

# Teaching the Way We Aspire to Teach: Now and in the Future



Teachers' vision for teaching and learning in  
Canada's public schools

July 2012

**Teaching the Way We Aspire to Teach: Now and in the Future**

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***Enseigner selon nos aspirations – Aujourd'hui et demain***

*Vision des enseignantes et enseignants à l'égard de l'enseignement et de l'apprentissage dans les écoles publiques du Canada*

**Juillet 2012**

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Part of this document has been translated into French by the Canadian Education Association and part by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, which may give rise to differences in style and terminology.

# Introduction



## The Challenge

Most teachers enter the profession with strong ideals regarding the work they are about to undertake, and the impact this work will have on the students they teach. A good number of those who apply to faculties of education will report that teaching is something they have dreamed of doing since they were, themselves, young children. Others will tell stories of teachers encountered throughout their own schooling – teachers who, through effective teaching strategies, personal encouragement and modeling, influenced their decision to pursue a teaching career. Conversations with teacher candidates entering their first years of professional life are, in many cases, full of hope, passion and the expectation that, through their work as teachers, they will be able to inspire, excite, and make a similar impact on the lives of the young people with whom they work.

Conversations with teachers who have spent some time in the profession often reflect a tempering of the high ideals with which they began their careers. While they are still hopeful about the work they are doing, there is a sense from many teachers that factors beyond their immediate control prevent them from fully realizing their original vision of what their professional life was going to be like. In short, there is often a noticeable difference between the teacher they aspire to be and the teacher that they feel they are required to be.

## The Research Project and Process

*Teaching the Way We Aspire to Teach – Now and in the Future* is a collaborative research project between the Canadian Education Association (CEA) and the Canadian Teachers' Federation (CTF). The project grew out of a shared interest in exploring with teachers their experiences and visions of teaching the way in which they aspire – that is, teaching in a way that resonates with their beliefs about teaching and learning. We wanted to find out:

- Do teachers experience a difference between teaching the way in which they aspire and the way they are required to teach? If so, why?
- What do teachers see as the elements or conditions that contribute to them being able to teach the way they aspire to teach?
- What are the implications for creating learning environments where those conditions are present on a consistent and systemic basis?

In concert with provincial/territorial teachers' organizations, CEA held 12 focus groups with teachers across Canada in order to understand what aspirational teaching would look like and the changes needed to make it a reality. About 200 teachers participated in the focus groups that were held from June to December 2011. The focus groups were based on an *Appreciative Inquiry* model of facilitation to ensure that the dialogue was grounded in stories of success and to frame the conversation around change in a positive and hopeful way.

To complement the focus group process and to reach a broader audience, the CTF distributed an online survey that was completed by over 4,700 teachers in May 2012. The development of the survey questions was informed by the preliminary findings of the focus groups. This report presents and discusses the findings from both the focus groups and the survey, including quotes from teachers themselves. The report begins with the survey results to provide a 'big picture' perspective on teachers' aspirations and related questions. The discussion of the themes emerging from the focus groups follows, offering greater detail and depth regarding what teachers see as aspirational teaching. The report concludes with a summary of the major findings and implications for future research work.

## Context and Rationale for Exploring Teachers' Aspirations

Recent meta-analyses of research on what makes a difference in student learning identify teaching effectiveness as the educational factor that has the largest impact, in terms of effect size, on student outcomes (See, for example, Hattie, 2009)<sup>1</sup>. Yet teaching takes place in policy and organizational contexts over which the teacher has little control, such as provincial curricula and assessment policies, provincial and local programs, accountability regimes, pre-service and in-service education, and the diversity among students who make up today's classrooms and communities. The context in which teaching occurs is further compounded by a lack of professional agreement on what effective teaching is and the conditions under which it comes about.

### CEA Focus on Engaging Teaching

In 2009, a CEA Symposium on *Engaged Learning, Engaged Teaching* explored the close connections and reciprocal relationships that exist between the teaching and learning processes. CEA's *What Did You Do in School Today?* initiative has been very effective in raising the voices of students across the country and, in particular, in focusing attention on *intellectual engagement* as a critical and often-overlooked dimension of student learning and engagement.<sup>1</sup> CEA decided to focus on the *teaching* side of the relationship as well in order to: contribute to the research base on engaging teaching and learning; help improve the tenor and content of current conversations about teaching; and to understand the context for teaching in Canada from the perspective of teachers.

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<sup>1</sup>See <http://www.cea-ace.ca/programs-initiatives/wdydist> for more information.

CEA also held a series of facilitated meetings with educators, including teachers and members of teachers' organizations, to explore ideas for an 'engaging teaching' strategy. These 2010 meetings resulted in a focus on *teachers' aspirations* and provided the following rationale for the project:

- Creating a more positive climate for teaching and strengthening and supporting the important work that teachers do is critical as the foundation for student learning in school.
- Globalization and the needs of a knowledge society are making new demands on both students and teachers and requiring schools to become places of innovation, ingenuity, and creativity.
- Teaching is an intellectual job that requires teachers to receive support and recognition as both professionals and learners who require a safe space to reflect on their own practice, both alone and with colleagues.

## CTF Work Group on Teaching Quality

*Teaching the Way We Aspire to Teach – Now and in the Future* also complements the work of the CTF Work Group on Teaching Quality that resulted in a national research project conducted in collaboration with CTF's member organizations. The Work Group identified the need for a national research project that would give voice to teacher perspectives on teaching and learning in Canada's public schools. Great significance was put on the need for teacher organizations to ensure that the teacher voice is heard in visioning for the future of education, as it is the profession that should be positioned as an authoritative voice on teaching and learning. This belief is grounded in the assumptions that:

- Teachers are the classroom experts. They are public leaders in student learning. As such it is critically important that K-12 educational decisions be informed by their professional knowledge and expertise.
- Increasingly, educational policy decisions are being informed by people with little or no background in public education, and without the input of teachers.

The intent of the project was to expose the voice of teachers concerning their perspectives on teaching and learning in Canada's public schools, drawing on the substantial pool of experience, expertise, and knowledge they possess.

The 2011 report resulting from the project, *The Voice of Canadian Teachers on Teaching and Learning*<sup>ii</sup>, highlights how important teachers' ideals and aspirations are to their professional practice. For example, 90% of teachers entered the profession because they "enjoy working with children", with over 80% indicating that the following are very important: "making a difference in children's lives"; "helping develop and motivate children"; and "love of learning". Those who remain in the profession do so for similar reasons.

# What Teachers Told Us: Online Survey Results



In his 1945 book *Teacher in America*, Jacques Barzun<sup>iii</sup> wrote that “teaching is not a lost art, but the regard for it is a lost tradition. Hence tomorrow’s problem will not be to get teachers, but to recognize the good ones and not discourage them before they have done their stint”. While penned almost 70 years ago, the results of a Canadian Teachers’ Federation (CTF) online survey show that Barzun’s words are still relevant today.

