

Title: The Effects of Government Policy and Changing Working Conditions on Canadian Teachers' Formal and Informal Learning Practices

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Focus - This project will examine the ways in which teachers in public elementary and secondary schools in Canada engage in their own informal and formal learning, and the ways in which recent government policy and changes in working conditions have influenced these learning patterns. The first stage of this study will involve a nationally distributed questionnaire, to approximately 2000 randomly sampled teachers drawn from the lists of approximately 270,000 teachers who are statutory members of the ten provincial teachers associations which make up the Canadian Teachers' Federation. The second, more qualitative part of this study will involve interviews and focus groups with selected teachers from Ontario, Alberta and Nova Scotia. The total numbers of teachers in statutory associations in these three provinces are 142,000, 29,000 and 10,000 respectively.

2. Literature Review - An investigation of the formal and informal learning practices of Canadian teachers builds on a number of theoretical strands, all well represented in the literature. First, the exploration of the meanings of formal, and particularly informal, learning, is now very diverse, and while there a number of now-historical treatises in the area (see, for example, Tough 1978; Knowles 1970; Penland 1977), the overall field has been well described and summarized in a number of specific articles and monographs, including Livingstone (1999), and Watkins and Marsick (1992). In addition, Garrick (1996) and Boie (1994) have examined specifically the recent upsurge in studies in these areas, and critiqued their apparent relation to changes in the global economy, and the perceived need for educating for a new "global" worker.

Another theme informing this study is reflected in the increased interest among educational researchers about the related concept of "teacher knowledge." This research has taken a number of directions in recent years, including explorations about what it is, what it should be, how it is acquired and/or enhanced, and the nature of its relation to student and school success (Briscoe 1997; Klein 1996; Gibson and Olberg 1998; Donmoyer 1995.) In 1998-1999, the first national study of the formal and informal learning activities of Canadian elementary and secondary school teachers was undertaken under the auspices of the SSHRC-funded New Approaches to Life-Long Learning project (NALL) (Smaller et al. 1999). This informed some subsequent studies such as that done by the Ontario College of Teachers in 1999. Although there is large and increasing volume of literature covering these themes, to date there has been much less attention paid to how teachers themselves see these matters personally - what they think is important to know and to learn, how they would like to engage in this learning process, and

what they are already doing in this regard. These precise questions directly informed the purpose and methodology of the 1999 NALL study.

At another level, directly linked to issues of teacher knowledge, are issues of professionalization. Viewed through the eyes of social stratification theorists such as Larsen (1980) and Derber (1990), professionalization has been, and remains, an ongoing historic process, both concrete and ideological, whereby the status and authority of particular middle-class occupational groups have been enhanced through state intervention, in exchange for their social regulatory work in society overall (not to mention their own self-regulation). Teachers have historically not been part of the “inner circle” of the most-favoured occupational groups. To be sure, the official rhetoric surrounding teachers’ work has often been based on their purported “status” in, and importance to, society. Ironically however, precisely because of the importance of teachers as “proper” role models for future citizens, in most western nations the control over their selection, training, certification and practice has generally remained very much in the hands of government and/or its closely monitored agencies (see, for example, Duman 1979; Gorelick 1982; Lawn 1996; Labaree 1992; Atkins and Lury 1999).

This contradictory nature of teacher professionalism has certainly been demonstrated in the recent context of neo-liberal schooling reform initiatives being promoted and undertaken in many western jurisdictions. While the rhetoric of professionalism is often used in these contexts, the general import is usually that of the “need” for the “upgrading” or “retraining” of teachers. Given these strong ideological messages, it is not surprising that a recent Ontario survey found a significant percentage of parents (75%) in favour of requiring teachers to submit accounts of their learning activities to their principals (rather than being allowed to use their own professional judgements about their own in-service learning), and an even higher percentage (83%) in favour of principals being required to use provincial guidelines and methods to evaluate their teachers (Livingstone et al 2001, 32). To be sure, very few teachers, and certainly none of their unions, are opposed to on-going opportunities for further education and training. Many, however, are very concerned about the control over teacher learning being taken entirely out of the hands of teachers - leaving others with the power to determine unilaterally what shall be learned, how much, when, and in what manner. These are not idle worries. Governments in British Columbia and Ontario have already imposed externally-controlled “professional colleges” on teachers in Canada, and other provincial governments are following these events closely. As will be explained in more detail below, a number of provinces have also introduced compulsory professional development programs for teachers, although they vary widely in their intent, and in the ways in which they have been developed and implemented. In some cases at least, teachers and their organizations have had little or no say in determining what the structure, process or content of these regimes has been, or whether these regimes have been designed to build on existing teacher knowledge, or in opposition to it.

