

Working Conditions

*Experiences of Elementary
and Secondary Teachers in
Ontario's Public Schools*

Research

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“Teachers in secondary have no idea how good they have it. They have a way more relaxed day. They have way more freedom.”

“Elementary teachers are running around like hamsters on a wheel.”

Reflections of teachers who have taught in ‘both worlds.’

Acknowledgements

The quotations which run throughout this report are the verbatim comments of elementary and secondary teachers who have taught in “both worlds.”

ETFO thanks all the Ontario teachers who participated in the research for this report.

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OVERVIEW

“It is ten times easier in secondary.”

Working conditions are more favourable for secondary teachers. That is the simple conclusion of our research on the experiences of elementary and secondary teachers in Ontario’s public schools.

Even though differences on many separate measures appear to be small, the collective effect of these differences, most of which favour secondary teachers, is likely to produce a distinct and relatively more positive secondary school culture or ethos. This ethos will almost certainly include a greater sense, on the part of teachers, of fair treatment by their schools and districts; it is also likely to be associated with higher levels of morale and job satisfaction. Evidence from many sources suggests that perceptions and emotions of this sort, triggered by working conditions, shape how teachers interact with students.

Clarifying possible differences in the working conditions of elementary and secondary teachers was the primary purpose for the study. Both survey and interview evidence provided an unambiguous answer to the question of differences between the two panels. There are, in brief, many differences and these differences overwhelmingly favour secondary teachers.

Secondary teachers rated their working conditions higher than elementary teachers overall and for seven of the nine broad categories. Only working conditions created by the provincial policy context and external influences on teachers’ working conditions were rated more favourably by elementary than secondary teachers and only those differences on external influences were statistically significant.

Secondary teachers rated 71% of their working conditions at least slightly more favourably than did elementary teachers. Twenty of the 24 (83%) differences in ratings which reached statistical significance favoured secondary teachers’ working conditions.

When teachers who had worked at both levels were asked about the main differences in the working conditions they experienced as elementary and secondary teachers, teachers were unanimous in the view that working conditions were more favourable in secondary schools. Almost all indicated that workload volume in secondary schools was less demanding than it had been in elementary schools. The complexity of their work in secondary schools, almost all claimed, was also much reduced.

Insofar as *teacher working conditions are student learning conditions*, better working conditions would seem to be an obvious focus for school improvement. This might be labelled an “organic” approach to school improvement, as distinct from school improvement planning, a decidedly “strategic” approach, which has been so popular for the past decade and yet so disappointing in its effectiveness.

ABOUT THE STUDY

“In secondary I can breathe versus the faster pace in elementary which leaves me exhausted at the end of each day.”

This study follows earlier research, *Teacher Working Conditions that Matter: Evidence for Change* (2006), sponsored by the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO). The earlier research looked at the working conditions of elementary teachers and the consequences of these conditions for the nature and quality of classroom instruction and student learning.

The working conditions “that matter” provided the starting point for this study. They are summarized below:

1. Workload volume

e. g., average hours per week devoted to instruction, lesson preparation, paperwork, lunch supervision

2. Classroom-level working conditions

e.g., number of students, familiarity with curriculum, motivation of students, available resources

3. Diversity of students taught

e.g., percentages of English language learners, those with special learning challenges

4. Access to technology and support for its use

e.g., access to phone, fax, email, computers, internet, proper training

5. School-level working conditions

e.g., clarity about roles and responsibilities, sense of school community, effective communication, involvement in decision making

6. District-level working conditions

e. g., competitive teacher salaries, pressure for change not excessive, support for professional development

7. Conditions created by the provincial policy context

e. g., changes introduced in past two or three years, rate of introduction, management of implementation

8. Conditions created by factors external to the school system

e. g., public views on teaching and teachers, media portrayal, employment opportunities

9. School leadership

e.g., helps set workable goals, encourages collaboration, gives useful feedback, models exemplary practices

The present study asked:

- How do the working conditions of elementary and secondary school teachers compare?
- What are some of the reasons for the differences in elementary and secondary school teachers' working conditions?
- How significant is the school organization as a source of differences in elementary and secondary school teachers' working conditions?