Teachers were invited to participate in an online survey in May 2012 through a variety of methods including direct email and invitations on websites and newsletters. A total of 5,082 responses were received of which 367 self-identified as not being a teacher or school administrator. The remaining 4,715 responses are considered in this report. Due to the variety of delivery methods, the number of invitations cannot be tracked and a response rate cannot be calculated.

## Teaching the Way You Aspire to Teach

Teachers were asked how frequently they have the opportunity to teach the way they aspire to teach. While over 40% of the respondents indicated that they frequently have opportunities to teach the way they aspire to teach, nearly half (49%) indicated that they occasionally have these opportunities.

Teachers’ opportunity to teach the way that they aspire to teach appears to be proportional to their teaching experience. Approximately one-third of respondents with less than 5 years of teaching experience indicated that they had frequent opportunities compared to almost one-half of those with 25 years or more experience.

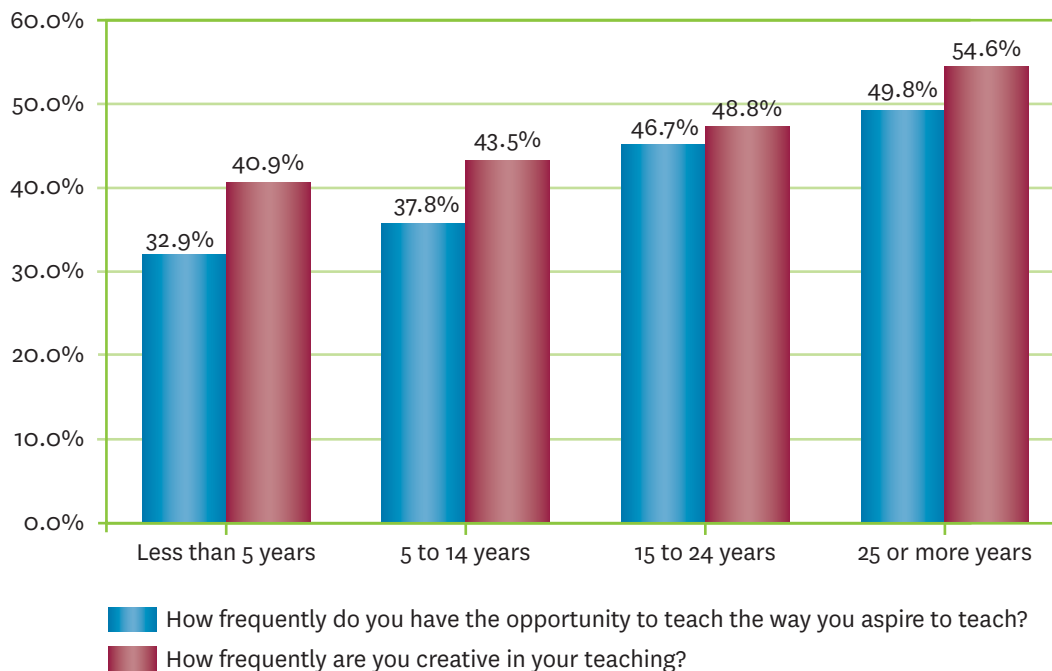
*I think that it is important to see teachers as learners and allow them the flexibility to try new things in the classroom, to take risks, make mistakes, reflect and adjust their practice accordingly.* – Teacher with less than 5 years of experience

*Je crois que les enseignantes et enseignants sont trop critiqués, trop évalués et qu'on devrait plutôt trouver et mettre en valeur leurs forces en les encourageant à risquer et à oser.*

– Enseignante avec moins de cinq années d'expérience

In a similar question, teachers were asked how often they have the opportunity to be creative in their teaching. Almost all of the respondents (94%) indicated that they, at least occasionally, have the opportunity to be creative in their teaching (46.5% frequently, 47.5% occasionally). Chart 1 illustrates the number of teachers, by level of experience, who indicated that they frequently have the opportunity to be creative in their teaching compared to those who responded that they frequently have the opportunity to teach the way they aspire to teach. Interestingly, almost an equal number of teachers indicated that they “occasionally” had opportunities to be creative and/or to teach the way they aspire to teach as those who indicated frequently. Perhaps teachers’ reluctance to indicate frequently is related to their access to supports for such teaching. Some of the reasons that may explain why many teachers feel they are unable to more fully realize their professional aspirations are addressed at the end of this section.

Chart 1: Respondents who answered “frequently” to the indicated questions by years of teaching experience

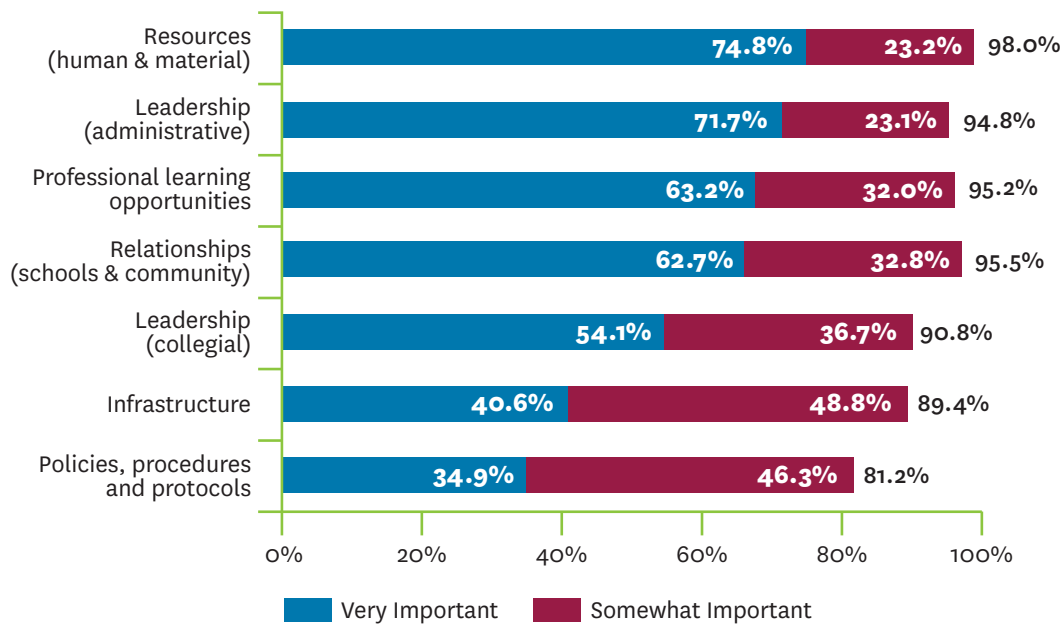


## Factors Supporting Aspirational and Creative Teaching

Respondents to the survey were asked to indicate the importance of various factors with respect to supporting them in teaching the way they aspire to teach. While virtually all respondents indicated that each of the factors was at least somewhat important, a majority of teachers indicated that 5 of the 7 factors were very important (Chart 2). Not surprisingly, almost three-quarters of the respondents stated that resources (human and material) are very important in supporting aspirational teaching. Over 70% of teachers indicated that administrative leadership was very important.



