



CHAPTER 10:

Implications and discussion

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



WORKLIFE OF
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Introduction

Surveys of the kind developed for this study are designed to generate data which provide a better understanding of teachers' working lives. When they are conducted by a teacher union there is an implicit assumption that some areas of concern to teachers will be addressed by the union, whether through bargaining or in some other way. What better understanding do the data generate, and how might the union advocate for its members?

New teachers

In terms of the survey sample, the survey reached fewer new teachers (less than five years experience) than might have been expected, with the result that there is less than ideal information about this group of teachers' work and perspectives. The study findings do provide some insights into issues and concerns specific to new teachers. For example, job instability was raised as an issue by less-experienced teachers who encounter frequent changes in teaching assignments and/or schools, making it difficult to plan in the face of uncertainty. The survey findings also suggest that teachers with less than five years' experience, or who are less than 35 years of age, or who work as a teacher teaching on call (TTOC), experience very high stress levels associated with job insecurity.

Much work remains to be done to document the needs of new teachers. The BCTF may need to consider whether the low representation is by chance or whether fewer new teachers are prepared to answer surveys, possibly because of other time pressures. Either way, it may be important for the BCTF to find ways to better understand newer teachers' perspectives on their work.

Gender differences

Gender differences are apparent in a number of areas, including female teachers' over-representation in part-time employment, and in possible financial and family commitment barriers to graduate studies. Most of the part-time teachers in the survey are female, and over half work part-time for personal reasons. One in five part-time teachers in the survey chose to work in part-time employment as a way to cope with workload, effectively using their own unpaid time for marking and preparation. This is consistent with the findings of the previous 2001 worklife study conducted by BCTF Research. Teachers on leave are more likely to be female and between 35 to 44 years of age compared to the overall sample. There is also a gender difference in the level of importance respondents attributed to strategies for improving working and learning conditions. Male teachers placed a higher level of importance on improving salary and benefits whereas female teachers placed more importance on improving learning conditions such as class size and composition.

A tentative conclusion may be that many women still take primary responsibility for families, and this is reflected in more women working part-time and/or facing difficulties in managing graduate studies and family commitments. With the increased feminization of teaching, gender issues may have been under-studied and may require more in-depth attention. If the BCTF membership is increasingly female, then issues affecting women teachers' work is an appropriate focus for the union, but arguably one which is minimally addressed at this time.

Professional development

There are clear issues and implications in terms of teachers' professional development, with minimal PD funding available to many teachers, some evidence of both positive and negative influences at school and district administrative levels, and a difference in values between those who see PD as consumers, looking through and choosing from a list of options, and those teachers who are exercising autonomy in ways that create professional development, often in collaboration with peers. There also appears to be significant support for mentoring of new teachers, an area where BC lags behind provinces such as Ontario¹, which has a provincial program to support induction and mentoring. The data from this survey are not conclusive but may be useful in generating more debate among teachers and within the union in terms of what forms of professional development might be developed and how they might be supported by the union.

Job satisfaction and stress

In a departure from previous research, this study explores what makes teachers satisfied in their work. Earlier studies tended to focus on stressors and did not elicit information on satisfaction in work. Responses show that many teachers clearly love teaching and gain immense satisfaction from a vocation which they see as instrumental in developing children's learning and development. The study's findings confirm that teacher-student relationships and interactions are the primary causes of satisfaction; yet other positive interactions with peers and parents, and some level of autonomy are also important factors which contribute to teacher satisfaction.

On the converse side, it almost always appears that it is a combination of factors that stress teachers, such as multi-tasking with limited time to manage all the tasks, complex classrooms, lack of support for problematic student behavior, and stress in professional relationships. Looking at satisfaction and stress data, it may be possible to better understand the primacy of the teacher-student relationship and to work towards conditions that preserve and enhance it.

It may also be possible to better understand that combined factors of stress are what produce *the most* stress and that while some stress is almost always apparent in teachers' work, certain combinations may have severe consequences for teachers. This suggests that strategies to reduce teacher stress need to be part of a more comprehensive and integrated approach that addresses the combination of factors that most contribute to teacher stress.

The survey findings provide evidence that working and learning conditions have deteriorated over the last five years. At least two-thirds of the teachers surveyed said their stress level and workload have increased compared to five years ago and four out of ten reported decreased job satisfaction. The analysis reveals few demographic differences among teacher groups, suggesting that increased workload and stress over the last five years are pervasive. Thus, strategies to reduce workload and stress would be of benefit to teachers across the board.

Perhaps it is time for some new approaches to recognizing where and why satisfaction occurs in order to build more of it for the benefit of teachers and students. For individuals, schools, unions, and districts, an awareness of the negative impact of these combinations may also be of utility in addressing individual issues or combinations of factors which cause stress. Opening up more

¹ <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/teacher/induction.html>

conversations on the positive and the problematic in teachers' work may engage teachers, employers, and unions in better and more collaborative ways to take positive control, and to better manage professional relationships and work.

