



NOT A PLATITUDE ON A PLACARD

THE LINK BETWEEN TEACHING CONDITIONS AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

BY SETH BERNSTEIN

If you visit enough education picket lines, or view enough education memes, you'll notice one of the more frequent slogans that appears around crisis time — “Teachers’ Working Conditions = Students’ Learning Conditions”. In the media narrative that foments conflict in these moments, any suggestion that “greedy teachers” want something more than money and benefits is typically dismissed. But what does that expression really mean? How do teachers’ working conditions — class size, support staff numbers, and salaries — connect with the student experience, and how is this represented in bargaining? Can the learning experience for students actually suffer due to a lack of bargaining?

CLASS SIZE

Public education is the single most important element in the maintenance of a democratic system... If... it [is] difficult to capture and hold the attention of students, then what and how they are taught is of little importance. What matters is the intensity of teaching put into them. We could do worse than to reduce classes from the typical twenty to thirty students down to ten. This would mean hiring more teachers and our public budgets tell us there is no money. A more important point is that there'll be even less money in a society of functionally illiterate citizens.

— John Ralston Saul, *The Doubter's Companion*

Though governments in Canada have tried to remove class size and composition (a reference to the range of student special needs) from the bargaining table (see the BC Liberals in 2002), the Supreme Court has recently affirmed teachers’ rights to bargain both. This is a critical decision. It is in

this space that unions can best counter austerity measures desired by governments, as it is much easier to find public support for smaller class sizes than it is to find support for a salary increase. In Ontario, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) recently successfully bargained down class caps for the Full-Day Kindergarten (FDK) program and, like other education unions, has been instrumental in establishing reduced caps at the grade levels.

As a parent of a kid who went through the Full Day Kindergarten program, ETFO’s recent cap deal came too late for my family. Left to the Ontario Liberal government, the FDK program featured essentially a limitless cap on class size as long as there were proportionate educators in the room (typically a teacher and an early childhood educator). Though we were grateful for the seamless day, the class size of 34 small children had clear, negative impacts throughout the year. We heard stories from other parents that included urinary tract infections due to their child not bothering with long bathroom lines, violent incidents, and overextended staff asking for assignments other than FDK. When ETFO entered into negotiations, one of their priorities was a hard cap on the FDK classes, and they managed to win a limit of 30.

As a high school teacher, I know what kind of impact class size can have on many different factors. But this anecdotal yet common understanding amongst educators has been clouded in the public eye over the past couple of decades by research that has called into question the impact of class size on achievement outcomes. Research by New Zealand professor John Hattie has been widely cited to suggest that class size does not matter...though he was actually suggesting that it matters less than a few other factors. Famously, Malcolm Gladwell suggested an inverted U-shaped relationship, where class size reductions can have a benefit if the class size starts large, but too small a class may be detrimental.

Recent research has supported teachers' implicit understanding: class size does impact achievement. But, missing from this discussion is the narrow measure of achievement that Hattie and Gladwell use (typically standardized test scores), and the holistic aspects of public education not captured by these measures. People for Education has called for "measuring what matters", including health, citizenship, socio-emotional skills, creativity, and quality learning environments. Without delving into whether or not it is necessary to attempt to quantify every aspect of education to satisfy the current technocratic paradigm that deems that only what is measured is what matters, it seems reasonable to assume that smaller class sizes would help with these aspects.

I'll offer an example; I teach at a non-semestered school where I see students for two periods of an average of 1 hour and 20 minutes each week. In my audio production classes, where students work on creative projects from their workstations and studio, this leaves me with a maximum of about five minutes per week per student in a class of 31 (that's the current cap. Rules permit up to 34 with

"flex factors" used by some boards — 10% of a school's classes can exceed cap by 10%). Cut the number of students in half, and I can get up to five minutes more per lesson, or 10 minutes more per week. This is time where I can sit with the student, listen to what they are working on, offer immediate feedback, check in with them and get a sense of how they are doing emotionally, and have a chance to really forge a connection. I can, and have, managed class sizes of over 30.

Don't get me wrong — students will generally learn and get their credit. With or without that extra 10 minutes per week, their achievement scores may be comparable...but this comes at a cost. The creative aspect of their projects may not be as strong. They may not feel as connected to me or to the classroom community. Some with higher support needs may not get as much of my personal attention as I would have liked to give them. And the pace that I have to maintain to engage with them at that minimal time budget can be punishing. It is hard to have that many micro-interactions in a workday, where every word you say matters.