A Note on Methods

Evidence for the study was collected using two methods. The first was a phone interview with a small number of teachers who had recently worked in both elementary and secondary schools. Almost all interviewees had moved from elementary to secondary schools where they had been for an average of two years at the time of the interviews.

The second and primary data collection method was a survey. Several items asked for demographic information, while the remaining (61 items) asked about working conditions. The survey was distributed in two ways:

via mail to secondary teachers in three Ontario districts (returned in individual, self-addressed and stamped envelopes).

via email notification (through ETFO's mail list) requesting teachers to respond to an on-line version of the survey developed and managed by the researcher.

In total, survey responses were received from 264 secondary teachers in three districts, 126 elementary teachers in the same three districts and 2,639 additional elementary teachers from other districts in the province. Results are summarized in the remainder of the report.

RESULTS

1. How do the working conditions of elementary and secondary school teachers compare?

“I only have to plan for two or three subjects in secondary versus planning for every subject in elementary.”

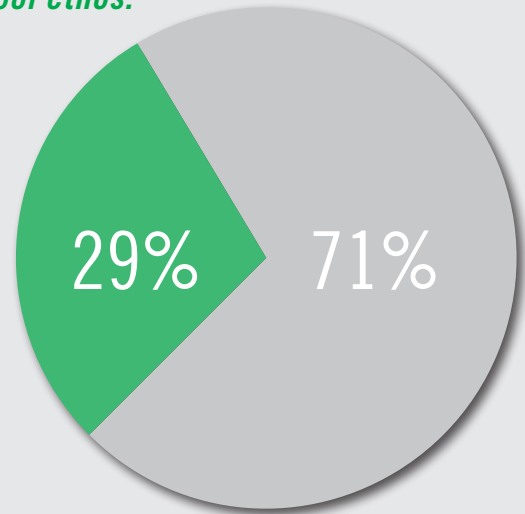
“I can get 90% of my work done in secondary during the day.”

Clarifying possible differences in the working conditions of elementary and secondary teachers was the primary purpose for the study. Both survey and interview evidence provided an unambiguous answer to this question of differences between the two panels. There are, in brief, many differences and these differences overwhelmingly favour secondary teachers.

Each item in the survey measured an individual working condition; and each item explored an aspect of the nine broad categories of working conditions described above (page 8). As Figure 1 illustrates, secondary teachers rated 71% (43/61) of these working conditions at least slightly more favourably than did elementary teachers. Twenty of the 24 (83%) differences in ratings which reached statistical significance favoured secondary teachers' working conditions.

Focused on the nine broad categories of working conditions (and the overall results), Figure 2 illustrates just how comprehensive the

The collective effect of these differences is likely to produce a different – and more positive – secondary school ethos.



■ % of all working conditions favouring elementary teachers
■ % of all working conditions favouring secondary teachers

FIGURE 1:

Comparing Overall Favourableness of Elementary and Secondary Teachers' Working Conditions

differences are favouring secondary schools. This figure describes the average responses of teachers, on a scale of 1 (least favourable) to 6 (most favourable), to items measuring each broad category. Secondary teachers rated their working conditions higher than elementary teachers overall and for seven of the nine broad categories (note that higher levels of Weekly Hours and Student Diversity were assumed to create more intense and complex working conditions for both elementary and secondary teachers). Only working conditions created by the Provincial Policy Context and External Influences on teachers' working conditions were rated more favourably by elementary than secondary teachers and differences in the ratings of the Provincial Policy Context were not statistically significant.

Differences reached statistical significance in five of the nine categories – Classroom Conditions, Student Diversity, School Conditions, District Conditions, and External Influences. Only External Influences favoured elementary teachers.

Only working conditions affected by external influences were rated slightly more favourably by elementary teachers.