Workload and stress

In terms of workload, this study reaffirms a range of research indicating that teachers' workload is a significant issue. The data from this study provide information about long hours worked in and out of school, complex roles, and significant communication/administrative tasks, all of which have been recorded in earlier BCTF and other research. Of a possible 47 sources of stress, teachers rated the level of support for students with disruptive behavior; class composition issues; lack of support for non-designated, "grey area" students; and the unmet needs of students as the 4 most significant sources of stress. The data suggest that teachers view their working conditions as fundamentally linked to the conditions that support student learning, and that they want to see improvements to working conditions that give students better chances of success. One key set of evidence for this claim is that while pay and benefits are stressed by many teachers as directions they want the union to pursue, respondents placed addressing working conditions linked to student learning as slightly higher priorities than their own pay and benefits.

The study also outlines some of the systemic factors creating problematic teacher workloads, with budget shortfalls forcing districts to reduce teaching positions and thereby increase teachers' workload. While student enrolment declined across Canada between 2001–02 and 2007–08, most provinces increased the number of educators² in public education with an overall increase of 9.8% for Canada. BC did the opposite, decreasing the number of educators by 7.8%, many of whom were teachers³. In some specialist teacher areas (Special Education/Learning Assistance, library services, English as a Second Language, etc.), the cuts in such positions have been even more severe (Table 1).

Table 1: Loss of specialist teachers—2001–02 to 2009–10

Specialty program	2001–02	2007–08	2009–10
Library Services	921.79	729.96	685.81
Counselling	990.92	915.80	909.88
Special Education	4,051.47	3,446.50	3,403.37
English as a Second Language	1,015.60	791.17	786.06
Aboriginal Education	205.89	190.88	185.23

BCTF Research chart with data from: Ministry of Education Form 1530 staffing data for 2001–02 to 2009–10. 2009–10 estimate figures from Ministry of Education. Revenue and Expenditure Tables, Table 10: 2009/10 Annual Budgeted Provincial Summary of FTE Employees by Type of Employee and Program.

² Statistics Canada defines educators as "all employees in the public school system (either school-based or district-based) who belong to one of the three following categories: teachers, school administrators, and pedagogical support."

³ BCTF Research calculations with data from Statistics Canada. Summary Public School Indicators for Canada, the Provinces and Territories, 2001/2002 to 2007/2008. Table A.12 Educators headcount (1) in public elementary and secondary schools, Canada, provinces and territories, 2001/2002 to 2007/2008, p. 32. Table A.1 Headcount enrolments in public elementary and secondary schools, Canada, provinces and territories, 2001/2002 to 2007/2008, p.21.

Work/life balance

While data from this study show that teachers have clearly welcomed work/life balance initiatives to address stress and coping issues, the evidence from a range of provincial data indicates that the causes of workload increases are systemic, with provincial policies and funding drastically reducing teaching positions, thereby both increasing workload and reducing support from specialist teachers. With potentially severe cuts expected in the 2010–11 school year, the implications are problematic for an education system in which teacher workload is already a significant issue. The survey results indicate that excessive workloads contribute to teachers being on medical leave. About half of the teachers on leave in the survey indicated workload issues contributed to their decision to take a leave. Teachers for whom workload issues were a factor were much more likely to be on a stress-related illness/disability compared to other teachers on leave.

Evidence⁴ from the BCTF's Salary Indemnity Program (SIP) shows that 43% of SIP claims, and 47% of costs, are stress-related; that women are over-represented in claim numbers; and that 60% of SIP costs are linked to teachers aged 50 or older. If workload increases and specialist support decreases as a likely consequence of cuts in teaching positions in the 2010–11 year and beyond, there may be increased stress-related claims in the coming years.

Workload and work/life balance should not just be a union issue but should be of concern in a society where the human and economic costs are widely impacting individuals, families, employers, health-care systems, and all taxpayers. There exists considerable evidence that mental health issues are becoming increasingly prevalent in Canada and across a range of occupations, and that many cases of depression are linked to work-related experiences. Hreceniuk (2008) states:

With costs of between 4 and 12 percent of payroll, depression is Canada's fastest growing disability. The mental health claims of depression, anxiety, and stress are the leading causes of short- and long-term disability.

