satisfaction, which intimated a hierarchy of importance, with the usual order being students, then peers or other educators, and parents or community. One respondent listed the following as factors which contributed to her satisfaction when teaching:

1. “Watching children grow and learn
2. Working with peers who are collaborative and flexible
3. Working with parents who are eager to listen and co-operative with my professional expertise and experience.”

Another respondent suggested:

1. “Students; awesome relationship, and their growth and progress
2. Teaching partners; working with a team that is supportive and nurturing
3. Supportive school board and district staff
4. Supportive community services.”

These data stress the importance of relationship in terms of teaching students and in terms of working with other adults. For many respondents, when working and teaching relationships were positive, as many were, they contributed to teachers’ satisfaction with their work. Some teachers stressed such relationships as positives that get them to the school each morning and keep them in teaching.

“I love the relationships that I build with my students and colleagues. We laugh and have so much fun while learning.”

“I also get a great deal of satisfaction from my colleagues. I have a fantastic job-share partner. I also collaborate with our other Grade 6/7 teacher very closely and it makes the job more enjoyable when you have others to bounce ideas around with and to plan with.”

“I find the atmosphere of working and collaborating with colleagues to be an intense source of satisfaction. I take pride in being a member of a profession where members are strong in their convictions, vocal, and self-assured. The dedication I see on a daily basis is very rewarding and inspirational.”

Respondents also identified other areas as positives that create a sense of satisfaction in their work, and these are shared below.

- **For many teachers, satisfaction comes from having autonomy**

“I can teach what I want, how I want, within the curriculum guideline.”

Some respondents either expressly referenced autonomy or spoke of the freedom they had to teach in the way they wanted. Their capacity to make choices in terms of pedagogical approaches and in curriculum within the boundaries of the provincial curriculum documents clearly provided considerable satisfaction:

“I have freedom to teach...with a great deal of autonomy in regard to subject and curriculum focus, lots of freedom in how to deliver, what to deliver within the curriculum, how to support students in need.”

“I greatly enjoy the variety of the work I do; working with principals, vice principals, teachers, students, parents, agencies....I have a lot of autonomy. I am glad that the work I do is with people, helping students and families. This is very satisfying.”

Autonomy was not defined by any respondent, yet teachers’ comments provide a sense that there is a commonality of meaning: to have some space to make decisions, to do the job in a way defined by the individual rather than by an employer or administrator, to have the flexibility to change and adapt as necessary. The value placed on autonomy appears to be an interesting counterpoint to the value placed on community and relationships, suggesting that many teachers thrive in a combination of autonomous decision-making within a supportive community.

- **Teaching, for many respondents, was more about passion for teaching than about satisfaction with work**

The survey asked teachers to comment on “the most satisfying aspect(s) of your work.” This was intended to explore the positive aspects of teaching, but to pose the question in a neutral manner. Responses to this question were surprising, in that a large number reflected a passion for the work of teaching, whether that passion was for the ‘ah-ha’ moment (that moment when a student “gets it,” when she or he acquires the understanding of learning a specific concept or skill), the joy in seeing children’s growth and development, or positive relationships with other teachers and administrators. Around 20% of respondents wrote comments which included the words “I love....” in expressing how they viewed their work, such as:

“I love it every day, collaborating with my colleagues, knowing that what I do every day is important; constantly learning.”

“As a French Immersion Grade 1 teacher, I love watching my students play and learn in French....I love to teach and like being part of a community.”

“I love sharing what things I’ve tried in the classroom, or ways I’ve adapted things to make them work with my colleagues. I love the creative process.”

Many others expressed the depth of their commitment to and enjoyment of teaching in less direct language, while still conveying the sense of being passionate about teaching.

For many teachers, the passion felt for their work encompassed more than one focus—often working with students, working in community, coaching students in sports, learning and changing as a professional. While there were many combinations of areas expressed in the reflection of teachers’ perspectives, the key areas within which they occurred were concerning the nature of teaching students and working in community with colleagues. When both aspects—respondents’ participation in the act of teaching and participation in community—were positive, then the teachers who offered their responses to this survey felt not only satisfied but passionate about their work.