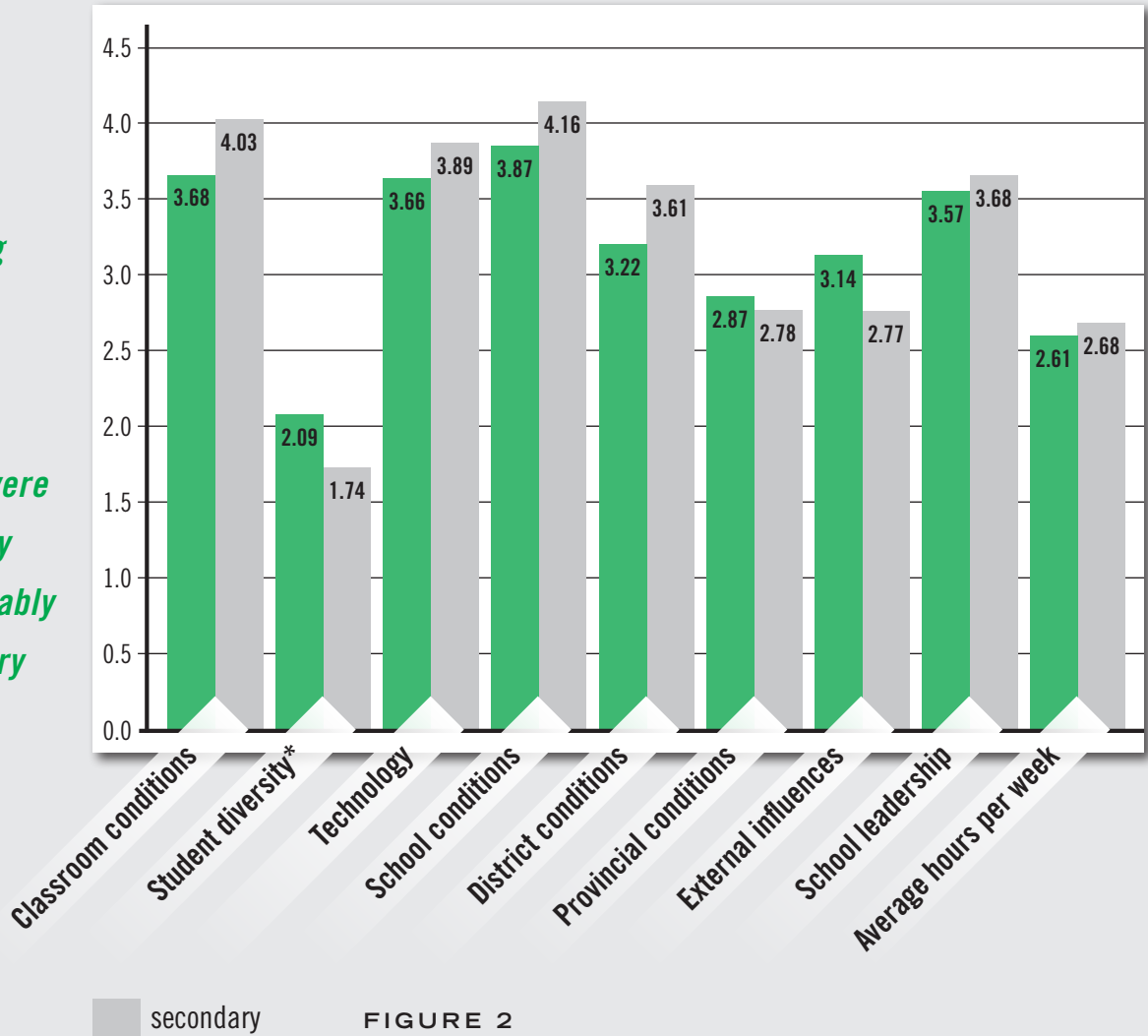


FIGURE 2

**Elementary and Secondary Teachers:
Favourableness of Eight Categories of Working Conditions**

**lower rating more favourable*

The survey results are reinforced by the results of the interviews conducted with 12 teachers who had worked recently in both elementary and secondary schools.

When asked about the main differences, respondents were unanimous in the view that working conditions were more favourable for secondary teachers. Almost all indicated that workload volume in secondary schools was less demanding than it had been in elementary schools. The complexity of their work in secondary schools, almost all claimed, was also much reduced.

2. What are some of the reasons for the differences in elementary and secondary school teachers' working conditions?

“In secondary we only have two semesters versus the three semesters in elementary. This reduces the amount of reporting and paperwork in secondary.”

