

Impact of Research on Education Policy and Teachers' Lives in Canada

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A. Studies of Teacher Learning: Opening Eyes and Influencing Policy

Until 1998, there was no Canadian research on teachers' informal learning. In fact, teachers not only exemplify formal learning in their practice, but are themselves the products of many years of formal education. It was therefore understandable when teachers and education policy makers in Canada discussed their own learning that they thought almost exclusively in terms of formal learning. Teacher learning meant taking more university or education courses or attending conferences and organized workshops.

All that changed with the national study of Formal and Informal Teacher Learning done by the WALL predecessor, the NALL Network (New Approaches to Lifelong Learning). The groundbreaking research done by Harry Smaller et al (essentially the same core research group as in the Teacher Work and Learning study in the current WALL network) is available through links on the WALL website (<http://www.wallnetwork.ca>).

The NALL study, also sponsored by the Canadian Teachers' Federation, sent a questionnaire entitled "The Canadian Teachers' Learning Survey" to over 1900 English-speaking teachers in 9 provinces during the 1998-99 school year. Following the lead of the larger NALL survey of learning habits of the Canadian population, the questionnaire clearly defined formal and informal learning in advance. Teachers were asked, often for the first time in an organized study, to think about and quantify their learning in their home, their community, and from peers in their workplaces.

Not surprisingly, 86% of teachers participated regularly in formal learning, compared to 60% of the general labour force population surveyed by NALL. Teachers also spent almost 12 hours per week on such learning, about an hour more than other workers. Teachers did not report as many hours spent on informal learning per week (10.3 hours per week on average), however, as other workers did (14.8 hours per week), although a full 98% of them reported learning on the job. The fact that few teachers still self-identified as learning in the home, for example, indicates that in 1998 teachers still thought of learning primarily in terms of formal courses. Only 3% of teachers reported learning anything about cooking in the previous year, which either indicates that teachers are terrible cooks, or else they didn't recognize such self-improvement as constituting learning.

One key statistic that helped silence the casual critics of “older” teachers as somehow less-engaged was the NALL Teacher Study’s finding that teachers with more than 21 years of experience actually did more formal learning (average 14.9 hours per week) than those with less than 20 years (8.8 hours) or 11-20 years (10.8 hours). Also, women teachers with children living at home spent more hours in formal learning than childless women or men with or without children. The research was invaluable at debunking these outmoded stereotypes.

As a follow up to the questionnaire study, the NALL group conducted in-depth interviews and a time-use diary study. One interesting observation of this project was that the same subjects reported more weekly hours learning in the time diaries than they identified in the original questionnaire, possibly because the very process of reflection required as they filled out the daily diaries helped them to better recognize their own informal learning.

The NALL study, which received widespread coverage by teacher federations across Canada, started to change not only the way teachers thought about their own learning, but also how public policy was shaped. In 1999, they also included informal options as learning activities of equal validity to traditional academic courses. By 2000, the College had issued a Professional Learning Framework which remains the critical foundation for choosing, organizing and recognizing teacher learning activities. As well as academic or additional qualifications courses, it urges teachers to choose from among such equally important choices as professional networking, personal reading and/or research projects, and learning through practice. With the official issuance of this framework as a guide to the entire profession, informal learning had “arrived” as an integral feature of education policy as it affected teacher learning.

Partly because of these moves to value informal as well as formal learning, the teachers of Ontario were outraged by their Conservative government’s mandatory learning program enacted in 2001 as the Professional Learning Program. This law required all certified Ontario teachers to complete 14 compulsory courses in a five-year period or lose their license to teach. Teachers were insulted at the insinuation that they did not learn on their own, and that they needed to take this very prescriptive set of approved courses. The NALL research data were widely quoted in teacher federation literature as evidence that the program was completely unnecessary. A very successful boycott of the Professional Learning Program ensued, and one of the first announcements by the new McGuinty Liberal government on being elected in late 2003 was to cancel the program.

The WALL sub-group studying teacher learning and work in 2003-04 has further explored Canadian informal and formal learning trends. It particularly identified three target provinces with

very different mandated learning regimes: Ontario's legislated Professional Learning Program, a less prescriptive Professional Development Profile requirement in Nova Scotia for 100 hours of learning within 5 years, and the even more self-directed (albeit still decreed by government Regulation) Teacher Growth, Supervision and Evaluation Policy in Alberta. The study found that while there were no significant differences between teachers in the three provinces and those elsewhere who reported taking a formal course in the previous year, and no significant differences among provinces in the amount of informal learning. The only significant differences found in the study were that teachers in the provinces with mandated learning reported much higher workload increases and stress increases than those in other provinces. This finding, that legislating what teachers must learn has little impact on learning but much impact on work intensification and stress, is a very valuable one for teacher unions to use with governments in developing ongoing education policies. The findings were reported nationally at a conference on school law and education policy in 2005, and have been used with the Ontario government in ongoing talks this year developing new policies and programs for teacher learning including the recent enactment of two additional professional development days per year.

