

## TEACHER STRESS AND WORKING ENVIRONMENTS: Implications for Teaching and Learning

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The second in a series of articles developed from regular public forums sponsored by the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development. Memorial Presents features speakers from Memorial University who address issues of public concern in the province.

*I have never worked in a coal mine, or a uranium mine, or in a herring trawler; but I know from experience that working in a bank from 9:15 to 5:30, and once in four weeks the whole of Saturday, with two weeks holidays a year, was a rest cure compared to teaching in a school.*

*T.S. Eliot (1950)*

In 2000, I began a qualitative study on the experiences of the province's high school teachers in their work environment. I wanted to determine the problems and present them in a tangible way, to paint a picture of life in the classroom that everyone could understand, and to make suggestions that would lessen the stress that teachers experience. I asked all participants why they had volunteered for the study. One

teacher said: "Because it's a very important issue ... It's the most important issue for teachers."

Using a grounded theory approach, I interviewed teachers in depth, both male and female, from rural and urban schools and those teaching in all subject areas. These are their experiences. As I relate these results, I ask readers to keep in mind that the working conditions of the teachers are the learning conditions of the students.

In 1982, Leona Kennedy and S.E. Kendall identified the sources of stress for teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador as time management, parent-teacher relations, lack of input into decision-making, the reorganized high school programme, and inadequate support from school administrators.

In 2000, 74 per cent of the teachers in one large school district reported that they felt stressed "much or most of the time."

In 2003, the Newfoundland and Labrador Teachers' Association (NLTA) report entitled "Putting the Teacher Back into Teaching" called on government to recognize teacher workload and the need for balance between organizational needs and individual needs. It asked that new programmes be thoroughly piloted and feedback assessed before these programmes were introduced into the classroom. It also asked for adequate resources.

In 2004, Dr. David Dibbon assessed the impact of workload on teachers and students. He reported that the average teacher worked 52.3 hours per week, that teachers in this province have less assigned preparation time than those in the other Atlantic provinces, and that accountability to parents and administrators increased documentation and paper work, factors that significantly added to their stress. Noting that large class size and mixed student composition was reducing teachers' ability to be effective in the classroom, he recommended that the job of teachers be redesigned.

To date, teachers have not experienced any notable changes in any of these areas.

Teachers talked about being tired, worn out physically and emotionally. As they reflected on a life in the classroom, in a job they loved but found overwhelming, it was clear that the effort to remain effective was taking a toll not only on them, but on their colleagues and, they feared, on their students.

“No time to stop, too many changes ... some not workable, some have negative effects on students” they said. They described themselves as “bombarded, overwhelmed, on overload, always on the run.” The word “impossible” was used over and over to describe their job. Increased demands for accountability from so many levels, each requiring a daunting amount of documentation and paperwork, all added to the hours worked. Recently, a teacher told my education students that he now spends more time on documentation than on lesson preparation. We must ask how that benefits students and how it makes the teacher feel.

Teachers discussed dealing with children who are profoundly needy, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally. They talked about teaching courses for which they had no background or training and how challenging that was, the time it took to prepare, and what it was like to feel that they weren't doing a first rate job.

Then there were the multiple roles expected: guidance counsellor, social worker, caregiver, parent, recess and lunchtime supervisor, fund raiser, extracurricular organizer.

“Just let us teach!” they said.

One participant described it this way: “Teaching doesn't end at 5 p.m. Calling parents, tracking things down, preparing for the next day – you're trying to juggle and balance the demands. I don't like being set up as a failure. I don't think there is a physical way of accomplishing it.”

In addition to the workload, stress was exacerbated by a number of serious barriers to effective teaching. Teachers felt that the whole area of Pathways (a program for students with special needs) and inclusive classes had been poorly planned; the program, they said, was implemented

without the necessary resources, and teachers were poorly trained to deal with the problems. All the literature on inclusive classes emphasizes the importance of resources – books, teacher assistants or team teaching, professional in-service, and administrative support. One teacher asked: “How is it that you can't teach phys. ed. without a phys. ed. degree – but with a bachelor of arts and a bachelor of education you now have to teach what is really special education?”

What is the impact on the students who need help when there are not the required resources? What happens to the average child, who is one of 38 in a classroom where the teacher has 6-10 students on different Pathways for a multitude of problems? How much thoughtful attention can a teacher give to any student in that environment? The perception in my study was that it was a no-win situation for everyone, teachers and students alike.

Behaviour management was a huge issue. In large, inclusive classes where students have multiple degrees of academic ability and problems tend to be greater, discipline issues become greater too. These teachers reported that they did not have adequate control to deal with discipline issues. They faced the same problem students day after day, and felt that they did not have adequate support from school administrators, board offices or the Department of Education.

“We are spending too much time on the wrong part of our job,” one teacher said.

The threat of violence seemed to be there for all the teachers I interviewed, a complaint that has been repeated on radio call-in shows recently by several retired teachers.

“Just because students aren't bringing guns to school here, the public thinks there isn't any real problem, but there is,” said one teacher I interviewed. Another said that she went into class daily with knots in her stomach, afraid that she might tread on someone's toes. “There's a threat there always.”