3. Objectives - This study will focus on exploring the following three research questions:

- a) What are the current forms, contents and outcomes of the full array of formal and informal learning activities of Canadian teachers, in their workplace, in the home and in the community?
- b) How have changes in the conditions of teachers' work, and other general social conditions, in the past five years, affected teachers' overall learning practices?
- c) To what extent have these changes affected teachers differentially, in relation to factors of gender, age, race, ethnicity, family status, dis/ability, and region.

4. Research Strategy and Methods

Introduction - In the 1998-99 NALL study, an eight-page questionnaire was mailed to 1945 randomly sampled teachers who worked in English language publicly funded schools across all 10 provinces. Briefly described, the questionnaire surveyed a number of themes - demographic background, workload, recent formal learning pursuits, and a number of sections relating to their informal learning at their workplace, home and in the community. Based on the response rate of approximately 40%, the findings demonstrated high involvement in both formal and informal learning. Teachers reported devoting an average of 8 hours a week to formal studies. 86% of respondents stated they had been involved in at least one formal learning activity - defined as a course, conference or workshop – during the previous twelve months, and most had engaged in two or more such activities.

In relation to teachers' self-reporting on their own informal learning, there were also a number of interesting pictures presented. Overall, teachers estimated that they devoted an average of at least 10 hours a week to informal learning activities related to either their paid employment, housework, community work or their general interests. Virtually all (98%) of teachers recognized that they had engaged in informal learning in their workplaces, in ways which assisted them in their present jobs, and/or would do so in new work situations. In addition, when asked what informal learning they may have done in their own homes, over two-thirds stated they had benefited from such learning, including such themes as home repair and renovation, gardening, cooking, child and elder care, and budgeting. Over three-fifths also indicated involvement with community volunteer organizations, and almost three-quarters of this group listed learning in areas such as interpersonal skills and organizational/ leadership skills. The unanswered question was how they organized their time to accomplish all this.

To answer this question, the second phase of the study involved a sampled group of 13 Ontario secondary school teachers involved in the national survey, who agreed to participate in an in-depth diary study. Blank 24-hour diary sheets were distributed, and for one complete week in November 1999, and a second week in April 2000, participants kept an hour-by-hour log of every activity in which they were engaged, at school, home and in the community. In addition, they were asked to make notations about what, if anything, they learned during each of these activities. These diaries resulted in a rich source of data about teachers' work schedules, and their formal and informal learning practices. Among other findings, these teachers reported on average seven hours per week of informal learning activity related directly to their work, as well as an additional 5.7 hours of other learning activity.

Finally, four of the Ontario respondents were selected for in-depth interviews, to follow up on the activities they had reported in their diary logs, and to develop more complete pictures of how they saw their own learning processes in relation to their work structures and processes. Through these interviews, it was clear that all four respondents saw the recent government reform initiatives (curriculum restructuring, student assessment and reporting, compulsory professional development, etc) as impacting significantly on both their informal and formal learning activities.

Proposed Research - As part of the proposed CRI project, two studies involving Canadian teachers will be undertaken.

A. National Survey - First, a national questionnaire survey will be undertaken in the Spring of 2004, correlating both with the 1999 survey of teacher learning as well as with the current CRI national survey. Approximately 2000 elementary and secondary teachers will be randomly selected from the membership lists of the statutory teachers' associations in the ten provinces, and questionnaire forms mailed to their homes. The survey form will replicate many of the questions asked in the previous study,

to allow for comparisons over the five-year interval – background demographic information, workload, recent formal learning pursuits, and a number of sections relating to their informal learning at their workplace, home and in the community. Additional questions will be added, to explore the ways in which teachers' work process and conditions have changed over the previous half-decade, and the effects these changes may have had on their formal and informal learning practices. In addition, some of the demographic questions will be enhanced, to promote responses which will enrich the analysis of how changes in work may have affected teachers' learning routines differentially, based on their own backgrounds (age, gender, race/ethnicity, rural/northern location, dis/ability, job status). Respondents will also be asked to consider identifying themselves, for possible inclusion in the follow-up regional studies (see below). Stamped, pre-addressed return envelopes will be included in the package, and follow-up phone calls will be employed to increase response rates. The data from these questionnaires will be in-putted and then analyzed in the usual manner.