**Chart 2: The level of importance of the indicated factors in supporting teachers to teach the way they aspire to teach**



Somewhat interestingly, resources (human & material) was not the most important factor when teachers considered support for creative teaching. While, once again, all of the presented factors were deemed as important, more than 8 in 10 teachers strongly agreed that flexibility was important in supporting them as a creative teacher. Approximately two-thirds of teachers strongly agreed that factors including effective school leadership, resources (human & material) and collaboration with other teachers were important supports in creative teaching.

Teachers were not asked if they had ready access to these supports. The fact that only 46% of teachers indicated that they frequently had opportunities to teach the way they aspire to teach could be linked to the fact that there is a lack of resources and/or leadership. Further study is necessary to determine if a causal relationship exists given the importance of the supports and the reluctance for teachers to indicate that they frequently had opportunities to teach the way they aspire to teach.

## Personal Attributes

There may be certain personal attributes that could benefit a teacher in the classroom. American researchers, Decker and Rimm-Kaufman<sup>iv</sup> identified distinct differences in the personalities of pre-service teachers:

Perhaps the most notable finding is that pre-service teachers were higher on all five personality facets compared to a normative sample. All differences were large in magnitude. Our findings show that pre-service teachers were high in extraversion, openness, and agreeableness, all characteristics likely to be beneficial for people entering into a profession requiring flexibility, ability to get along with others, and high levels of social interaction, showing consistency with desirable qualities in teacher preparation.

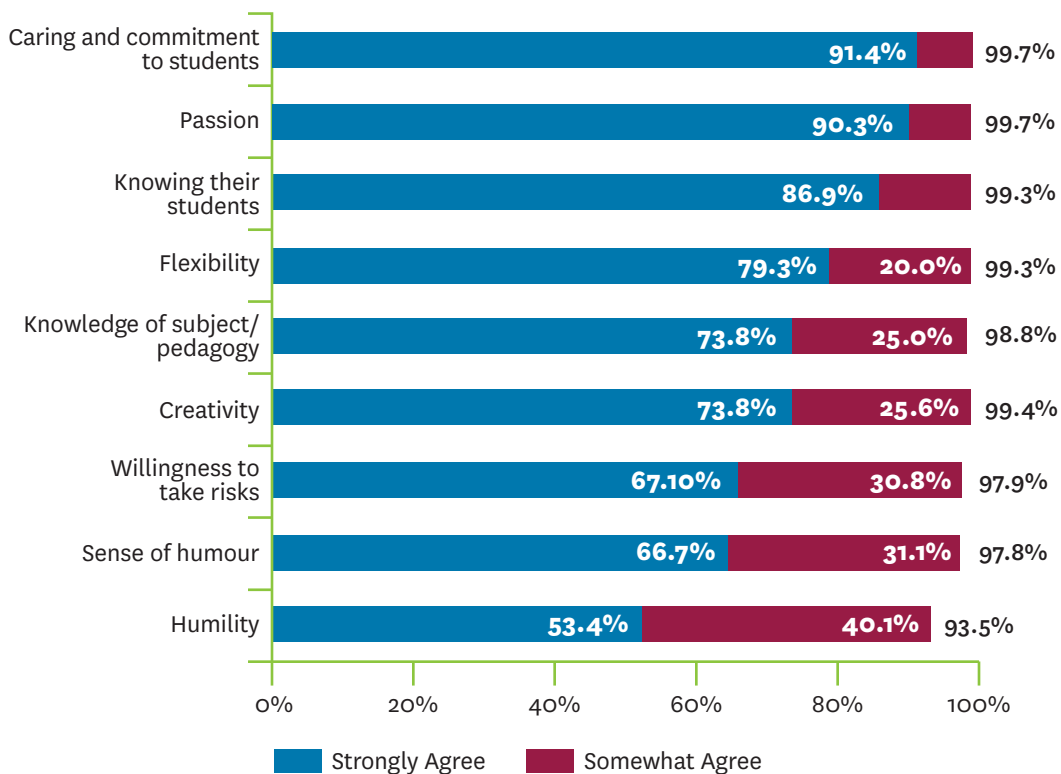
Decker and Rimm-Kaufmann conclude that different personal attributes and beliefs lead to a need for varied approaches to pre-service training. In our survey, we asked teachers to identify the extent to which they agree that certain personal attributes of teachers would help them in teaching the way that they aspire to teach and if they agreed that faculties of education should consider personal attributes when screening applicants. Of note here is that this question, as opposed to those previously discussed, asked respondents to consider teachers in general rather than their own personal attributes.

Chart 3 illustrates the level of agreement to the various personal attributes that were presented to respondents. Almost all teachers believed that each of the personal attributes helps teachers in teaching the way they aspire to teach. More than 85% of teachers strongly agreed that caring and commitment to students, passion and knowing their students are personal attributes that promote aspirational teaching. As these teacher respondents told us:

*Passion for teaching kids is key, and forming relationships with them paramount!*

*Enseigner, c'est une histoire de coeur, il faut être passionné pour passionner les jeunes!*

**Chart 3: The extent to which teachers agree that the identified personal attributes help in aspirational teaching**



While there was general agreement regarding the identified personal attributes, there were some significant demographic differences among those who strongly agreed that the identified attributes helped teachers to teach the way they aspire to teach.

- Approximately 9 in 10 elementary teachers strongly agreed that knowing their students was helpful as opposed to 8 in 10 of secondary teachers.
- Women teachers were more likely to strongly agree with attributes such as passion (F-91.9%, M-85.3%), flexibility (F-81.9%, M-71.3%), caring and commitment to students (F-93.7%, M-84.2%) and knowing their students (F-89.8%, M-77.5%).
- More experienced teachers strongly agreed that the personal attribute of willingness to take risks was important for aspirational teaching ranging from 60.4% for those teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience to 70.3% of those with 25 or more years of teaching.
- More experienced teachers were more likely to strongly agree that knowledge of subject/pedagogy was an important factor in aspirational teaching than beginning teachers ranging from 66.1% for teachers with less than 5 years of experience to 79.6% for those with 25 or more years.

The majority of respondents agreed when asked whether faculties of education should consider personal attributes of applicants through the use of personal interviews or surveys. While there was general agreement regarding the consideration of these attributes (58.0% strongly agree and 34.7% somewhat agree), it should be noted that a significantly higher share of respondents disagreed that these attributes should be screened than disagreed that they were valuable.