“In secondary when I am ‘on call’ I can bring my marking into the class and am also exempted from duty that day.”

The second question for the study inquired about possible reasons for differences in elementary and secondary teachers' working conditions. Results provide a partial but promising response to this question. Districts appear to play a key role in moderating *at least the perception of* differences.

When responses from teachers across the three districts were compared, there were significantly different responses on 24 items. Differences on 20 of these 24 items favoured the working conditions of secondary teachers. But this pattern of differences was not uniform among the districts, as Figure 3 indicates. Secondary teachers in District One reported more favourable working conditions on about three quarters (74%) of the survey items. In Districts Two and Three, however, the proportion of items favouring secondary school working conditions dropped to about 60%.

Plausible causes of the gap between the first district and the two others could be district culture, ethos or some other set of clearly “soft” district characteristics, with nevertheless powerful influences on how teachers think and feel about their work. A recent study, for example, suggests that the district has a significant impact on teachers' perceptions of conditions in their schools, affecting, indirectly, their sense of collective efficacy (Leithwood & Jantzi, in press).

The pattern of differences is not uniform, suggesting that districts play at least an indirect role in how teachers feel about their working conditions.

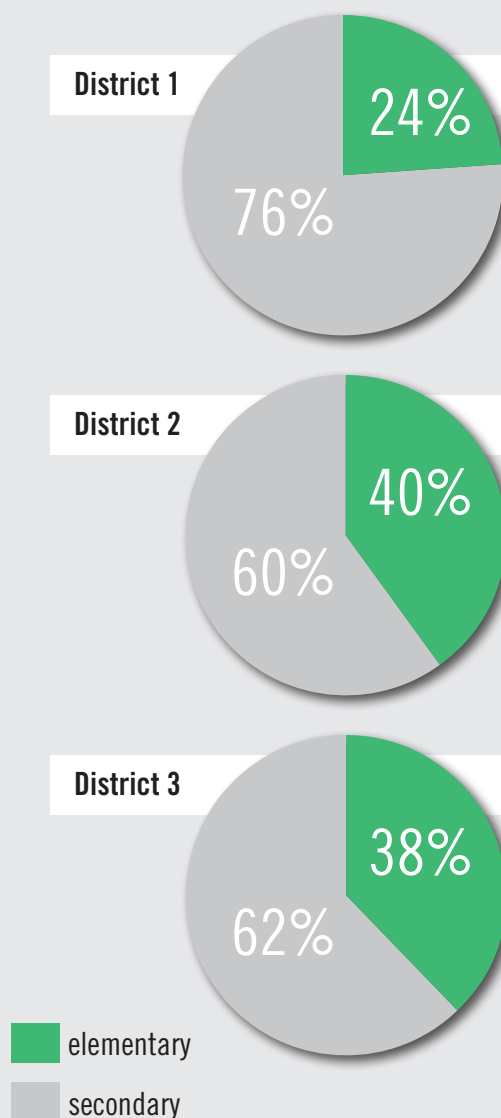


FIGURE 3
District Differences in Working Conditions Favouring Elementary as Compared with Secondary Teachers

3. How significant is the school organization as a source of differences in elementary and secondary school teachers' working conditions?

“In secondary we have exam weeks where we supervise exams and then can leave the school to go home to mark. These are weeks of no instruction for students.”

“I have a daily spare as well as a full hour for lunch in secondary.”

Asking how significant the school organization is as a source of differences in working conditions was the third question in the study. Two sets of items on the survey, on school-level working conditions and school leadership, addressed this question directly.

School-level working conditions. As Figure 4 shows, secondary teachers' responses were more positive than elementary teachers' on 14 of the 17 items measuring school-level working conditions; differences in the responses to 9 of these 14 items reached statistical significance. Responses to three items favoured elementary school-level working conditions, but only one of these differences was statistically significant (“teachers have opportunities to work together in small groups”). Of the broad categories of working conditions measured in the study, only classroom-level working conditions appeared to be a more significant source of differences in the experiences of elementary and secondary teachers.

