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How Do Teachers Compare to Other Workers?

In 2004, the Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL) network conducted a large-scale survey of over 9,000 members of the Canadian labour force concerning their working conditions and learning activities. The survey was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

While the number of teachers included in the survey is not large enough to allow for interprovincial comparisons of teachers, the responses of teachers across the country can be compared with those of other occupational groups and to the labour force as a whole.

by David W. Livingstone and Fab Antonelli

Among full-time employed workers (over 30 hours per week), the demographic profile of teachers is distinctive.

The teaching force is older than the labour force in general, with nearly half (47 per cent) over 45. Similarly, nearly half (46 per cent) of all teachers have been working in the same type of job for more than 16 years. Teachers are also more likely to be female (75 per cent) and white (95 per cent) than most other occupational groups.

Canadian teachers comprise a relatively stable, older, female-dominant and not very racially diverse occupational group.

Discretion on the job

In a knowledge-based economy, workers need increasing discretion to perform their jobs. But what do workers themselves think about their discretionary control of their jobs?

Teachers are the most likely occupational group to say their jobs require a great deal of thought (89 per cent) and that they have a great amount of choice in doing their jobs (61 per cent). Teachers are especially distinctive in their majority belief (57 per cent) that they can always plan their own work, compared to less than a third of most other groups in the general labour force. In terms of employees' involvement in their work, teachers are the prototypical "knowledge workers."

Changing conditions

The vast majority of Canadian workers think that work techniques and equipment, including computers and related software, have changed at least moderately over the past five years and about a third think they have changed a great deal. Canadian teachers are about as likely as other professional employees to acknowledge skill increases and changing work techniques in their jobs and more likely than either service workers or industrial workers. But they are somewhat more likely (45 per cent) than most occupational groups (less than 40 per cent) to express high levels of job stress.

In response to questions concerning organizational change in employment conditions over the past five years, most workers state that they have witnessed significant organizational restructuring. Teachers are again distinctive in that the majority (64 per cent) report changes in terms of reduced numbers of employees within their workplaces, compared to only minorities (42 per cent or less) among other categories of workers.

Work hours

This survey confirmed findings of other studies concerning a recent trend in the hours of work in the Canadian labour force.

After gradual declines in the length of the normal workweek for most of the 20th century, a growing polarization of part-timers and over-timers has been evident during the last few decades. The proportion of those working a previously standard 40-hour week has continued to decline, while the proportion of those working over 50 hours per week and those working fewer than 30 hours per week – typically without non-wage benefits – continues to increase.

Around 20 per cent of teachers are now employed part-time, a proportion similar to that found in the general labour force. Meanwhile, the normal workweek of those in full-time employment (that is, 30 or more hours per week) is now about 45 hours. In our survey, full-time teachers – in line with what has become the Canadian norm – reported working an average of at least 45 hours per week.

But a more detailed national survey sample of teachers (Smaller H. et al, 2005) found that they work an average of 49 hours, including time spent after school hours in preparation and marking, extracurricular activities, reporting to parents, etc. Many recent studies of teachers' working conditions in Canada and elsewhere have established that teachers remain among the most likely of workers to do unpaid overtime. When asked more generally about their normal work week in the WALL survey, they were quite likely to have taken some of their unassigned duties for granted.

Along with most occupational groups teachers also do substantial unpaid housework, an average of 15 hours per week. But teachers have an exceptionally high rate (69 per cent) of involvement in voluntary organizations, compared to a minority of the general labour force. Teachers' volunteer work plays a vital but often unrecognized role in community sustainability.

Teachers' extensive unpaid overtime work, their relatively high levels of job stress, and the extent of their volunteer work should be better understood by the general public.

Learning profiles

The WALL national survey asked a series of questions about ongoing learning – formal courses or workshops and informal study, whether self-directed or with a mentor.

Teachers reported exceptionally high course participation rates – among the highest of all professional employees. The general survey found rates of over 80 per cent. With more in-depth probing 90 per cent of the teachers surveyed reported in-service training activities. These rates compare to about two-thirds of professionals and managers and less than 60 per cent among the general labour force.

In addition, over 90 per cent of teachers reported active engagement in informal on-the-job learning, marginally higher than other workers (about 80 per cent). Teachers are more likely (56 per cent) than most workers (42 per cent) to seek mentoring from colleagues, but their estimates of time spent in informal job-related learning and informal learning generally were similar to other occupational groups.

Overall, teachers are more involved in combinations of formal and informal learning and spend more time in learning activities than most other general occupational groups.

The WALL survey findings offer some preliminary benchmarks for assessing the changing nature of adult work and learning in Canada. The comparisons of teachers to other Canadian workers could help the teaching profession in steering its future policies.

The WALL survey raises some immediate challenges:

We need to make greater efforts to achieve a teaching force more demographically representative of the Canadian population.

We need to use the relatively high levels of discretionary control we have in our jobs and our very high rates of continuing education to exemplify and promote the kinds of high-involvement organizations required by a well-developed knowledge-based economy.

But we should sound alarm bells because of relatively high staffing cutbacks in our schools, long hours and high levels of stress.

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Question wording presented below has been modified for brevity. For complete questions and results see the full report, available at www.wallnetwork.ca.