## Supporting Aspirational Teaching

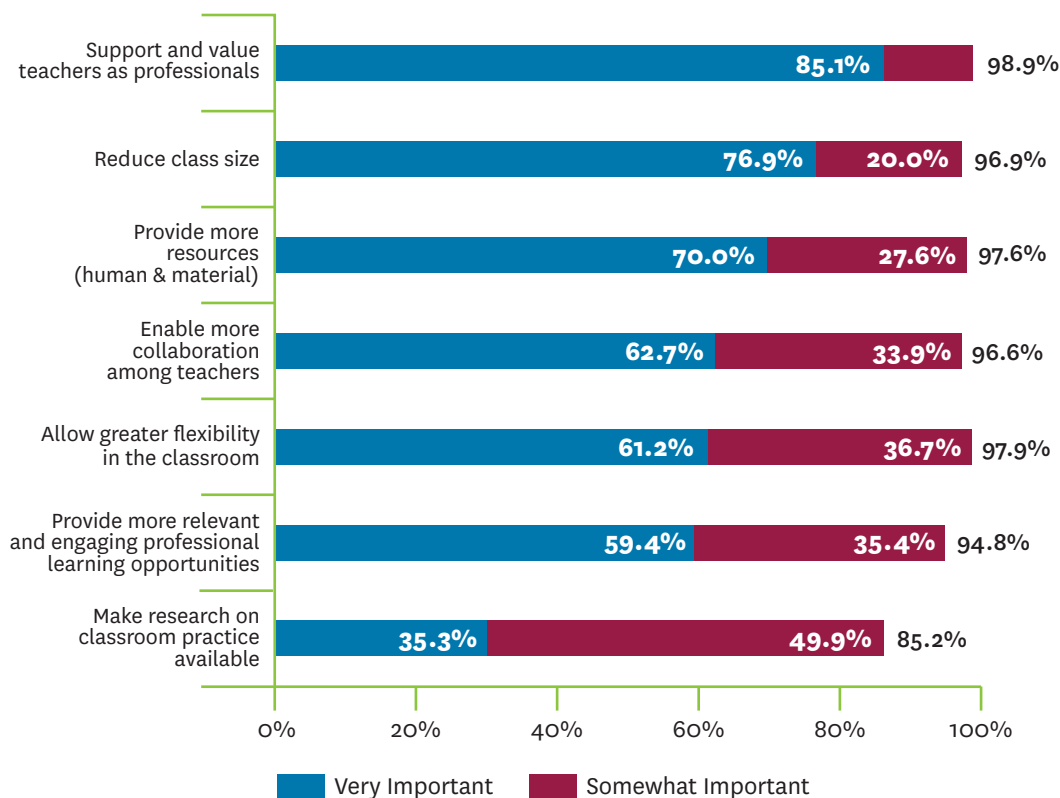
Teachers were also asked to rate the importance of various actions that school boards and/or provincial and territorial governments could put in place to promote aspirational teaching. A majority of teachers stated that all but one of the actions was very important, ranging from providing more relevant and engaging professional learning opportunities (59.4%) to supporting and valuing teachers as professionals (85.1%). Only 35.3% of teachers indicated that making research on classroom practice available was very important in promoting aspirational teaching. Chart 4 illustrates the level of agreement as to the importance of the actions of school boards and/or provincial/territorial governments in supporting teachers to teach the way they aspire to teach.

It is interesting to note that while teachers believe strongly that small class sizes – and one might argue proper resources to support inclusion – are necessary to promote aspirational teaching, teachers identified receiving support and value as professionals as the most important action that could be taken by school boards and/or provincial/territorial governments in promoting aspirational teaching. Teacher respondents made these observations:

*The piece that is frustrating as a teacher is the lack of recognition by the public and by school division administration, even government, that teachers are highly educated professionals who possess the skills to determine what is best for their students. The corporate model of education being pushed on teachers is killing their passion and creativity. Why is this significant? Because passion and creativity are the cornerstones of responsive teaching. Advocacy for teachers' professional autonomy is equivalent to advocacy for students; passionate, creative, engaged teachers are what is best for students.*

*Il serait bien si le ministère de l'éducation traitait les enseignants comme des professionnels respectables et écoutait ce que nous leur disons avec notre expérience en salle de classe .... Quand les enseignants se sentent respectés, c'est toute la communauté qui y gagne.*

**Chart 4: The importance of actions of school boards and/or provincial/territorial governments in supporting teachers to teach the way they aspire to teach**



Lastly, teachers were asked to respond to an open-ended question regarding what they believe is important in informing the discussion of teachers' instructional aspirations. Their responses shed some light on why nearly half of teacher respondents told us they only occasionally have opportunities to teach as they aspire to teach (and 9% indicated that they rarely or never have the opportunity to do so), and why 48% of teachers indicated that they are only occasionally able to be creative in their teaching (with 6% of teachers indicating rarely or never).

For example, lack of time was a frequently cited barrier to teachers being able to realize their instructional aspirations – time to plan, to prepare lessons, to collaborate, and to simply teach.

***Getting the TIME to collaborate and share ideas with others is crucial.***

*La clé à tout ceci est le temps. Il faut avoir du temps pour consulter les nouvelles ressources qui arrivent du ministère et d'autres sources. Il faut aussi du temps pour faire des recherches en Internet afin de découvrir des ressources, des idées, etc. Il faut le temps pour concevoir ou recueillir le matériel requis pour des activités créatives. Il faut aussi du temps pour consulter ses collègues. En revenant de formations ou d'ateliers, il faut du temps afin de mettre en pratique ce qu'on vient d'apprendre.*

As noted, reducing class sizes and providing more supports to meet diverse student needs were identified as priorities as this would allow teachers to provide more one-on-one time with their students.

*As we work with more high needs students, class size has become a major challenge to getting to know students, and how to help them learn.*

*Réduire le nombre d'élèves par classe et offrir plus de ressources humaines pour aider à gérer les élèves en difficulté (comportementales et académiques) aideraient grandement les enseignants(es) à enseigner.*

Teachers want professional development that is relevant to their needs and they also want time to be able to put into practice what they have learned.

*I think that while there are many professional learning opportunities available, not many are necessarily relevant to classroom practice/resources. Professional learning opportunities should be more relevant.*

*Je sens que l'apprentissage professionnel pertinent stimule la créativité dans l'enseignement ainsi que les échanges entre enseignants.*

Not surprisingly, opportunities for collaboration are highly valued among teachers as a means of sharing their accumulated knowledge and experience.

*Collaboration among professionals empowers teaching.*

*La collaboration doit être facilitée par l'administration avec la flexibilité dans l'horaire.*

Effective enlightened leadership at the school and district level is seen as key to supporting teachers' instructional aspirations.

*School leadership, to me, is the most important aspect of teacher's instructional aspirations. In order to be creative and have the flexibility to be creative, we need school leadership that supports teachers. In order to do this, making sure ALL principals are qualified to be school leaders should be top priority.*

*Leadership pédagogique au niveau des écoles.*

The shortage of human, material, and other educational resources can impede teacher aspirations to foster learning for all students.