Based on the data collected, it appears fair to say that many BC teachers find immense satisfaction in their teaching, primarily in terms of the act of teaching and relating to students, but also in terms of having considerable autonomy while being part of a school community. Relationships with colleagues and parents are also important in providing satisfaction.

The comments and perspectives shared by teachers also link to an area of literature briefly referenced earlier in this paper. Because education involves human interaction, the relationships involved in schools become pivotal to students’ learning and belonging, and to the sense of teachers’ satisfaction with the work they do. Nel Noddings discussed the need for teachers to have caring relationships with students:

I do not mean to suggest that the establishment of caring relations will accomplish everything that must be done in education, but these relations provide the foundation for successful pedagogical activity. First, as we listen to our students, we gain their trust and, in an ongoing relation of care and trust, it is more likely that students will accept what we try to teach. They will not see our efforts as ‘interference’ but, rather, as co-operative work proceeding from the integrity of the relation. Second, as we engage our students in dialogue, we learn about their needs, working habits, interests, and talents. We gain important ideas from them about how to build our lessons and plan for their individual progress. Finally, as

we acquire knowledge about our students' needs and realize how much more than the standard curriculum is needed, we are inspired to increase our own competence. (2005, para. 12)

In terms of professional relationships between adults in schools (teachers, administrators, and support staff), most of the literature focuses on the building of positive relationships through deliberative approaches such as professional learning communities. Coral Mitchell and Larry Sackney expand on three areas of capacity-building: personal, interpersonal, and organizational, all of which necessitate building and sustaining professional relationships:

Personal capacity is related to the ability and desire to reflect on, assess, and critique existing knowledge; to seek out new ideas and new understandings; and to reconstruct personal knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes as warranted by these analyses. Inter-personal capacity is concerned with the ability of groups of people to work together on shared purposes; to come to a set of shared understandings and agreements about their work; to generate effective group processes, expectations and outcomes; and to operate in a spirit of mutual trust, respect and psychological safety. These two sets of capacity are developed within a framework of organizational capacity that brings people into contact with one another, that invests heavily in professional learning and continual improvement, and that pays careful attention to leadership patterns, structural arrangements, communication and information pathways, and learning environments. (2009, p. 31)

The satisfaction that some teachers express likely derives from these kinds of community-building. Some teachers appear to have developed workplace cultures that may not be professionally collaborative but that are welcoming and inclusive, and that incorporate some of the qualities such as trust and mutual respect that Mitchell and Sackney articulate. Whatever the forms, and however they evolved, teachers' satisfaction with teaching is in part about their place in community and their relationships with other adults and with students.

## **The stress of teaching: What BC teachers consider to be the most stressful aspects of their work**

Research shows that teaching can be stressful. To learn more about how teachers in BC are experiencing stress at work, the worklife survey asked, "Please comment on what you consider to be the most stressful aspect(s) of your work." The following data are based on responses to this question.

For a significant number of respondents, there are multiple causes of stress in their work lives. And as it is with workers in any field who report stress, it appears that for many teachers it is the combination of factors that induces stress in such a way that work is often intensified:

"Teaching 30 students, with many lettered students in class as well as so many students that have behavioural difficulties, ESL, hyperactive, family difficulties, difficulties relating to peers. There is me and only me to handle all this—sometimes it feels like a three-ring circus. What about a personal home life??"

Teaching is an all-encompassing job! Combine the above with supervision duties, professional day meetings, handling field-trip arrangements and going on them, hours spent on report cards, staff meetings, marking, creating programs for students with learning difficulties, staff meetings, committee meetings, working on projects with other teachers, meeting other teachers to discuss students, Learning Assistance, counsellor meetings, screening-meetings preparation, looking for and finding new materials, textbooks, creating worksheets, trying to teach the curriculum and finding time for me—AAAAAHHH!”