Within the data on depression and stress, there is also international evidence that those public sector occupations that are relationship-based (education, health, and social services) have higher prevalence of stress-related illnesses:

In terms of how stress links to occupation, the European Foundation (2005) identified education, health, and social services as the work classifications of highest stress. The UK Health and Safety Executive reported that those employed in education were second only to public administration workers in terms of days estimated days off caused by stress. In Canada, COMPAS Inc. (2006) stated that “the majority of (Ontario) teachers reported being really stressed at work on a frequent basis” (p. 10). Also in Ontario, 94% of Ontario English Catholic Teacher Association members stated that overworking was negatively impacting their personal, family, and social lives (Matsui, 2006). These studies reflect data from a range of Canadian and international studies (Naylor & Schaefer, 2003; Timms, Graham, & Caltabiano, 2006; Wilson, 2002) that indicate high levels of teacher stress. (Naylor, 2008, p. 2)

⁴ *The prevalence of stress-related disorders in BC school districts.*

http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2009WLC01.pdf

The contribution of this and other studies may be to argue that a wider view of managing work/life balance is required. At this time, most work/life balance programs encourage individuals to develop coping strategies. While such strategies are useful, they may ignore those systemic factors which cause stress and which are outside of individual control. Stress is a societal issue and it costs society dearly, and so the focus on individual strategies should be balanced with an increased focus on systemic factors such as provincial funding and policies which create the stress factors throughout the system.

Yet there is little evidence that many governments are even aware of the issue, let alone proactively addressing it. Indeed, the evidence of inadequate funding resulting in cuts to teacher numbers (beyond what reflects reduced student numbers) actually exacerbates workload issues, and likely increases the incidence of stress-related illness. If stress and imbalance are in part caused by systemic factors, then the way to address them is also systemic, requiring governments to consider this and many other studies, including those from corporate Canada and the World Health Organization. The debate on balance in work and life needs to consider how to create more manageable work in ways that benefit society as a whole by making citizens healthier and more productive while also aiming to reduce costs in areas like prescription drug use and rehabilitation.

One of the problems in addressing issues raised in teacher union research about teacher workload is the external perception of vested interest—that the data and analysis support pre-existing union stances and positions to improve teachers' working conditions. Yet there are two compelling reasons for engaging unions, employers, and government in a wider discussion and analysis of teacher workload issues. The first is already evident in a plethora of research—that the social and economic costs of work-related stress are huge and unsustainable. The second is that high teacher workload and stress is likely to negatively impact students' academic and social development.

For both these reasons, a consideration of workload and stress is required, as argued in an earlier paper⁵:

While the issue of stress-related illness is complex, the paucity of prevention measures at federal and provincial government levels reflects an apathy which should be challenged. Instead of individuals and society paying huge costs as consequences of stress, the factors causing stress could be addressed by reducing workloads, providing incentives for early retirement, and supporting a variety of work/life balance options, including four-day weeks, flexible schedules, and telecommuting. Other approaches more appropriate to teachers' work should also be considered. There needs to be an explicit focus on gender and solutions found to support women, who are over-represented in stress-related illnesses. (Naylor, 2008, p. 6)

⁵ The rising tide of stress in Canada: Time for governments to act in support of schools and society. http://www.bctf.ca/uploadedFiles/Publications/Research_reports/2008WLC03.pdf

Teacher retention issues

Increased workload and stress, and loss of job satisfaction not only have implications for students in the classroom and for teachers' work-life quality, but will likely affect teacher retention in future years. This survey found that one in five teachers is considering leaving the profession, with mid-career teachers the most likely to do so. Increased workload, stress and burnout, health conditions aggravated by stress, lack of encouragement, job insecurity, and dissatisfaction with the provincial and district governance are all contributing factors for surveyed teachers considering such a decision.

The impact of teacher stress on student learning

Other empirical studies have shown that excessive teacher workloads and problematic conditions in classrooms cause teacher burnout and negatively impact students' learning. Leithwood (2006) states:

There is good evidence to show that teachers' working conditions matter because they have a direct effect on teachers' thoughts and feelings—their sense of individual professional efficacy, of collective professional efficacy, of job satisfaction; their organizational commitment, levels of stress and burnout, morale, engagement in the school or profession; and their pedagogical content knowledge. These internal states are an important factor in what teachers do and have a direct effect on what happens in the classroom, how well students achieve, and their experiences of school. "Teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions." Working conditions matter! (pp. 88-89)

One option may be for the BCTF to explicitly connect teachers' working conditions and students' learning conditions in future communications with parents, in the media, and in bargaining. Such connections have been made before, but with evidence of increased workload and stress, the time may be right for a focus on why high teacher workload and stress negatively impact students' learning and educational experiences.

Priority areas for BCTF focus

The survey results point to two explicit areas where the union might advocate for change and improvements: the first stresses several "working conditions" areas (improve support for Special Education, more planning/prep time, and smaller class sizes), while the second stresses improvements to salary and benefits. In addition to the areas suggested by respondents, there are other potential areas for BCTF action and advocacy, which might include building a case for offering more early retirements, an increased focus on addressing a number of issues faced by women teachers, and exploring ways of reducing workload.

A final suggestion may be to explore the needs of newer teachers, beyond what was learned in this report. How do newer teachers view and engage with their union? What might the needs be for improved and systemic induction and mentoring across the province? Might different forms

of communication need to be developed by the union in order to better connect with new teachers?

The research team welcomes any comments, questions about this research, or any suggestions for additional links. We can be contacted at: researchteam@bctf.ca.

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