*I often feel as though, in order to be as creative and effective in my teaching as I aspire to be, I must go far beyond the time and resources made available to me during the school day. I regularly spend evenings and weekends planning, preparing, assessing, and purchasing materials for lessons that are student-driven, interesting and engaging for my class.*

*Les attentes sont très élevées envers les enseignants. On nous demande de soulever des montagnes avec peu de moyens. Les ressources humaines telles les assistantes en éducation et les enseignantes ressources, les travailleurs sociaux, les psychologues scolaires, les mentors en gestion de comportement sont des ressources nécessaires pour toutes les écoles y compris les petites écoles et surtout pour arriver à répondre aux besoins de tous les élèves.*

The ongoing emphasis on large-scale testing and its negative influence on teaching and learning poses a serious impediment to teachers being able to teach the way they aspire to teach.

*Provincial restrictive expectations for student preparation for standardized tests is THE most limitative factor in my teaching the way I aspire to teach. Students have no opportunities to inquire and explore topics of their own inspiration. There is no TIME anymore, none. Test scores are the driving force in education in my province, in my board, in my school and, with a guilty conscience, partially in my classroom.*

*Ce qui m'empêche le plus d'être créative en salle de classe en ce moment sont les exigences et la préparation pour les évaluations du Ministère (nous en avons 3 à mon niveau). Nous devons passer beaucoup de temps à préparer les élèves pour ces évaluations et nous devons enseigner les choses de "la façon" que c'est voulu sur le test de fin d'année.*

Access to current technological resources as well as training to support teachers in effectively and creatively integrating new technologies into their daily practice emerged as another theme.

*I would love to be able to use technology more in my classroom. I am in a portable and one of a number of teachers in my school who do not yet have a SmartBoard. Having students come to my class following a teacher with a SmartBoard has been a challenge, as the teachers were able to do so many more engaging activities and the students had far more opportunities to learn using the technology.*

*Les connaissances dans la matière enseignée et les nouvelles tendances pédagogiques jumelées avec les nouveaux outils technologiques sont des éléments cruciaux qui permettent de former un apprenant du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle. Présentement, il y a trop de contraintes pour réellement faire ceci adéquatement.*

Teachers also expressed that they can feel overwhelmed with the growing number of curriculum expectations they are required to meet, and how this can crowd out creativity and innovation in the classroom.

*I feel that there are far too many curriculum expectations to be met in the Ministry documents and too much overlap of expectations from one grade level to the next. This has taken away opportunities to be flexible and creative in the classroom because there is too much to cover in too little time.*

*Réduire le montant d'initiatives ministérielles qui portent souvent à confusion et qui enlèvent ou réduisent la souplesse de l'enseignement. On devrait reconnaître que de toutes les personnes impliqués dans l'enseignement de l'élève, à part le parent, l'enseignant reconnaît les besoins particuliers et sait adapter son approche pédagogique afin de mieux rejoindre l'élève en question. La fatigue et la frustration de ne pas enseigner ce qui nous passionne ... est démotivant.*

Teachers firmly believe that K-12 educational decisions should be informed by their professional knowledge and expertise as reflected in these comments.

*Teachers should have more say in the development of policies that they are expected to implement in the classroom! Right now too many policies and initiatives are being developed by ideologically driven gurus and consultants who have little or negligible classroom experience. And the so-called research that supposedly informs much "expert" thinking is less than impartial – it is often highly politicized. The daily working experience of practicing teachers seems to count for little or nothing.*

*La valorisation du personnel est primordial pour créer une ambiance dans lequel les élèves et les enseignants sont heureux et demeurent passionnés par ce qu'ils font. Il est aussi essentiel que les enseignants soient consultés et écoutés quand on veut faire des changements et des améliorations à notre système d'éducation. Nous avons à coeur la réussite de nos élèves et nous nous faisons dire trop souvent les démarches qu'on doit suivre même s'ils ne produisent pas de bons résultats.*

In reflecting on the aspirations teachers have for their professional practice, these are just a few of the many interesting and insightful observations that teachers shared with us.

*Teachers should be encouraged to be reflective. Why did you make that decision? How did that help this particular student? How do I let this student know I value him/her as a person and that the world is a better place because he/she is in it? How can I show a student that learning is important for its own sake? How do I manage a student's behaviour and still let them know I appreciate their exuberance for life or the trauma they have experienced? Another thing that is extremely important to me and one that I've never been questioned about either during my admittance to a Faculty of Education or during a job interview is how I feel about reading – favourite books, authors, genres.*

*L'enseignement est devenu une bureaucratie ... je veux simplement transmettre ma passion, mon intérêt, mes connaissances à mes élèves. De quoi se rappelle-t-on de nos enseignants au secondaire? Leur façon de raconter des histoires qui nous touchaient. Leurs anecdotes qui assuraient notre compréhension. Leur matière qui nous captivait et nous stimulait à choisir une profession. Assez avec les grilles, les critères d'évaluation, les niveaux ... je veux simplement aider mes élèves à devenir des personnes dont une communauté serait fière.*

# What Teachers Told Us: The Focus Groups



## Teachers' Participation in the Focus Groups

From June to December 2011, CEA held 12 focus groups with teachers in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Yukon, Manitoba, Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec. In total, about 200 teachers participated in the focus group process that was facilitated in either English or French. About a quarter of the focus groups were conducted in French.<sup>2</sup>

Provincial/territorial and local teachers' organizations played a major role in the organization and the recruitment of participants. As much as possible, the organizers attempted to ensure a mix of teachers for each focus group, (e.g. early and later career, elementary and secondary school, geographic, and gender mix). Teachers were informed that they were participating as individuals representing their own views, and not necessarily those of their teacher organizations or their schools or school districts.

## About the Appreciative Inquiry Facilitation Process

The focus group process was based on an Appreciative Inquiry model of facilitation. While many approaches to change and improvement begin by looking for and finding problems and deficits that prevent a system or organization from moving forward, the Appreciative Inquiry perspective is committed to framing facilitated conversations around change in a positive and hopeful way.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The focus group facilitators were Ron Canuel (in French), the CEO of CEA, and Stephen Hurley (in English), a teacher, educational consultant, and frequent contributor to CEA. Hurley also developed the facilitation guide.

<sup>3</sup><http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu> for more information.



The process is always grounded in stories of success – times when participants feel that *they got it right!* As these stories are told and become part of a broader collective narrative, common themes and elements of professional success are identified, considered, and used to ground a vision of how these moments of success can become more frequent in teachers’ professional lives.

The Appreciative Inquiry method of facilitation always begins by engaging participants in actively seeking and telling personal stories that reflect the heart of the topic being investigated, and always ends with the imagining and design of processes and environments that will foster attention to the common themes and elements identified. In this way, Appreciative Inquiry is an effective way to engage the hearts and minds of the group around a common purpose and a common, worthwhile goal.