With larger classes, not only am I not physically available to them as much, but I'm also at risk of being less emotionally available to them. And of course this assumes that all of the technology we use in the course is running smoothly. Schools used to have onsite technology support, but that was phased out years ago, and we now submit work tickets centrally that get fulfilled within an unpredictable time window.

Class size makes a huge difference in areas that are perhaps less visible during the school day. In high school, where a teacher's maximum student cap is 180 across six courses, 30 minutes of marking per month per student (roughly three assessments) totals



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90 hours per month. Lesson planning, meetings, mark inputs and extracurricular supervision take place during other times in the day. In theory, preparation time — always a point of tension in bargaining — provides 1 hr and 20 minutes per day to plan lessons (and, as a side note, the stereotype of a veteran teacher who recycles lessons is not one that I've come across in schools very frequently). This time can be eroded by on-call supervisions for teachers who need coverage, often to supervise extracurriculars.

These interruptions and daily realities explain why, for most, an intact preparation period is not enough time to prepare for three lessons the next day. This is why, in the late 90s, when Mike Harris attempted to have teachers teach seven out of eight periods, instead of six of eight, there was outright rebellion. It is also why bargaining on-call coverage language is so critical.

Bargaining class size is a critical mechanism for frontline workers to increase the intensity of the teaching and support that students receive.

SUPPORT STAFF

Education unions do not only represent teachers. Schools have office, custodial, and support staff, and all are critical to the functioning of a school not just as a location that provides services, but as a community hub as well. While decision-makers have bent to some pressure at the bargaining table to meet federation demands about teacher/student ratios, the lure of austerity budgeting has tended to hit other school-based staff hard over the past decade, with impacts that vary from region to region. Management's rationale of cutting non-classroom staff in order to "protect the classroom" grossly misrepresents the interwoven fabric of a school. Within the Toronto District School Board, it is not uncommon to hear of office staff reductions in schools of about 40-60% over the past 15 years.

At our school, and at others, the office staff are the frontline connection point for our at-risk students. They are the ones who can often flag a student in crisis. Fewer caring adults in the building, and workplace attrition forcing us to adopt "robo-calling" for student absences, impacts how we can support students who are in crisis. Phone calls home by an office staff member to communicate or investigate an absence offered clearer insight to help with school-based support, and often created a human connection between school and home.



There is another spillover effect: with fewer staff in the office, workload is downloaded to teachers, and uploaded to principals and vice principals, who in some cases may effectively act as office administrators, even answering phone calls and collecting school-based forms. These consequences are visible, but it is the invisible ones, with their impact on wellness of the community, that cut the deepest.

Support staff consist of the psychologists, social workers, early childhood educators and education assistants who support our students in the school (public health nurses were cut). At our school, we see our psychologists and social workers for a half-day a week. They often rotate through from year-to-year, creating a stream of new faces with little continuity for the student support team or students. Cutting these positions at a time when mental health awareness is at an all-time high betrays the core motives of decision-makers.

In an applied classroom at the secondary level, it is not uncommon for many students to have individualized education plans (IEPs). To meet some of the stipulations of those legally-binding IEPs, like 10-minutes of one-on-one time each class, a teacher would need to have three full-time education assistants (EAs) in the class with them. Instead, there might typically be two EAs per school.

Custodial staff have also been cut. Most schools are operating with a fraction of the caretakers they used to have a decade ago. Though they do their best to cover the shortfall, there are daily gaps that simply don't get met, with implications for the school as both a building, and as a learning space.

Bargaining support staff levels is integral to student well-being. In Ontario, some of the cuts have been slowed or partially reversed during recent bargaining sessions that have seen the education unions focus on this issue at the table.

WAGES AND BENEFITS

How much does an unemployed teacher or an unemployed, university-educated potential teacher really cost the state if integrated accounting methods are used? There are the direct social costs; the loss of a long-term investment in their training; the removal of their powers of consumption from the economy, and of their contribution to property values. Does all of that add up to less than the salary of a teacher? This is not a question which our systems of public accounting can entertain.

— John Ralston Saul, *The Doubter's Companion*

Education workers can internalize neoliberal narratives so as to not "upset" the public; this has been reflected in the past by coming to the bargaining table with pre-emptive offers of a wage freeze, and going to great pains to establish that "this [bargaining] is not about the money". I believe it's a mistake to operate within this paradigm; for one, bargaining is *almost always* about the money, even when not a salaries' issue — reducing class size costs money, for example. It also feeds into the race-to-the-bottom that austerity drives.