“When you try to break down the elements of stress in the profession of teaching it actually does a disservice to teachers. It’s not the individual items that cause stress, it’s the combination of things which actually causes stress. When we have our most stressful times, during report-card preparation, we also have all the other items to contend with at the same time. We can’t put the kids on automatic, and the meetings don’t stop; there’s still marking and planning; we still need to deal with behaviour issues and call parents, we still have the administration to deal with and the very real problems of kids not getting what they need at school and at home. This is when our stress levels are at their highest.”

“The most stressful elements of my job are all the obligations and expectations of others that pull me away from my lesson-planning and working with my students. Constant meetings, e-mails filling up my inbox every day, paperwork, coaching, with an inadequate amount of prep time to complete it all. Due to scheduling constraints at my middle school, I need to teach multiple classes, so I see between 80–90 students each day. This creates a very large marking load, and I find I have a difficult time keeping up with all the assessment samples I collect to mark. I have parents that want me to keep them informed of their child’s habits/ assignments on an almost daily/weekly basis, and want me to offer tutorials before and after school to keep their child on task with their work. I find my job often takes up much of my personal time, and I have to make sacrifices in other aspects of my life for the expectations of the career. However, unlike some other jobs, we teachers receive little or no benefits for all the additional overtime we are expected to put into the job.”

“The most stressful aspects are the continuing additions of things/subjects we must teach. Just lately, it is the Physical Activity; when do you fit that into your day? Math, Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, etc., plus, now, 30 minutes of jumping around? Where? In my class? I try to cram all the requirements of learning for my students. Grade 3 Math, for example, is just too much for one year, especially if you teach another grade level. I, as a teacher, want them to have time to absorb new concepts before leaping to the next, to ensure my report card requirements are fully met. I find little time to enjoy my students. I rarely have time to just relax fun to get to know them. It is work, work. How sad. As for my stress level, it goes up and up.”

These comments express considerable strength of feeling about the stressful aspects of teaching, reflected both in the wording and in terms of rhetorical questions, punctuation, and capitalization—all ways that some respondents used to convey their message of the nature and impact of stress, and how such stress affects both their professional and personal lives.

There may also be gender differences in the effects of stress in terms of teachers choosing to work part-time in order to manage workload and stress issues:

“The most stressful aspect of my work is finding the time during my work day to complete all the tasks of my work day. There never seems to be enough hours in the day. At the end of the day I’m exhausted, but carrying home a briefcase of marking to be completed for tomorrow. I have chosen to work part-time because I could not raise and manage my family and work full-time as a teacher.”

“I can’t do a job this important (kids’ education) and still have a life with family, friends.”

A BCTF study of secondary English teachers (Naylor & Malcolmson, 2001) also explored evidence that suggests some female teachers may work full-time but are paid part-time, as they indicated opting for part-time work while using their own unpaid time for preparation and marking. In the current worklife study, there are several indicators that gender differences may be occurring in terms of responses<sup>2</sup>, but there is insufficient detail to be definitive. With the increased feminization of teaching, it may be timely to consider gender differences in terms of work and workload in future research.

A number of distinct areas of stress were identified by respondents, which are reported below.

- **Respondents reported feeling pressured by the demands of multiple tasks and limited time**

One respondent asked, “When do I get time to teach?” in a plaintive series of comments concerning constantly changing and multiple demands. In some cases, teachers spoke of the difficulties of discussing students with education assistants because no time allocation is made for EAs beyond their contact time with students. In other cases, completing report cards consumes considerable amounts of time. Whatever the factor, and there were many, the overall pattern in the data is that with multiple and increasing demands (e.g., daily physical activity) on teachers’ time, there simply is not enough time to manage the tasks:

“All the bits and pieces to weave together, never enough time. When teachers recognize a student has issues outside the norm they ask for help, but early intervention is not really very early. We are professionals who should be supported with the extra help to bring these students along. Instead, we have meetings, do more paperwork, and have even less time and energy for teaching. Nobody listens when we call for help. Administrators who do not provide the structure and set appropriate behaviour expectations in the school; hallways, assemblies, etc. Filthy floors, dusty everything, lack of storage, and space around children’s desks.”

