

Teacher to Teacher – Sharing the Wisdom of Experience

by Debbie Bailey and Cynthia Prasow

In 2016-2017, we contacted retired teacher organizations across Canada to request that they distribute a survey to their members. The intent of the survey was to gather the wisdom that seasoned educators had collected over their many years in schools, and to share this experience with practicing teachers, particularly those new to the profession. We received 658 completed responses representing every Canadian province and territory. As we read through the many pages of detailed responses, the following major themes emerged.

Professionalism and the Art of Teaching

Respondents wrote about what it means to be a teacher. They saw it as a challenging, rewarding and honourable career, and a role that requires qualities such as optimism, persistence, kindness, resilience, humour, determination and integrity. They wrote about the joy of being with young people and the importance of valuing every child. “Teaching is the most rewarding career that one can choose. You have the ability to have a positive impact on many lives.”

Developing Positive Relationships

There were extensive comments about the importance of relationships with students, colleagues, parents and the community. “Teaching and leading in education is all about relationships. Building positive, compassionate, empathic relationships with those you wish to serve will assist the learning process.” Ensuring that students felt safe, accepted and respected was emphasized. “I learned that children appreciated fairness and consistency. They won’t always remember what you taught them, but they will remember how you treated them.”

Finding a Mentor

Retired teachers strongly urged beginning teachers to seek out a mentor to discuss their challenges and to celebrate their successes. “Ask for help from your fellow teachers...they will (think) that you are asking for help because you want to be the best you can be.” Finding the right mentor is important. “Find a teacher who exemplifies all that you admire in the teaching profession and make a connection with them.”

Creating a Space for Teaching and Learning

A clear message was that all students have the potential to learn, and that they learn at different rates and in different ways. “The best teachers are those who are able to allow their students to be who they are while giving them opportunities that are varied enough for the individuality of the student.” Respondents shared a wide range of suggestions for ensuring the classroom was one in which each student could succeed. The importance of the teacher having sound curriculum knowledge, strong classroom management skills and a willingness to plan carefully for learning was emphasized. Classrooms need to be places where children are engaged participants. “Students will learn if they perceive there is a need, that the learning is relevant to their lives and if they are interested.”

Challenges and Solutions

While passionate about their profession, retirees shared some of the challenges they faced. Respondents also provided suggestions on how to weather these challenges. “As you grow in your profession, surround yourself with positive, optimistic colleagues. It doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have a critical eye...but the temptation to become jaded and cynical will be there. Stay focused on your students.”

Work-Life Balance

Many respondents saw teaching as a vocation which can be all-consuming. “Balance your passion and commitment to your career with excellent self-care. Stay grounded with a variety of personal pursuits.” The benefit of doing so is that, “...you’ll be a better teacher, especially in the more challenging moments.”

Lifelong Learning

Teaching is a constantly changing career that requires educators to be open to new ideas, willing to take risks, and thoughtful about implementing change. Our respondents stressed the need to be a reflective practitioner - learning from students, colleagues, parents and one's own work. "Teachers need to understand that to be a great teacher is always a state of becoming, that they need to be...in constant search of ways to better help their students to learn."

We hope the above summary provides an indication of the richness of the comments shared by respondents. We want to thank the participating retired teacher organizations for their willingness to distribute the survey. Most importantly, we want to thank those retired teachers who took the time to complete the survey so thoughtfully and openly.

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