B. Teacher Workload Studies: Self-Affirming and Valuable for Public Relations

University-based research into teacher workloads during the last decade has been just as valuable for teacher union public relations programs, and for teachers to use with parents and the public when explaining what their job entails. The right wing media and complaining parents are quick to cite the long summer holidays and the 9 to 3:30 school day as evidence that teachers don't work very hard. In rebuttal, teachers have traditionally been able to defend themselves anecdotally. Recently, however, teachers have been able to point to research findings to prove that in fact they DO work very long hours, much of it unpaid. They have been able to counter their community critics by saying "You may work 50 weeks a year for 40 hours per week, but I work 50 hours per week for 40 weeks. In effect, we get exactly the same amount of vacation!"

Table 1 shows the results of three recent university-based research studies into Canadian teacher workload. Several teachers' federations have also done their own research projects within the past five years, which can be found at websites for the Alberta Teachers Association, British Columbia Teachers Federation, and Saskatchewan Teachers Federation.

Table 1

Study	Date	Work Hours	Other Findings/Features
Smaller et al, WALL (Can. Teachers Learning Practices and Workload Issues)	2005	50.2 hours/week	Up from the 48 hours/week reported in the 1998 NALL-CTF survey. Teachers also reported 8 hours/wk of formal learning and 11 hours/wk informal learning.
Smaller et al, NALL (time-use diary study of Ontario secondary teachers)	2001	48.7 hours/week	17% more hours per week than same teachers reported on 1999 NALL questionnaire. Teachers also reported 13 hrs/wk informal learning
Harvey and Spinney, St. Mary's University (time-use diary study of Nova Scotia teachers)	2000	52.5 hours/week	Less than half (26.2 hrs) was instructional time. 90% of teachers reported stress and feelings of despair.

Partly because of such research and the support it provides for sagging teacher morale, there has been a weakening of the teacher-bashing rhetoric of many governments in Canada and elsewhere. Now, instead of blaming lazy teachers, educational reforms have focussed on improving student success including test scores and on rewriting curriculum.

Many more excellent examples of education research which have shaped Canadian education policy and teachers lives could be cited, of course, especially research by such OISE/UT luminaries as Michael Fullan, Michael Hargreaves and Lorna Earl. Their work has been particularly influential in Ontario, where the Deputy Minister of Education Ben Levin has created a very strong pro-research climate, in which Michael Fullan is a special advisor to the Premier and Lorna Earl is Researcher in Residence to the Ministry of Education. Many Ontario schools actually observe what they call "Fullan Days" in which they focus on building learning communities to improve student performance. However, the research I have focussed on in this brief paper has been performed by partnerships of academics with teacher federations. Such a partnership allows input and expertise from the profession to inform the research design, and also benefits from wide dissemination of results to policy makers. Results shape union policies and give more credence to the positions we take with politicians and Ministry bureaucrats. Academic writing is often simplified because union

partners insist on readability and practical application of results, so that academic research is rendered more accessible and relevant to policy makers than it might otherwise be in its traditional forms of discourse. In other words, everyone benefits!

C. Research Papers

The research papers cited here as exemplary academic-union partnerships include:

Harvey, Andrew and Jamie Spinney. Life On and Off the Job: A Time-Use Study of Nova Scotia Teachers. Saint Mary's University, March 2000. <http://www.nstu.ca/pklot/TeachersTimeUse.pdf>

Smaller, Harry, Paul Tarc, Fabrizio Antonelli, Rosemary Clark, Doug Hart and David Livingstone. Canadian Teachers' Learning Practices and Workload Issues: Results from a National Teacher Survey and Follow-Up Focus Groups. *Work and Lifelong Learning Network* (2005). http://www.wallnetwork.ca/resources/Smaller_Clark_Teachers_Survey_Jun2005.pdf

Smaller, Harry, Rosemary Clark, Doug Hart and David Livingstone. Informal/Formal Learning and Workload Among Ontario Secondary School Teachers. *New Approaches to Lifelong Learning* (2001). <http://www.nall.ca/res/39learning&workload.htm>

Smaller, Harry, Rosemary Clark, Doug Hart, David Livingstone and Zahra Noormohammed. Teacher Learning, Informal and Formal: Results of a Canadian Teachers' Federation Survey. *New Approaches to Lifelong Learning* (2000). <http://www.nall.ca/res/14teacherlearning.htm>

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