For some, the demands mean that more work is being taken home and that this negatively impacts their home life:

“I do not feel that teachers are given nearly enough time to prepare lessons and to assess students. It seems that it is expected that we create innovative, dynamic, and flexible lessons according to our ever-changing class composition, but no extra time is allotted. When curriculum is changed, it is extremely stressful. Not

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<sup>2</sup> See [Chapter 1, Demographic and employment characteristics of teachers in the survey](#) and [Chapter 3, Workload issues for BC teachers](#)

because we don't like change, but because no extra time is given to create new lessons. Even when the curriculum is not changed, I am constantly trying to implement new strategies, constantly changing my lessons to improve their delivery. All this has to be done at home! It takes time to be creative. I'd love to collaborate with other teachers; who has time?"

"Bringing work home: marking, doing reports takes away my family time."

"Completing report cards (many hours), dealing with increased student (and their family) problems, lack of counsellor support, too-frequent staff meetings which take time away from planning/marketing/break time, and I have hours of marking to do at home at the present time."

- **Respondents stated that the complexity of the classroom, in terms of class size and class composition, adds to their sense of stress**

Few teachers stated that class size in itself was their major stressor, but the combination of class size and composition made teaching and meeting student needs more difficult and therefore became a major source of stress:

"Class size and composition are the biggest sources of stress, usually. The types of Science labs I do have changed since the class sizes are larger. It is too difficult/dangerous to do some labs."

Many teachers in the survey work in split-grade classes. Split grades usually were identified as a stressor alongside other factors, usually class size or composition:

"[Major stressors are]...classroom composition and split classes. For the past three years I have had a split class and the composition of students has been very difficult."

"Having a class of 30 students with 5 identified students with special needs, not including the students who are waiting for psycho-ed assessments. I am struggling to meet the needs of all students."

- **Respondents described a lack of support for teachers in their efforts to meet students' needs**

The perception that students' needs are not being met is a consistent theme in the data, but this is linked to respondents' additional perception that systemic failure to address unmet needs impacts the individual teacher and induces stress:

"...Not receiving support in classroom with children who may have special needs or behavioural (adjustment to school) needs upon entering Kindergarten. Support is very necessary during the first few weeks till pupils with special needs can be assessed and designated<sup>3</sup> to be eligible for support."

"....struggling to meet the needs of all students; not spending enough time with the regular kids due to demands of the time-takers in the classroom; seeing a huge swing from quality and effort to mediocrity; that teachers are not respected for the effort they make."

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<sup>3</sup> Special Education Services: A Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines:  
[http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/special\\_ed\\_policy\\_manual.pdf](http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/specialed/special_ed_policy_manual.pdf).

In this area also, most respondents grouped the concept of support with more than one issue, including limited access to education assistants, support for students with special needs, or access to diagnostic testing for students:

“[I have a] 4-grade split, 9–13-year-olds, even teaching PE has become stressful because young kids do not have skills or strength of older kids. Have had 2 grey-area kids on list for testing because I know they are not grey-area. Already March and no testing has been done. No speech pathologist, no real Special Ed at our school, no librarian, no support.”

“There are [a] high number of students with special needs with only partial EA support and no time before/after/during school to communicate with EAs and there is no availability of administration before and after school.”

The data from this survey show strong parallels with the 2001 BCTF *Worklife of BC Teachers* qualitative data<sup>4</sup>, suggesting that little has changed in terms of stress factors. However, the 2009 data appear to show a significant number of teachers who identify the lack of support as a key factor. In other words, the stress factors are similar between the two data sets, but in the 2009 data, teachers are suggesting that it may be as much the lack of support as it is the stress area itself that may be causing teachers to feel stressed. The notion of support is somewhat difficult to define, but respondents’ comments imply that the lack of support from any one or a combination of administration, parents, and peers is a factor which impacts them negatively. This speaks to the nature of school communities and the interactions within them. Where such interactions are positive, and where teachers feel supported in community, more teachers may be able to deal with issues that create stress.