The teachers who were interviewed in the study reinforced survey findings, claiming that school-level working conditions had a significant impact on their experience. When asked to compare the cultures in elementary and secondary, for example, most claimed there were more opportunities for school-wide collaboration in elementary, an advantage they attributed primarily to the smaller size of the school. Yet they also pointed to the department structure of their secondary schools and the significant opportunities for collegial collaboration which that

afforded. These teachers did not identify significant differences between elementary and secondary schools in opportunities for professional development, participation in decision making or the quality of school facilities. They also felt that there was more emphasis on academic achievement in their secondary schools, an emphasis which most teachers attributed to the possibility of students failing a course or grade in secondary schools. Grade retention had not been permitted in their former elementary schools.

While the teachers interviewed reported more communication between parents and teachers in their elementary schools, they also felt that parents could be “in your face.” This was much less the case in their secondary school experiences, which they often attributed to the greater respect parents awarded secondary teachers.

School leaders. The measure of school leadership included in the survey is based on a well-researched model of successful leadership practices (see Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2005). This view of leadership, suitably adapted, underlies several of the Ontario Ministry of Education's current efforts to further develop leadership in the province.

Only one of the three differences in working conditions favouring elementary teachers was statistically significant, namely – “teachers have opportunities to work together in small groups.”

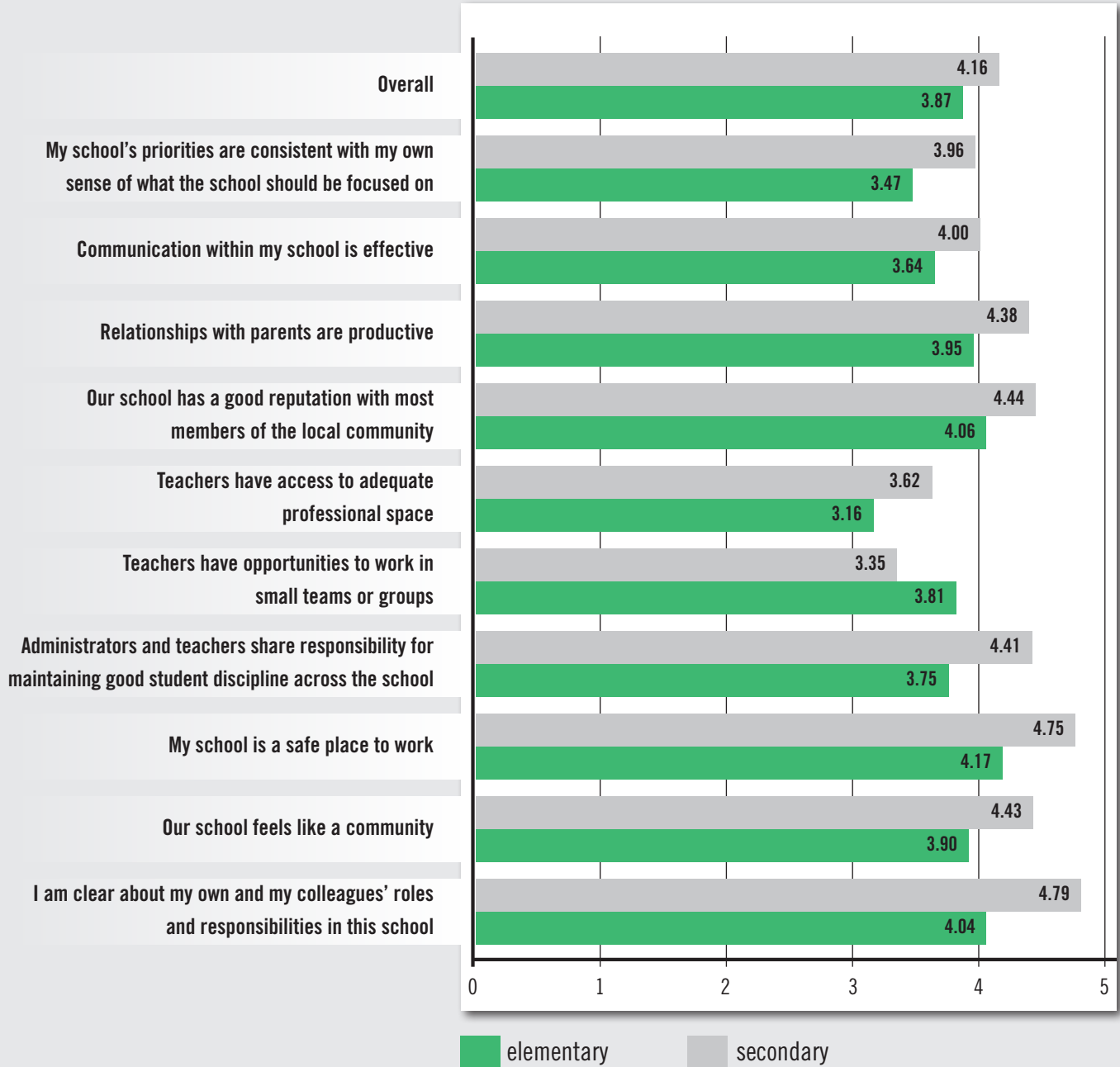


FIGURE 4

A Comparison of the Favourableness of School-Level Working Conditions of Elementary and Secondary Teachers*

** significant differences only*

Rooted in “transformational” approaches to leadership, the model used in the survey covers four broad categories of practices including: Setting Directions (two items), Developing Capacity (three items), Redesigning the Organization (three items) and Managing the Instructional Program (three items).

Figure 5 indicates that elementary and secondary teachers differed only slightly on their ratings of the four categories of leadership practices in their schools. These small differences, however, favoured secondary teachers in two of the four categories. Redesigning the Organization and Managing the Instructional Program were rated virtually the same by both groups of teachers.

Elementary and secondary teachers differed only slightly on their ratings of the four categories of leadership practices in their schools. But the research contains at least several surprises.