B. Regional Studies - Since the NALL 1999 survey, various Canadian provincial governments have mandated professional learning regimes for publicly employed teachers. Provinces have varied considerably in the ways in which these plans have been conceptualized, developed, and implemented. For this study, three provinces will be selected, based on their varied approaches to legislating teachers' professional development. In Ontario, the government unilaterally developed and imposed a plan under which teachers must successfully complete a compulsory, state-regulated, formal program of 14 mandatory courses over a five-year period in order to maintain their certification to teach. By comparison, in Nova Scotia a professional learning plan was developed over several years by a joint committee of stakeholders. Under the plan, administered by the Nova Scotia Teachers' Union, teachers use a standardized form to self-report annually on learning activities (formal and informal) they have undertaken during the previous school year. They are required to report a minimum of 100 hours of learning activity over each five year cycle, with no tie to either performance appraisal or maintenance of the teaching certificate. Finally, in Alberta, the Ministry of Education, through discussions with the Alberta Teachers' Association, developed a Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation (TGSE) policy, which includes a mandatory professional growth plan to document teacher learning. Monitored by the employer, these growth plans can include both formal and informal learning, chosen by the individual teacher. They are not tied to maintenance of the license to teach, but they are part of the system of performance appraisal.

Given these significant differences in professional development regimes for teachers, more qualitative studies will be undertaken in these three provinces once the national teacher learning survey has been completed and analyzed. These explorations will add to the data provided in the national survey, but also allow for a separate analysis of the ways in which specific government policies, and other factors, have affected both the formal and informal learning patterns of teachers in these three jurisdictions.

Interviews - In each of the three provinces, approximately 10 teachers, selected from those who participated in the national survey and identified themselves, will be interviewed for approximately 30 to 40 minutes. The purpose of these interviews would be threefold:

- a) to clarify, and further explore the information provided in their survey questionnaire forms;
- b) to explore in more detail their own involvement in, and their observations and opinions about, the professional learning program in their province;
- c) to explore the extent to which their involvement in this provincial program, and in their own wider formal and informal learning practices, have been influenced by their own background and situation as well as by the changing conditions of work.

These would be semi-structured telephone interviews, with as much room for open-ended, reflective,

responses as possible. The interviews will all be conducted by one graduate student, who would be hired, trained and supported by the central research team. These interviews will be taped, transcribed, and systematically analyzed.

Focus Groups – Following up on the interviews, approximately six focus groups, each consisting of six to nine teachers, will be conducted in each of the three provinces. Participants for these focus groups will be selected with the assistance of the respective provincial teachers' associations. While attention will be paid to having the selections made as randomly as possible, efforts will also be taken to ensure adequate representation across a number of important demographic factors, including age, gender, ethnicity/race, urban/rural, job status and dis/ability. It is also possible, depending upon the perceived comfort level of "minority" participants, that special focus groups might be constructed, involving mainly or only these participants. Protocols for these focus groups will include issues relating to changes in teachers' work, workplace relations and the respective provincial professional learning programs, which emerged from the analysis of the data from the national survey and the subsequent interviews. These focus groups, held in different parts of each of the three provinces, will likely run for 1 ½ to 2 hours. They will be audio (and possibly video) taped, transcribed, and systematically analyzed. While the development of the protocols, and the overall planning for this activity will be undertaken by the central research team, the actual selection, organization, and undertaking of the focus groups will be coordinated and conducted by the project's contact person in each of the three provincial teacher association. However, all three coordinators will be assisted by one graduate student, hired and trained by the central research team, who will travel to the provinces in question to provide this support.

5. Role of Each Team Member - This overall sectoral teacher study (national survey and provincial studies) will be coordinated by the central research team (Harry Smaller, Rosemary Clark and David Livingstone), including direct responsibility for the design, administration and analysis of the national survey, as well as the overall coordination and subsequent analysis of the regional studies. The research partners from the provincial teacher federations will assume responsibility for provision of randomly sampled names and addresses of teachers to be included in the national survey, as well as coordinating all aspects of the teacher interviews and focus groups undertaken in the three designated provinces.

6. Training Process and Responsibilities of Students - Over the course of the project, three graduate students will be selected by the central research team, and, where needed, will undertake training sessions in the relevant quantitative and/or qualitative methods required for participating in the various stages of this project. One student will work with the research team to conceptualize and design the national questionnaire survey, and then assume responsibility for the coordination, printing, distribution and collection of the survey forms. A second student will subsequently work with the research team to design the telephone interview study, and then assume responsibility for undertaking the interviews. The third student would be involved with the focus group activity, as explained above.

7. Dissemination of Results – In the first instance, once the results of the national teacher survey have been analyzed, they will be written up in a number of different forms for dissemination. Information sheets will be developed for distribution to officials in all provincial teachers' associations for use in policy, development and planning, as well as for workshopping with local teacher professional development groups. At the same time, two modes of articles will be written – first, more traditional academic articles for dissemination in conferences, academic journals, ministry of education and faculty of education officials; secondly, articles for more general readership for circulation to both the popular, and more specialized educational, media. Near the end of the project, once the data from the interviews and focus groups were analyzed, another series of articles will be prepared and disseminated. It is also possible that a monograph would be developed once the entire research program was completed.