Much has been written about “factory” or “industrial” models of schooling in which students and teachers are cogs in a system of schooling where outputs or results are paramount, and where the nature of community is rarely considered. Martin and MacNeil (2007) contrasted “school as factory” with “school as community,” arguing for a shift away from industrial models of schooling:

The key to community-building is involving and showing support for all members of the school, but the role played by teachers, who have the most direct relationship with students, is especially important. Schools that have this type of leadership are caring and nurturing place that create *collegial teaching environments* for teachers and successful learning environments for students.

The importance of informal interpersonal *relationships* is the most dynamic source of power in organizations today (Kanter, 1996). Schools need to use this power to develop commitment, equality and justice. Building community through school culture requires leaders that have a strong sense of purpose and encourage *reflection* and *dialogue*. (para. 3–4)

Martin and MacNeil’s analysis of and preference for school as community is a reminder that education in schools has much to do with human relationships, and where such relationships do not result in a sense of community which offers support, then stress appears to be increased. Examining the issue of improving schools as communities is also a source of some interesting current literature, including *The School Community Journal*, which focuses exclusively on schools as and within communities. In a recent edition, Keiser and Schulte (2009) state:

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<sup>4</sup> <http://bctf.ca/publications/ResearchReports.aspx?id=5570>

As school leaders seek ways to improve schools and districts, school climate is essential. Increasing academic performance, enhancing social and emotional skills, and even retaining quality teachers are all related to positive school climate, but trying to understand the complex patterns and subtle norms which create that climate can be perplexing (Belenardo, 2001; Osher & Fleischman, 2005). While containing elements of school safety, environment, teaching, and learning (Cohen, 2007), the heart of school climate may be defined as ‘the quality and consistency of interpersonal interaction within the school community that influences children’s cognitive, social, and psychological development’ (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997, p. 322).

It is through these interactions that relationships are formed and a sense of community arises. Belenardo (2001) identifies the elements of a sense of school community as shared values, commitment, a feeling of belonging, caring, interdependence, and regular contact. Perceptions of the school community will vary among individuals, but as they identify with their school and their role in the culture, common features of the group norms become evident (Griffith, 2000; Royal & Rossi, 1999).

Schools that display the shared values of fairness, justice, respect, cooperation, and compassion have a positive sense of community, supporting and motivating both teachers and students (Bushnell, 2001; Furman, 1998; Keiser & Schulte, 2007; Noddings, 1992; Osher & Fleischman, 2005; Schulte et al., 2002; Schulte, Shanahan, Anderson, & Sides, 2003). (p. 46)

While the nature of community is varied and complex, the data from respondents in this survey indicate that positive aspects of community (e.g., support and collegiality) in schools appear to increase teacher satisfaction, and negative aspects (e.g., lack of support, and isolation from peers) may produce stress in teachers. It therefore appears sensible to place more focus on the nature of community in schools as well as the work done in them in order to address issues of stress.

- **Lack of support to deal with problematic student behaviour increases respondents’ stress**

A number of respondents reported problematic student behaviour as a stressor.

Often this issue is compounded by what some respondents see as a lack of active engagement by school administrators and/or parents in dealing with behaviour:

“Administrator’s lack of support for students with academic and behavioural challenges.... Parents are too busy to do things with their kids.”

In other situations, respondents described unsupportive parents but very supportive school administration:

“Every year is different and presents different areas of stress. For example, extreme behaviour students with non-supportive parents make for a stressful year. Parents who question you and defend their child’s poor behaviour and who do not accept poor parenting as part of the cause. Thank goodness for strong supportive administration.”

In some comments, teachers stated that the behaviour comes from both designated and un-designated students. However, there are many other instances where teachers reported additional compounding factors, including perceptions of lack of support for dealing with behaviour:

“Dealing with behavioural challenges from a designated behaviour student, and lack of support from the EA (education assistant) working with him.”