Methodology: The WALL national survey of the working conditions and learning activities of the Canadian labour force was administered in 2004 by the Institute for Social Research at York University (see www.wallnetwork.ca). The survey asked respondents (N=9,063) for demographic information and about current employment conditions, unpaid work and their formal and informal learning activities. The general results are deemed to be accurate to within three percentage points 19 times out of 20.

Rounding: Due to rounding rules concerning survey results, percentages for some questions may not add up to 100 per cent.

Demographic profile of respondents in the Canadian labour force, with breakdowns by occupational groups

	Total Labour Force	Managers	Professional Employees	Teachers	Service Workers	Industrial Workers
Demographic Dimension	%	%	%	%	%	%
Age (45+)	39	39	35	47	34	39
Sex (F)	49	53	65	75	68	19
Race (white)	88	89	90	95	88	87
Career (16+ years)	30	33	32	46	25	33

Control of ideas (% agree)

- How much thought and attention does your main job normally demand of you?
- How often is it possible for you to put some of your own ideas into practice?
- Your job often requires you to learn new skills.
- How much choice do you have over the way in which you do your job?
- Do you participate in making decisions about such things as the

products or services delivered, the total number of people employed, budgets?

Total Labour Force Managers Professional employees Teachers Service workers Industrial Workers

	Total Labour Force	Managers	Professional Employees	Teachers	Service Workers	Industrial Workers
Job Dimension	%	%	%	%	%	%
Great deal of thought	72	80	82	89	62	64
Always plan own work	29	34	30	57	16	18
Learning new skills is required (strongly agree)	41	43	53	57	31	30
Great amount of choice in doing job	51	56	44	61	32	41
Policy-making	59	77	51	62	37	28

Changes to one's own job

- In the last five years has the level of skill required to perform your job changed?
- In the last five years to what extent have the work techniques and equipment you use on a regular basis in your job changed?
- How often do you find your job stressful?

	Total Labour Force	Managers	Professional Employees	Teachers	Service Workers	Industrial Workers
Great Personal Job Change	%	%	%	%	%	%
Skill increase	59	70	61	62	50	48
Work techniques	34	41	36	33	27	25
Job stress most of the time	33	39	38	45	30	28

Changes to organization and employment conditions

Has your workplace undergone any of the following forms of organizational change in the last five years?

1. a reduction in the number of employees
2. a reduction in the number of managers/supervisors

3. greater reliance on part-time or temporary workers
4. an increase in overtime hours
5. greater reliance on job rotation and/or multi-skills

Organizational Change	Full-time Employees					
	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes
Reduced number of employees	45	52	55	64	43	49
Reduced number of managers	25	36	28	36	24	24
Increased part-time employ	39	40	41	42	44	36
Increased overtime	35	41	37	35	27	43
Increased multi-skills	40	47	43	40	39	40

Normal workweek among full-time employed labour force

Work Activity	Full-time Employees					
	Normal HRS/ WK	Normal HRS/ WK	Normal HRS/ WK	Normal HRS/ WK	Normal HRS/ WK	Normal HRS/ WK
Paid work hours	45	44	43	45/49*	42	45
Housework hours	14	14	14	15	15	14
Volunteer work hours	3	3	2	3	2	2
Total hours	62	61	59	63/67*	59	61
Work Activity	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes
Volunteer work	46	56	51	69	38	27

*The second figure is from Smaller, H. et al (2005) *Canadian Teachers' Learning Practices and Workload Issues: Results from a National Teacher Survey and Follow-Up Focus Groups*. (Retrieved June 20, 2006 from www.wallnetwork.ca)

Formal and informal learning activities of full-time workers

- At any time during the past year did you receive any formal training or education, including courses, private lessons, correspondence courses (written or electronic), workshops, apprenticeship training, arts, crafts or recreation courses, or other training or education no matter how long or short?

- Are you planning to take any formal organized courses in the next few years?
- Have you done any informal learning to keep up with new general knowledge in your occupation during the last year?
- In the past four weeks did you seek advice from someone knowledgeable with the intention of developing your job skills?
- How much time do you spend in a typical week in informal learning:
 - at your place of employment?
 - related to paid work, volunteer work, housework and general interest?

Full-time Employees						
	Total Labour Force	Managers	Professional Employees	Teachers	Service Workers	Industrial Workers
Learning Activity	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes	% Yes
Formal course in past year	57	69	68	84/90*	52	45
Plan to take a course	51	61	62	59/88*	47	39
Informal on-the-job learning	81	89	86	92	74	71
Sought mentoring last month	42	51	51	56	35	30
Learning Activity	Hours	Hours	Hours	Hours	Hours	Hours
Informal on-the-job learning each week?	5	5	4	4	4	5
Total informal learning each week?	12	12	11	11	12	13

*The second figure is from Smaller, H. et al (2005), *Canadian Teachers' Learning Practices and Workload Issues: Results from a National Teacher Survey and Follow-Up Focus Groups*. (Retrieved June 20, 2006 from www.wallnetwork.ca)

For more information regarding the Work and Lifelong Learning network or survey results, see www.wallnetwork.ca.

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