The focus group process consisted of the following steps:

- In paired interviews, focus group participants were asked to remember a specific time over the past couple of years when they felt that they were at their best, a time when everything seemed to click, and both they and their students felt they were “in the zone”.
- In small groups, participants shared the high points of their partner’s stories of “Discovering the Vision”.
- After hearing all the story highlights, participants identified themes and conditions related to aspirational teaching.
- Focus group participants were then asked to consider the surrounding context in which their stories took place and then imagine the elements that had to be in place if they were going to teach consistently the way they aspired to teach. Specifically, they were challenged to imagine that they had fallen into a deep sleep and awakened in the year 2020. They were then asked to imagine the scenario that would best energize and excite them – their ideal teaching environment.

## Elements of an Ideal Teaching Environment

To focus the discussion, teachers were presented with 6 elements seen to be critical to realizing teachers’ aspirations: personal attributes; leadership; relationships; resources; policies, procedures and protocols; and infrastructure. These were chosen to reflect the complexity of the teaching-learning dynamic and environment. They include qualities that teachers bring to the job, those they negotiate with others, and external factors that teachers have to work with or within.

In imagining their ‘ideal’ teaching environments, teachers made it clear they were not starting from a blank slate. In fact, many of the teachers had experienced teaching the way they aspired to teach, at least occasionally, and acknowledged that these elements were sometimes already present in their teaching environments, not only in an idealized world. However, the Appreciative Inquiry approach used with the focus groups asked participants to picture a situation where they were able to teach the way that they aspired to teach *on a consistent basis*, not just occasionally.

Table 1 shows what teachers told us were the most important aspects of each of the 6 elements.

**Table 1: Most important contributors to aspirational teaching, according to teacher participants**

<b>Personal Attributes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Passion for teaching, for learning, and for students</li> <li>• Caring and commitment to students</li> <li>• Creativity, flexibility, and willingness to take risks</li> <li>• Knowledge and drive for self-improvement</li> <li>• Energy, enthusiasm, and engagement</li> <li>• Trust, collaboration, and connectedness</li> </ul>
<b>Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive and trusting</li> <li>• Grounded in the classroom and involved with students</li> <li>• Commitment to shared leadership, equitable and fair</li> <li>• Visionary instructional leadership</li> <li>• Accessible, approachable, and available</li> </ul>
<b>Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual trust, respect, and support</li> <li>• Recognition and appreciation of teacher as professional</li> <li>• Collegial, collaborative, and interactive</li> <li>• Strong community connections</li> <li>• Knowledge and understanding of students</li> </ul>
<b>Resources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A variety of material, intellectual and human resources that include:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Flexible physical space</li> <li>◦ Community as resource</li> <li>◦ Up-to-date technology</li> <li>◦ Time</li> <li>◦ Students as resources</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Policies, Procedures and Protocols</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should exist to support teaching and learning</li> <li>• Flexible, yet consistent</li> <li>• Minimal, fairly simple, and sensible</li> <li>• More progressive and positive assessment policies</li> <li>• Reducing class size policies</li> </ul>
<b>Infrastructure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible and adaptable physical space</li> <li>• Flexible scheduling</li> <li>• Adequately funded and resourced</li> <li>• Enables greater connections to the community</li> <li>• Adequate technology</li> </ul>

Not surprisingly, many of the points that teachers considered most important – such as trust, respect, flexibility, and the need for support – were raised not just once, but cut across a number of the elements. The following section highlights some of the overarching themes that emerged from both participant reflections on the individual dimensions as well as their final vision statements.

## Major Themes Emerging from the Focus Groups

It should be noted that this discussion draws on both the conversations that took place in the focus group sessions and the written responses that teachers submitted at the end of the sessions.

### Students are the central focus in the work that teachers do

Teachers communicated a resounding message that the majority of the energy, resources, and practices that are part of schools need to be *directed to nurturing student learning*. Ensuring success for all students was a top-level priority when imagining the type of work in which teachers desired to be engaged. Initiatives, rules and policies that drew energy and resources away from this focus were seen as being detrimental and not in keeping with the teaching to which they aspire.

Teachers are faced with classrooms that are far from homogeneous; individual differences and a unique set of needs that students bring to the learning environment represent a major challenge for their work. In the teaching to which they aspire, teachers did not express a desire to eliminate this challenge, but recognized the importance of sufficient resources. Many expressed the belief that addressing these differences and meeting the needs of every student is integral to their vision and purpose as a teacher.

Beyond merely *recognizing* and *addressing* the needs of students, there was significant support for the idea of intentionally leveraging student differences as powerful resources that could be used to enhance and strengthen the learning for all. The multiplicity of perspectives and strengths that are present in today's classrooms offer a unique opportunity for critical and innovative approaches to teaching.

Many teachers also stressed that they need to know and understand their students as individuals with lives outside the classroom. To teach the way they aspire to teach, teachers need to understand students' worldviews, know "the personal story of every student", and respect all students' life stories.

*In the teaching to which I aspire, I am empowered to get to know my students, get to know their strengths, needs, and interests and to tailor my teaching to their needs. The administration supports me and provides that which I need and helps in supporting student needs. I assess students' progress and ensure that every child could be and feel successful by learning at their own level.*

*C'est certain qu'il n'y a pas de monde parfait, mais un élève et une enseignante heureux ne peuvent qu'aboutir à une réussite et c'est prouvé. Si un élève est heureux à l'école, il va apprendre parce qu'on lui apprend à se passionner pour son apprentissage.*

### Teachers have a strong sense of the personal attributes that they bring to their work

Passion, creativity, dedication, and a deep sense of compassion for their students are hallmarks of the quality teacher. These were expressed very strongly in the vision statements of the participants.

Teachers also stressed the importance of professional knowledge and the drive to improve themselves through lifelong learning, seeking intellectual stimulation, curiosity and a research orientation. Some teachers cautioned against taking themselves too seriously, stressing that humility, authenticity and a sense of humour are critical personal attributes. In a number of the focus group conversations, personal attributes generated the most discussion.

*Respect for all; acceptance of differences. The golden rule: If I don't or won't, how is it ok to expect others to?*

*Je veux diriger l'apprentissage selon les forces, intérêts, et aspirations de chaque élève.*

## **Trusting and mutually supportive relationships are key dimensions of the teaching/learning dynamic**

The value and power of relationships, in their many forms and dimensions, emerged as an important part of the dynamic within the classroom, throughout the school and into the community. At the centre of this dynamic was the relationship that teachers were able to nurture with students. In the teaching to which they aspired, participants dreamed of being able to develop learning tasks and projects that went beyond student engagement and actually encouraged students' strengths and interests to emerge and be developed.

Teachers spoke passionately about the need to have the time and space to get to know their students. This was seen as an essential part of creating a respectful and supportive classroom, seen by many as being a foundational part of the teaching to which they aspired.

A supportive and trusting relationship with the administration was also identified as being essential. Participants imagined a working environment where school and district-level administrators led from a shared vision of teaching excellence focused on student development and success. Included in this vision was an image of principals and vice principals who were able to be both visible *and* actively participating in the teaching and learning life of the school.