Some respondents stated that the behaviour stemmed from a “grey area” student without any ministry special needs designation. In some of these cases, the lack of designation meant a lack of identifiable support, whether in terms of EA time or a specific program structure:

“Dealing with disruptive behaviour students without EA help. When a student is dropped from the behaviour district program because parents won’t follow recommendations given from the team and the student is returned to the classroom with no additional help because student does not come with any funds.”

It seems that levels of support to deal with behaviour vary, from considerable to minimal, and there is a range of people and roles who do or might offer such support. When there was some element of support, it seemed that more respondents stated that they were better able to cope with the behaviour, and reduce their stress. Conversely, where one or more people in administrative, parent, or education assistant roles were perceived as unsupportive, teacher stress appeared to be higher. In some cases, relationships with school administrators and district staff were strained and increased teacher stress.

- **For some respondents, relationships with parents are strained and are a source of teacher stress**

The issue of what some respondents see as the lack of parental support is not directed at the majority of parents, but at a minority whose communications or actions increase teacher stress:

“Parents. A few parents provide the most stress for the school as a whole. They often have unreasonable expectations, poor parenting skill, financial pressure. The few bring their own personal/social problems into the school, expecting staff to fix them. Negative letters to the Board, the media, on Facebook. The toxicity of these few can infect an entire staff.”

“Contact with parents. We have email and voice mail. Parents expect an immediate response, but I am teaching. I have very little time to read and respond via email in the day. I am not comfortable with phoning parents with other kids in my room (I don’t want to talk about a student while other students are in the room). Lots of parents think that I can fix the problem they have with their kid. They have had a relationship for 15 years, I met the kid only 6 months ago; so what can I do?”

It appears that part of the stress as it relates to communication or contact with parents is linked to work intensification, with parent contact arguably more frequent, and in some situations more problematic, than may have been the case when communication systems were fewer. For elementary teachers, contact with parents involves communicating with 20–30 parents; for secondary teachers, the number is potentially many more. Parents, however, have contact with far fewer teachers than teachers have with parents. In addition, as technology has become more pervasive, with access to cell phones, e-mail, and social networking, the frequency of parents initiating contact or publicly airing their concerns about teachers may have increased, as some respondents indicated, and may be a stress factor.

- **Inadequate time for preparation and marking identified as a stress factor**

“When teaching English 10 and 12 and Socials 10 my first year, I found the lack of prep time most stressful as creating good units and working took a lot of time working at home.”

“The prep time. 90 minutes a week in two 45-minute blocks or three 30-minute blocks is so far from adequate for primary. By the time you take your kids to the other teacher and then have to return for them, the time passes quickly. I have a Monday and Friday prep and miss many, which are not made up.”

“There is no time to reflect, refine, or rest. Little time for students, little time for prep, and little time for me makes for a very poor job (for all involved).”

These comments reflect issues from primary through to secondary. When prep time occurs, it appears to be limited, fragmented, and easily eroded.

For many respondents, the lack of time for preparation conveyed the sense of always trying to fit in multiple and competing demands so that the core elements of preparing for, delivery, and assessment of learning seems difficult to manage:

“The most stressful part of teaching is all the prep required to teach thorough lessons every day. There are not enough hours in the day (especially prep time) to do my job the best way I could.”

Some respondents are differentiating instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners, yet they struggle to find adequate time for the additional preparation required in order to differentiate:

“There is no time for meaningful collaboration and prep for differentiated instruction in order to meet the growing demands and needs of our students.”

The lack of preparation time could be a factor which may limit some teachers’ willingness to attempt differentiation. With significant cutbacks in specialist support teachers for inclusion since 2002, the demands on classroom teachers have increased in terms of meeting diverse needs. Differentiation and Universal Design for Learning encourage classroom teacher design of lessons which incorporate principles where units are designed to accommodate a wide range of learning styles. Yet, for many teachers, this may involve—at least initially—an increase in prep time as they access and use a range of approaches.

