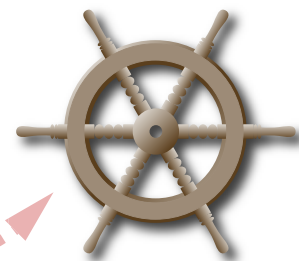


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Issues in educational research and links to improving student learning and well-being

by Debbie McIsaac. NSTU Executive Staff Officer, Professional Development

Recently I attended the American Educational Research Association 2015 Annual Meeting and conference, *Toward Justice: Culture, Language, and Heritage in Education Research and Praxis*, along with approximately 14,000 educators, graduate students, researchers and policy makers with diverse interests and expertise in education. On the last and fifth day of the conference I crossed paths in a session with one of our teachers from the South Shore Regional School Board, Ian Kent. In his words, he was blown away with the sheer volume of sessions and keynotes referencing every topic you could possibly think of relating to education. He appreciated the Canadian context of the referenced research which reminded him of how 'lucky' we are to be teaching where we are with the supports we have, as well as being able to attend sessions that were relevant to his personal and professional development.

The theme for this conference was a call to examine the meaning of culture, language, and heritage in education research and praxis with the aim of advancing justice, both locally and globally. A great deal of the research presented, in over 2,600 sessions, focused on how experiences of people are shaped by principles and practices of justice and how scholarly interests can align more closely with the interests of justice as they impact those who have, and continue to be marginalized and excluded.

Much of the focus in the presentations was on identifying the link between what is happening in educational research, the issues in education and possible resolutions to assist in improving learning and well-being of students. With the overwhelming number of sessions offered, covering so many diverse topics of research, selection can be a challenge. Following the main theme of social justice, I was able to attend, to name a few, presentations on the impact of putting listening at the centre of interactions in educational settings and what that means for enacting justice; giving students a voice in providing valuable input towards improved educational and social

conditions in schools and communities; understanding the relationship between social justice education and its impact on adolescent empowerment; the consequences of neoliberal policies such as standardization, on school reform and student learning; and national and international perspectives on teacher satisfaction and working conditions. In consideration of my professional interests at this time and where we, as an organization, are in the context of an education review and the recent release of the Minister's Action Plan, *The 3 Rs: Renew, Refocus, Rebuild*, I decided to focus my time and energy on sessions dealing with issues of teacher workload and teacher satisfaction.

Research tells us the most significant influence on student learning, after socio-economic status, is the quality of the teacher-student interaction. Research and our own experience also tell us that workload is the single greatest impediment to ensuring the quality of the teacher-student relationship and the ability of teachers and administrators to learn new strategies to assist students. Teacher satisfaction and working conditions not only impacts teacher recruitment and retention, but also can attribute to student achievement either positively or adversely. Results of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) in 2013, which surveyed 34 countries and education systems focused on working conditions and school learning environments, seeking to increase understanding of the impact of multiple aspects of teachers' experiences and practices on the teaching profession and conditions for high quality teaching and learning. This study shows that teacher -job satisfaction has a significant impact on the learning environment, which in turn, is impacted by policy decisions.

Research has shown that teachers who are less satisfied and have negative perceptions of working conditions are more likely to leave their positions, which in turn can have negative effects on student achievement. In the United States, a recent study showed that almost half of

new teachers leave in the first five years of entering the profession, with disproportionately higher attrition in high poverty and lower performing schools. Teachers reported that they are more likely to leave due to poor working conditions than low salary.

Perceptions regarding administrative support also have a growing influence on teacher satisfaction. A study conducted on school principals' leadership looks at the principals' contribution to student achievement through their impact on the school, its organization and climate and upon teachers and teaching. The impact principals have on the organization of teacher work, school organization, and relationships between school and community, influences the climate and conditions under which the staff, especially teachers, work. This influences teacher satisfaction and feelings of self efficacy. Dr. Charles Ungerleider speaks to the increasingly demanding role of the school principal and the ever-challenging range of responsibilities. There is an increasing authority placed upon the principal to meet the demands of social diversity, special needs, retaining students, competing in the world economy, and the overall demands of school accountability. The data provides a clear indication that principals need to be visionary leaders, experts at teaching and learning, instructional leaders, human resource managers, financial managers, etc., with the ability to build collaborative, positive school climates to create an environment to enrich student learning.

Throughout the sessions I attended, the data and conversations held, are a clear indication that teachers and



administrators

both locally and globally are facing challenging times. To get a clearer picture where educators in Nova Scotia fit into the larger picture, the NSTU has entered into a research study with Dr. Kevin Kelloway, Canada Research Chair in Occupational Health and Psychology and Dr. Lori Francis, Professor of Psychology at Saint Mary's University. The study will look at the demands on teachers' time in relation to doing work-related tasks each day, both at school and at home. The demands on teachers' time has increased considerably, impacting on health and well-being as well as the work environment. As we so often hear, a teacher's working conditions are a student's learning conditions therefore, to provide the best possible education, the teacher's workload must be manageable and realistic.

The research will involve a sample of teachers in the public school system taking part in a "day reconstruction" study in which they will complete a survey detailing the activities of the day through the use of an electronic platform to distribute the survey and collect the data. The study is scheduled to take place mid-May with the results made available by the end of June. If contacted, I encourage you to take part in the study and contribute to a piece of very important data that will endeavour to capture the demands on teachers' time.

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