The desire to build collaborative relationships with colleagues was one of the strongest dimensions. Teachers envisioned policies and processes that would enable the development of more opportunities for working together in ways that current school structures do not always allow or promote. Instead of being bound by traditional disciplines and grade levels, many expressed the desire to collaborate on cross-grade, interdisciplinary units, tasks, and projects that connected both teachers and students in new and diverse ways. Participants were enthusiastic in their support of challenging approaches to schooling that have supported traditional images of teachers working in isolation. Shared planning times, flexible scheduling, and alternative approaches to designing curriculum were just some of the suggestions offered but, at the heart of the discussion was the desire to be able to learn, plan, and work more closely with colleagues.

*When people work together, they bring out the best in one another at all levels of education. With positive relationships in which people are celebrated and personal growth possible, you would see students who were engaged. How about many adults in one classroom or no grade levels and summative assessment or time to talk to colleagues?*

*I collaborate with other adults who believe in the potential of ALL children to learn. We work together in a respectful, supportive, and empowering environment and do whatever is necessary to support optimal learning for all. My students and colleagues would know I care about them.*

*Le prof est un facilitateur qui engage la discussion. La technologie est présente, les notes sont envoyées électroniquement à chaque élève. Les ressources pour démontrer et manipuler sont nombreuses.*

## **Being valued and recognized as professionals is a key foundation for a positive teaching and learning environment**

The sense that parents, the public, and the administration trust teachers to know how to do their jobs effectively was seen as a key foundation for positive working relationships. In an ideal teaching and learning environment, teachers are, and are seen as, knowledgeable, experienced, and competent professionals, motivated by a keen desire to have all students succeed.

*My first comment... being valued by all! So that the economic, pedagogical, social and human benefits of our life experiences with students may be useful to everyone around us.*

*Administration that supports me in what I want to do, but also challenges me to do better. Administration that values what I do and offers appreciation for it.*

*Une école où le personnel (tout le personnel) est engagé dans la même vision et mission afin que les élèves soient engagés, créatifs, innovateurs, communicateurs et aient un pouvoir de décision afin d'avoir un impact sur leur apprentissage. Les élèves en sortent avec tous les outils nécessaires.*

Mutually supportive and respectful relationships with parents were an important condition in the type of teaching that was imagined. The idea of parents and educators working together for the ultimate benefit of the student was seen as essential. Not only did participants express the desire to be seen as trusted by parents for their knowledge as well as a commitment to their children, but they also recognized that parents represented valuable sources of insight about the students that they taught.

## **Visionary, responsive, and democratic leadership is needed to support teachers**

Although the idea of support was used frequently when discussing school leadership, the precise understanding of the idea was not the same for everyone. For some, support was defined by how present a principal was in the day-to-day running of the school; for others, support was seen as trusting that teachers knew what they were doing and to let them do it with minimal interference. These differences in understanding aside, there were some common dimensions relating to support that emerged across the various focus groups.

Many participants valued the vision of meeting the needs of all students but also recognized that attending to the differences among students required high levels of creativity and innovation. Leadership that shares and, indeed, supports risk-taking and adopting alternative approaches was seen as being very important in bringing this vision to life. In fact, some extended this idea to identify their administrator as being a leader who modelled the type of visionary thinking and practice to which they, themselves, aspired.

Connected with the idea of risk-taking, teachers identified the need to feel that their leaders would stand by them in the face of conflict and criticism. They admitted that, in teaching the way that they aspired to teach, they were likely to bump up against some questions and even disagreements around approaches and strategies. Knowing that they could count on the support of school and district leaders was important.

Participants also felt strongly that a visionary and supportive leader was committed to shared leadership among the staff, the school board, the school council, and the government. Some called it “leadership by consensus” – the belief in teamwork and allowing “the hidden talent of teachers to be elevated to leadership”. Being equitable and fair were seen as related values in a leader.

Support is also demonstrated in a shared commitment to ensuring that school procedures and policies are focused on enhancing, not hindering, the work that teachers set out to do. For many, the reduction, if not elimination, of responsibilities and processes that are not directly connected with the goals of promoting student success is one of the manifestations of supportive leadership.

*In the teaching to which I aspire, I am led by a visionary leader who respects the past but takes calculated risks for future advances. Protocols are sensible and efficient; not reactionary and random.*

*In the teaching to which I aspire, principals will be actively engaged in instructional leadership rather than spending the bulk of their time as building managers.*

*Je serais heureuse dans ma classe, dans mon école car ce que fais est valorisé et porte fruit. La réussite des élèves est plus importante que la note. Nous sommes tous heureux d’y être, d’y vivre.*

## **Schools exist within and not apart from the larger community**

Teachers recognized that the school is an important part of the community in which students live their lives. There was a keen desire to draw the circle wide enough to take advantage of what communities have to offer – to see the community both as a resource and a powerful place of learning.

On the one hand, structures and programs designed to draw parents and resources into the school are ways of recognizing the value of community participation and involvement. The acknowledgement that a great source of support, expertise, and experience exists outside the walls of the school is an important step; the real challenge lies in working consciously to draw it into the school so that it can have a positive impact on programs and student learning. There was a strong sense among participants that this is an effort worth making.

On the other hand, the outside community is seen as a rich context in which students are able to extend and expand their learning. In addition to excursions and field trips, the community can become a valuable place for on-site training and field-based learning placements.

The parent community was included as a key component to creating a bridge between the school and the surrounding community. A number of teachers expressed the view that schools should foster “an open door policy” and “an open dialogue with parents”.

*In the teaching to which I aspire, students and teachers are highly engaged in relevant learning experiences that stimulate and connect students with their community and their aspirations.*

*In the teaching to which I aspire, I provide students with a wide range of learning experiences and opportunities in and out of the classroom in an effort to allow them to find a place in society.*

*Je distingue 2 réussites, 2 moments où je suis dans ma zone : Réussite sur le plan social (individuellement ou collectivement) : estime de soi, esprit de groupe, coopération; Réussite sur le plan pédagogique : apprentissage et progrès scolaire.*

## **Flexibility is key when designing the policies and infrastructure that govern teachers’ work**

Teachers expressed a desire to find ways of working that allow them to respond to the needs of their students, while creating and nurturing a safe, respectful, and inclusive learning environment. In supporting the spirit of approaches such as *differentiated instruction* and *universal design for learning*, they strongly believe that the rules, procedures and processes that govern their day-to-day work need to be grounded in and focused on this same vision.

*Flexibility and consistency* are key dimensions when thinking about the procedures and policies that are in place. Teachers are looking for systems that support their own desire and need to adapt their teaching to the specific dynamic of a particular group of students, or the particular type of learning task that they are looking to implement.