- **Reporting causes a periodic increase in stress**

For most respondents who articulated reporting processes and periods as stressful, it was the intense and periodic nature of reporting which added stress to the school year, with intense bursts of time. Some respondents described 20–30 hours spent on preparing report cards<sup>5</sup>.

For some teachers with young families, there were difficulties managing the work required at reporting times and done largely at home, together with the necessities of looking after their own children. Two such respondents said that it was stressful:

“...to complete report cards without extra prep time. Having small children at home makes it difficult to work on report cards during after-school hours.”

“Report cards, no matter what type, because of time to prepare them, are time away from class prep and cost to family life.”

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<sup>5</sup> See [Chapter 3, Workload issues for BC teachers](#)

For some, the mandatory use of BCeSIS added stress to reporting:

“My report cards take four times longer than when I did report cards using report writer.”

“BCeSIS—time, crashing, not always easy to log in. Impersonal report card comments to personalize, it takes way too long!”

Limited computer access in schools also causes stress for many teachers. For many, completing report cards at school becomes problematic when there is minimal access to computers:

“Right now I teach out of four different classrooms and none of these has a working computer. I do not have my own classroom. I do not have a computer to use for prep and report cards unless I line up to use one of the two computers available in staff workroom.”

## **Stress in teaching and society: Final thoughts**

Stress in teaching appears to be inevitable, because teaching has become an increasingly complex job in which work has been intensified over time. Stress is also experienced because teaching involves relating to and interacting with students, other teachers, school administrators, support staff, and parents. It may be useful to separate the two areas—work intensification, and human interactions and relationships—in terms of considering approaches for improving teachers’ work lives.

Work intensification can be addressed both individually and systemically. Individual teachers may address stress factors to some extent by choosing wellness and lifestyle options that minimize stress. They may also choose to work within limits that are professional yet which make it possible to maintain health and minimize stress. However, whatever the individual teacher does, the major stress factors are systemic and require systemic attention and solutions.

Education systems can reduce intensification by reducing the mass of directives and expectations that seem to emerge each year. For example, the recent requirement for schools to provide daily physical activity may appear innocuous, but it reflects the trend to keep demanding that something more be done while nothing is taken away. An inquest jury in BC (2009) recommended that schools address domestic violence issues<sup>6</sup>—a worthy goal, but one more task for teachers if such a program is introduced. Increased accountability demands also intensify work; one example is the excessive paperwork required to demonstrate accountability in Special Education. Foundation Skills Assessments and school league tables reflect other forms of accountability that add to stress, especially in those schools identified as less successful, usually schools in low socio-economic areas facing multiple challenges. Governments emphasize accountability, yet fail to recognize the costs and impacts of this emphasis, often negative, on those who work in schools. They add programs and initiatives, yet rarely fund them adequately or consider how to support the teachers who are directed to implement the programs. Government, therefore, through its systemic actions, can increase or reduce stress. The evidence to date suggests that the BC government’s systemic actions increase rather than reduce stress in the BC public education system.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.vancouver.sun.com/life/inquest+recommends+domestic+violence+unit+improved+policing+stricter+bail/2363018/story.html>

Addressing the complexity of stress developing in a context of human interactions is more difficult. The progression in this area may involve consideration of building more caring and inclusive communities in addition to addressing specific issues of workload. Yet communities are influenced and shaped by both those who inhabit them and as well as by those who influence them from the outside. Such influences include school districts, the Ministry of Education, and government. Thus, in reshaping communities of schools, multiple influences need to be considered if less stressful communities are to evolve.

As reported elsewhere<sup>7</sup>, the costs of teacher stress to individuals and society are huge, and require systemic attention. While teacher unions may address some aspects of the impact of stress on teachers through bargaining, rehabilitation, and other programs, little may change until government, employers, and unions reach some consensus on the problems of and solutions to stress.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research\\_reports/2009WLC01.pdf](http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2009WLC01.pdf)  
[http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research\\_reports/2008WLC03.pdf](http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2008WLC03.pdf)