Most (though by no means all) of us are relatively well-paid. Other workers should have good remuneration, too. Neoliberal governments have been so effective at creating a disingenuous zero-sum bargaining framework, where any raise “must come out of the funding for students & classrooms”, that we collectively forget to question how a general suppression of wages and cutting of public service budgets is supposed to in any way benefit us. Education workers need to be active in the anti-austerity fight, and offer pervasive solidarity to workers in their communities, for the neoliberal plan to be countered effectively.

Teachers who are paid a good wage are able to focus on their jobs. In California, where teachers’ salaries have been relatively stagnant, and where housing costs can be high, reports have emerged of teachers moonlighting as Uber drivers, and Uber directly recruiting teachers to work, during evenings and weekends. In Ontario, salaries are a bit higher, and housing costs are generally less cumbersome, though some education workers lower on the grid, especially those in support staff bargaining units, might find the stories coming out of the States resonating with their experience if they live in areas with higher costs of living.

Bargaining good salaries and benefits as part of working conditions enables education workers to focus on their jobs without having to take on other work. And, contrary to the corporate discourse job security and a seniority-based grid step salary system can be quite motivating for staff: it is easy to find creative energy and patience when not stressed about money and precarity, and it is much easier to work collaboratively — essential in education — when not competing with colleagues for salary increases.

POSITIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

Department Heads used to be senior, experienced staff who were paid a significant stipend and given a period in their timetable to support their department. In the early 2000s, what used to be Department Heads became Positions of Responsibility (POR), whose working terms are still bargained locally. If there was an area of education where a window into a world of management rights-only is possible, the POR model would be it.

When Curriculum Leaders (CLs), who were once Department Heads, were created, they worked for less money, and without the extra preparation time. Today, Curriculum Leaders are becoming Assistant Curriculum Leaders (ACLs), who work for half of the money of CLs (approximately \$2,500/year), with no extra preparation time.

Management likes this model for a variety of reasons: it gives them access to a significant percentage of their teaching staff with collective agreement language that allows for administrative direction. It also allows them, to a certain extent, to circumvent seniority hiring and hand-pick candidates. Additionally, an ACL may be tied to multiple departments representing a large number of staff who perform various duties: principals will often use them to absorb some of the other school-based cutbacks, such as tech support and specialized program administration.

In short, ACLs are full-time teachers with a very busy core job, and a demanding part-time job that pays very little. It is hard to see how students are well-served with this model.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

There are a range of future challenges that connect with supporting students that will end up at the bargaining table. Here are just a couple of them:

E-Learning: Though there is no evidence suggesting that e-Learning is best for meeting a diverse range of socio-emotional, active citizenship and wide-outcomes academic goals, the province and boards have signaled intent to expand access to e-Learning in Ontario. The lure is two-fold: current collective agreements often have a two-tiered wage system that incentivizes the lower cost-per-credit delivery of e-Learning in summer and night school; and decision-makers envision larger class sizes and reduced physical school space requirements.

Classroom integration and high school destreaming: There is plenty of evidence that suggests that classroom integration at the elementary level, where students with special needs are integrated into regular classrooms, can be more beneficial than creating standalone special needs classrooms. Likewise, there are equity-based and pedagogical reasons for getting rid of streaming into Applied or Academic programs that happens at the high school level. However, there is little evidence that suggests the province and boards are willing to fund the staff numbers required to make integration and destreaming truly work. There is also fear that the raised class caps for destreamed classrooms would result in an overall increase in class sizes across the province.

CONCLUSION

Because of the impact on students, the public can often view bargaining as a process by which education workers are acting out of complete self-interest, to the detriment of their children. Bargaining, however, provides a powerful forum for the expressions of the collective insights and wishes of frontline workers in a place where that collective action can be harnessed to win improvements that have a direct impact on student well-being in the classroom. It’s a connection that education unions need to work on making, via an honest assessment of political action and communications strategies, so that the anti-union public discourse that emerges from power brokers and the media can be effectively countered in our communities. Teachers and support staff who are well-supported, well-resourced, and working in clean, safe schools are best able to support the learning of students in their care.

It’s not just a platitude on a placard during crisis moments: teachers’ working conditions really *do* equal students’ learning conditions. ●

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