A teacher of seven years reported, “I've had students who have been expelled or suspended at

school and they want to harm me. I have had damage done to my car and to my property. And I have come close to being assaulted in the classroom by a student who actually did go on to assault another teacher.”

If teachers fear violence and find it stressful, then the general student population must be affected both by this fear and by the stress that teachers feel. “That constant feeling of walking on egg shells,” as one teacher put it, is hard on everyone. In fact, when I returned home from the Harris Centre presentation, there was an e-mail waiting for me from a Level 1 student who had watched the presentation on TV. He said he wanted me to know that he was affected by teachers’ stress and by disruptive behaviour which, he felt, took away his learning time. He noted that his experience went beyond the classroom because both his parents were teachers and he was very cognizant of the way that stress affected them.

The struggle to facilitate learning in this environment of constant changes, demands, pressures, behaviour concerns and large inclusive classes, was raised by every teacher in the study. They talked about the barriers to being effective and of how hard this was on their self-esteem. They wanted to be “good” teachers. That frustration was expressed over and over again.

All of these teachers resented not being included in decision-making; they felt undervalued by administration and the public, unappreciated as professionals. They expressed feelings of anger caused by having to implement changes made from the “outside,” measures which, they felt, were often unworkable.

A policy made without teacher input and without concern for teacher workload is being implemented this year, when, instead of the two-week high school exam period, exams are crunched into one week. One teacher of French

has 170 students. That teacher must mark those exams, take turns supervising in the exam room, and supervise corridors in the early morning and at lunchtime. As well, a 15-minute oral exam must be given to every one of those 170 students, a process that would require 45 hours for that component alone. It isn’t possible

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to get four done every hour; there must also be change-over time. When the teacher pointed out these difficulties, the response was: “It has to be done.”

No wonder teachers in my study used words like “impossible.” No wonder they think that policies are often handed down without respect for teachers or students.

(In fairness, however, perhaps we should ask if administrators in this system are experiencing high levels of stress too, with more demands and pressures than they can manage. Perhaps this is another area where research is needed.)

Teachers talked about the importance of adequate physical, professional, and intellectual resources. They said it was not uncommon to be assigned a new course for September but not to have the curriculum or texts so they could prepare over the summer. As well, training often happened after the fact, sometimes months after they had been teaching the course. How can teachers be effective if they don’t have the resources, the training or the time? And how can we think that there isn’t any fall-out on students? One teacher expressed his feelings about resources in this way: “Nobody cares if I have enough resources or if my class is too big to handle technology. I’ve got 35 students. I’ve got room for 12 and resources for three.”

While stress levels are high, there is a fear, especially among young, untenured teachers, that, if they talk about their stress, there will be repercussions. Most of the teachers I interviewed had never talked to anyone about how they were

feeling; although three had been off on stress leave, they had talked only to their doctors, but no one else. Some cried. Some almost did. Some held their heads as they talked about their dreams of being a good teacher, and about how their confidence had been eroded, their self-esteem lowered, because they couldn't keep up the pace, couldn't meet the demands and pressures, especially without support and resources. For most, it was the first time they had really spoken about their losses of physical and emotional health, personal and family time (a big concern), and the loss of their dream of being a good, effective teacher.

Here are some ways that teachers have described stress:

"It takes away energy. It causes sickness."

"Stress for me is when there are more expectations of me than you could possibly achieve."

"It's like being chased down the road by a Mack truck."

Stress leaves scars.

"Some teachers have gone in and closed the door [to the classroom] and screamed. I've gone in and closed the door and cried," a teacher who had been retired for one year told me. "And then 20 minutes later, when lunch is over, opened the door like everything was normal. So you do a lot of pressing down." She demonstrated with her hands, then turned away, put up her hands in a 'no, no' fashion and said tremulously, "I don't want to talk about that any more."

Is this a healthy work or learning environment? The teachers I interviewed and the many who have since e-mailed, phoned and spoken to me out in the community do not think so.

So, the question is: What do we do about this? As we are all stakeholders in education, I believe that we all have a responsibility to learn the issues here and to address them. I offer the following suggestions as a place to start:

## Recommendations

- Acknowledge teacher stress as a major health concern. Invite teacher input and make the following systemic changes:
- Eliminate supervision duties. Supervision duties have nothing to do with teaching.
- Reduce documentation and paper work.
- Reduce class size.
- Increase preparation time.
- Improve the physical work environment. Start with providing a pleasant staff room in which to work and socialize, a lockable desk and a comfortable office chair in each classroom.
- Recognize the need for good communication between teachers and all levels of administration and set up processes to facilitate this interaction.
- Invite teachers to the table to discuss Pathways and inclusive classes.
- Provide adequate resources: physical, intellectual, and professional. Professional development is a must if teachers are to be up to date and if they are expected to teach new courses and new curriculum. No other group of professionals would be expected to handle new work without the manual or the training. Government should allot the time and money for adequate professional development.
- Develop workable discipline guidelines and ensure teachers' safety. Teachers need input and administrative support to carry out the rules that are set.

We can no longer ignore the facts, as has been done for so many years. The time has come for action. A healthy working and learning environment is attainable and it is my dream that together we can make that happen for our teachers and students. 

The Harris Centre assists individuals, organizations and communities to connect with people at Memorial University who could be helpful to regional policy and development projects.

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