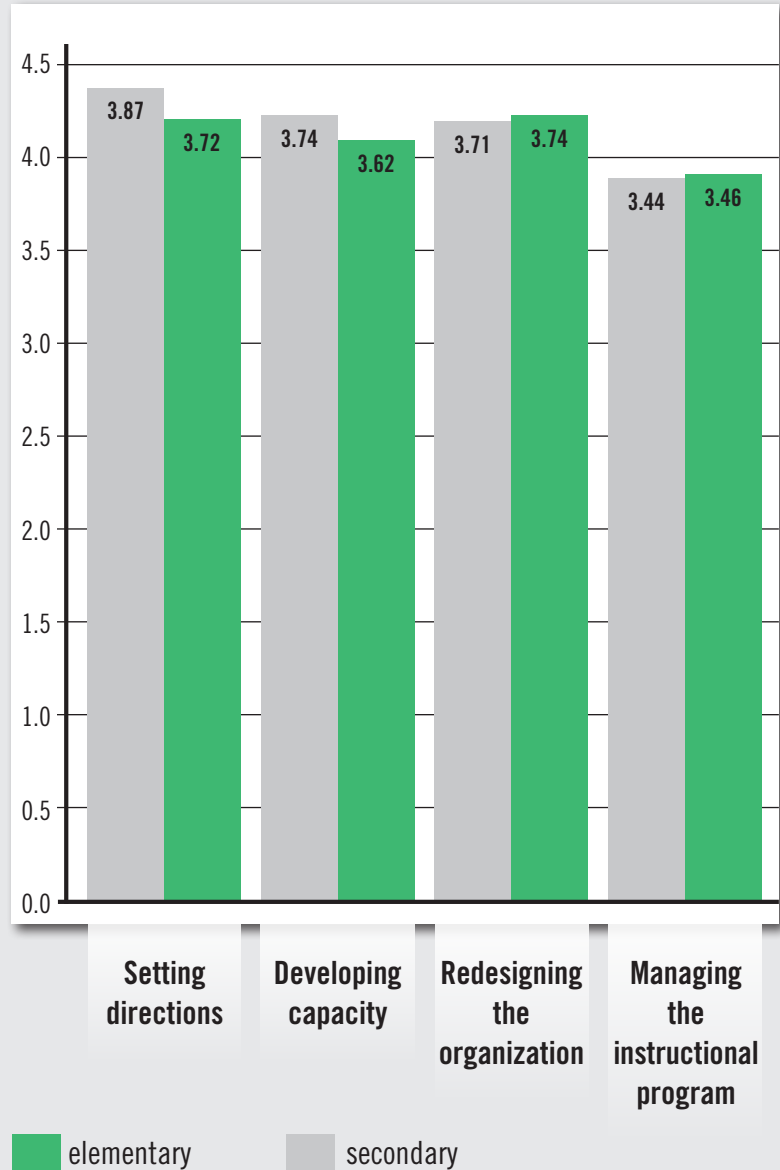


FIGURE 5
Elementary and Secondary Teachers’ Perceptions of Their School Leaders

Some surprises in the research

- Even though the provincial priority on literacy and mathematics has its most robust expression in elementary schools, secondary teachers nonetheless rated the clarity provided by their administrators about long-term mission and short-term goals higher than did elementary teachers.
- Because of such differences as school size and curriculum complexity, it is often assumed that elementary principals have more opportunities than secondary principals to support individual teacher efforts and to model exemplary practice. But the secondary teachers surveyed for this study rated their principals higher than their elementary colleagues on both sets of practices.
- Secondary schools are typically thought to struggle in their efforts to engage parents who, as their children get older, feel less welcome in the school and less clear about their purposes for engaging with the school. But secondary teachers in this study rated their school principals slightly higher than did their elementary counterparts on helping build productive relations with parents. This finding is a bit at odds with the comments from some of the teachers interviewed.

Overall, the impressions about school leadership derived from the survey were inconsistent with the views expressed by the teachers interviewed. Their near unanimous view was that elementary school principals were much more visible, gave them more feedback on their instruction, were more hands on and were more supportive. Opportunities for teachers to exercise leadership in their schools, however, seemed no different in elementary as compared with secondary schools.

CONCLUSION

Evidence from this study may not be easily generalized to the province.¹ Acknowledging this limitation, however, both the interview and survey evidence paint an unambiguous picture of differences in the perceived favourableness of working conditions for secondary and elementary teachers. These differences are especially marked with respect to classroom-level and school-level conditions. Evidence from this study also suggests that teachers' opinions about the favourableness of their working conditions are influenced in no small measure by the districts in which they work.