*Less procedural-type “stuff” (i.e. announcements, bell, assemblies) to allow more time for the learning.*

*Less structured; more freedom of choice; less driven by hours necessary to obtain a certain number of credits; more about students’ choices, drive to succeed and master the material in a manner that is directed more by themselves. Flexibility of schedule. Why do all students have to begin at 8:15am and end at 3:00pm? Access to teachers with whom they connect.*

*Ce serait un environnement où le personnel, les élèves et les parents seraient moins stressés ou brusqués. Avoir un focus ou une vision plus à long terme; Avoir un enseignement (ou une vision) plus global.*

This need for a focus on students and the flexibility to respond extended to specific dimensions of teaching such as approaches to how students are assessed and evaluated. Both policy and practice related to assessment and evaluation need to be keyed to *individual* student growth. This includes reporting processes that provide parents, students and teachers with the information they are able to use to adapt learning approaches and strategies, as opposed to collecting data and information that does not immediately connect with student growth.

Flexibility also means developing physical structures that are adaptable to the particular learning needs, tasks and activities being planned. Increased agility in terms of space, furniture and the overall approach to grouping and moving students throughout a period of time are all dimensions of flexibility that lead to the type of dynamic and responsiveness desired by teachers. Greater options in terms of collaboration across grades and subject disciplines, as well as flexibility related to scheduling and timetabling of both teacher and student time, would encourage the development of projects and activities that had greater depth and more potential for lasting connections.

*In the teaching to which I aspire, there is time, both for creation and adaptation, but also for implementation...There would be risk-taking in lesson planning and spontaneity in classroom activities to allow opportunities to bring in current issues that relate to curriculum, either student- or teacher-directed.*

*1) Créativité : une direction à l'élémentaire plus souple. Au secondaire, les moyens techniques au financiers. 2) Souplesse : Bonne communication entre collègues; entraide dans le secteur. 3) Affectivité : Confiance en soi et en eux. Leader positif. 4) Passionné : Tu enseignes dans ton champ de discipline et capable d'en sortir en tout temps. 5) Facilitateur : Partage de l'enseignement vers tes élèves. Partage du monopole de la connaissance.*

## **A variety of material, intellectual, and human resources are critical supports to teachers**

It is no surprise that resource *availability* is key to the visions and aspirations expressed by teachers. Having enough resources on hand to “do the job” that they wanted is a common and recurring theme.

Beyond mere availability, however, it is important that these resources are *current* and reflect up-to-date information and approaches. Technology is obviously seen as important, with quality and accessibility being essential for the work of both students and teachers.

Time is seen as an extremely important, albeit less tangible, resource. Teachers see having adequate time to plan, meet with colleagues and engage in professional learning as a resource that is vital in supporting and, indeed, making possible the type of work that they dream of doing.

A strong and explicit connection exists between thinking about resources and the way that teaching practice is structured. As an example, alternative approaches to staffing that both enable and promote different ways of working together is important to building a sense of collegiality. The flexibility to extend current practice of connecting primarily with grade or subject partners is seen as an important step in fostering the idea of staff members being resources to each other.

*The teaching to which I aspire would be exciting for both me and my students. I would incorporate technology where appropriate. The students would be able to take ownership of their own learning. I would be given the time and resources to plan and assess to the best of my ability.*

*Énergisant. On serait fier de ce qu'on a accompli. Ce que l'élève a appris. Les gens seraient heureux d'être au travail. On pourrait arriver le soir à la maison avec un sentiment d'accomplissement.*



# Conclusion



## Why Should We Care About Teachers' Aspirations?

In the Introduction to the book, *Stories of the Courage to Teach: Honoring the Teacher's Heart*<sup>v</sup>, Sam M. Intrator asks “why should we care about the heart of a teacher?”. The question reminds us of a related one: “Why should we care about teachers' aspirations?”. The following quote from Intrator sums it up well. We should care because...

**Education depends on what teachers do in their classrooms, and what teachers do in their classrooms is shaped by who they are, what they believe, and how vital and alive they are when they step before their students.**

Asking teachers whether they are able to teach the way they aspire to teach gets at the heart of “who they are, what they believe, and how vital and alive they are”. Elizabeth MacDonald and Dennis Shirley, in *The Mindful Teacher*, introduce the notion of “alienated teaching” which they believe is “endemic” to American education. They define it as “a kind of teaching that teachers perform when they feel that they must comply with external conditions that they have not chosen and from which they inwardly dissent...” (p. 2)<sup>vi</sup>. Although aspirational teaching is qualitatively more than just the absence of alienation, the concept of “alienated teaching” provides a sobering backdrop to the research questions for the project, *Teaching the Way We Aspire to Teach: Now and in the Future*, repeated below:

- Do teachers experience a difference between teaching the way they aspire to and the way they are required to teach? If so, why?
- What do teachers see as the elements or conditions that contribute to them being able to teach the way they aspire to teach?
- What are the implications for creating learning environments where those conditions are present on a consistent and systemic basis?

# Highlights of the Research Findings

The project co-sponsors, CEA and the CTF, were heartened by the high degree of consistency and complementarity between the findings of the online survey and the focus groups. According to these findings:

## **1. A significant proportion of teachers have experienced teaching the way they aspire to teach, at least occasionally.**

- A large majority of the teachers who participated in the focus groups provided stories and examples of when they were at their best – “in the zone” – and teaching as they aspired to teach.
- In the online survey, 42% of teachers reported that they frequently had opportunities to teach the way they aspire to teach and were also frequently able to be creative in their teaching practice (47%).
- However, nearly half of teacher respondents (49%) told us they only *occasionally* have opportunities to teach as they aspire to teach (and 9% indicated that they rarely or never have the opportunity to do so), and 48% of teachers indicated that they are only occasionally able to be creative in their teaching practice (with 6% of teachers indicating rarely or never).

## **2. Although teachers are able to teach the way they aspire to teach on occasion, this does not always happen on a consistent and system-wide basis.**

Teacher organizations, parents, and other educational groups have consistently proposed policy changes such as reducing class size, providing adequate resources (both human and material), and allowing for more time for reflection, planning, and collaboration. In addition to these changes, the following were identified by teachers as being key elements supporting them in teaching the way in which they aspire to teach:

- Professional learning opportunities, particularly those that are relevant and support teachers in their collaborative work with other teachers;
- Trusting relationships with students, parents, and the administration;
- Being supported, valued, and recognized as professionals by governments, the public, parents, and the school administration;
- Visionary instructional leadership;
- Policies, programs, and infrastructure that increase flexibility in the classroom;
- Assessment and reporting policies and practices that provide parents, students, and teachers with information useful to adapting learning.

## **3. Finally, there was significant agreement among teachers about the personal attributes of teachers that were most important. They are:**

- passion for teaching and a commitment to students
- caring for children
- knowing their students, and
- flexibility to use one’s professional judgment and expertise to make sound pedagogical decisions in the interest of student learning.

The Canadian Education Association and the Canadian Teachers' Federation are encouraged to find that "alienated teaching" does not appear to be a common feature of education in Canada. However, as our research shows, we also cannot afford to be complacent in Canada. As teachers who participated in the survey and the focus groups told us, we have a long way to go before teachers are *always* able to teach the way they aspire to teach and before their vision of aspirational teaching becomes a reality on a consistent and system-wide basis.

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