A substantial number of differences in the favourableness of working conditions experienced by secondary and elementary teachers reached statistical significance. Even putting aside the most extreme differences, however, the trend so clearly favours secondary teachers as to be an instance of a “synergistic interpretation”² – a term first coined in reference to the large, collective impact on students of many school conditions which individually have only small effects (see Scheerens & Bosker, 1997).

Applied to teachers' working conditions, this theory suggests that even though differences on many separate measures appear to be small, the collective effect of these differences, most of which favour secondary teachers, is likely to produce a distinct and relatively more positive secondary school culture or ethos. This ethos will almost certainly include a greater sense, on the part of teachers, of fair treatment by their schools and districts; it is also likely to be associated with higher levels of morale and job satisfaction. Evidence from many sources suggests that perceptions and emotions of this sort, triggered by working conditions, shape how teachers interact with students.³ Insofar as *teacher working conditions are student learning conditions*, better working conditions would seem to be an obvious focus for school improvement. This might be labelled an “organic” approach to school improvement, as distinct from school improvement planning, a decidedly “strategic” approach, which has been so popular for the past decade and yet so disappointing in its effectiveness.

1. The evidence regarding secondary teacher working conditions for this study came from teachers in just three of the province's school districts, so the results may not be readily extrapolated to other parts of the province. We can test the generalizability of the results in a modest way, however, by comparing the responses of elementary teachers in the three districts with the 2,765 responses of elementary teachers from across the province. In brief, the most striking results of this comparison suggest that, as compared with the larger provincial sample, elementary teachers from the three districts experience considerably less diversity among their students, perceive their district working conditions to be somewhat less favorable and view conditions created by the provincial policy context a bit less favourably.

2. This term is attributed to Scheerens and Bosker (1997).

3. Evidence about this issue is also reviewed in Leithwood (2006).

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