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## Teaching in Turbulent Times: Teachers' Perceptions of the Effects of External Factors on Their Professional Lives

*Scholars often seek to understand the relationships between various social, economic, political, and cultural events and their impact on the lives of Canadians. As a compulsory social institution the school is an arena where the turbulent external environment has a significant influence. The teacher is the primary contact for children in the school and must deal with the indirect ramifications of societal activity as imported by the students. At the same time the teacher is a member of the wider community and is directly affected by those same events. The effects of such disruptions on the professional lives of teachers who live and work in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, are documented and described in this article.*

*Les chercheurs tentent souvent à comprendre les liens entre divers événements sociaux, économiques, politiques et culturels et l'impact qu'ils ont sur la vie des Canadiens. En tant qu'institution sociale obligatoire, l'école constitue un milieu que l'environnement externe turbulent influence de façon importante. L'enseignant est la personne-ressource principale pour les élèves à l'école, celle qui doit gérer les conséquences indirectes de l'activité sociale telle qu'elle est importée par les élèves. De plus, l'enseignant fait partie de la communauté étendue et est donc directement affectée par ces mêmes événements. Cet article documente et décrit les effets de telles perturbations sur la vie professionnelle d'enseignants qui vivent et travaillent sur l'île du Cap Breton, en Nouvelle Écosse.*

The study reported here investigated the impact of a turbulent external environment on the professional lives of teachers from Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, a region currently experiencing major social, economic, cultural, and political disruptions. These include the closure of coal mines and other large industrial facilities, the collapse of the fisheries industry, changes to national unemployment insurance regulations, and the increased out-migration of workers and their families, to cite just a few examples. The changes resulting from these disruptions affect all members of the local community and are implicit in indices of social distress (e.g., higher incidence of vandalism, family violence, and suicide; lower school retention and completion rates). However, the effect of these changes on the professional lives of teachers in the area has not been previously studied.

### *Introduction*

The genesis for the study was in a conversation I had with a teacher during a practicum visit. She was in a state of shock and sought someone with whom to share her feelings. I happened to be there. The previous day her husband had

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received his layoff notice from the local coal mine. Stopping at the community post office later that afternoon, she had met a neighbor and given her the bad news. To her surprise, the neighbor was dismissive, saying something along the lines of "What's your problem, you've got a good job, why don't you worry about those whose men are the only income earners?" The teacher felt this was most unfair; to her, her job provided the family with the extras in life, but her husband's job was the main one. For him to lose his job, she felt, was as traumatic to her family as the layoffs had been to everyone else. But her neighbor did not see it like that.

As she talked, I thought of how we define ourselves and our work in such personal ways. We create a "mental landscape" and spend our professional lives navigating across that landscape (Connolly, Clandinin, & He, 1997). I also thought of the other effects of the layoffs on the working lives of teachers: children whose parents were perhaps making negative comments about the teachers, much like those that the cooperating teacher had heard; children coming to school hungry and confused, with no money coming into the home; children coming to school fatherless as the breadwinner went off-Island to seek work; children who one day did not come at all, as the whole family left Cape Breton for another life.

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The general research question that guided this investigation was: How do teachers from northeastern Cape Breton perceive and understand the effects of external environmental factors on their professional lives? Data-gathering and analysis were framed by four specific research questions:

1. What external factors do teachers perceive as affecting their professional lives?
2. To what extent and in which ways do teachers believe these factors affect their daily work in schools?
3. What metaphors do teachers use to describe their daily work in schools?
4. To what extent do teachers perceive the views of others toward their work have changed over the past five years?

#### *Theoretical Framework*

It is generally accepted that "schools are contextual institutions that are heavily influenced by the politics and culture of the communities in which they reside" (Prybylo, 1998, p. 569). To this end, there is a significant body of research exploring the effects of external environmental change on the management and administration of the school (Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Scheerens & Bosker, 1997; Young & Levin, 1998). Similarly, there is work that examines the effects of social categories such as ethnicity, gender, social status, poverty, and the like on students' learning outcomes and on teachers' perceptions of their practice (Dolan, 1996; Kyle, 1997; Louis & Smith, 1990; Marjoribanks, 1995). However, there is little, if any, North American research that explores the effects of external environmental change on teachers' perceptions of their professional lives. The study reported here begins to address this gap in the literature.

It is apparent that schools should relate to the community in which they are located (Corson, 1991). Similarly, educators must be aware of the influence

exerted by the community and external environment on the school and on the role functions of teachers in that school (Hanson, 1991; Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Johns, 1992). The acceptance of organizational adaptation to environmental circumstances is described by Morgan (1986) as a contingency view of organization and management. This view requires that consideration be given to those external environmental factors that affect the professional lives of teachers.

Bolman and Deal (1991) note that "organizations that face highly uncertain environments need high levels of flexibility and adaptability to cope" (p. 70). Although public schools throughout North America and the rest of the industrialized world are currently facing challenges associated with an uncertain and rapidly changing ethnocultural environment (Goddard, 1997) exacerbated in Canada by the high internal population mobility index (Young, 1991), the traditional organization of schooling has changed little. Teachers continue to operate in somewhat restrictive bureaucratic structures where "flexibility" and "adaptability," as described by Bolman and Deal (1991), may not be possible.

As teachers grapple with the task of defining their professional identity in such turbulent times, they often use metaphor to describe their work (Bibik, 1997; Graham, 1993; Lorsbach, 1995; Stofflet, 1996). An exploration of these metaphors is an effective technique to discover the perceptions teachers hold with respect to the work in which they are engaged. Through an examination of the metaphors to which teachers refer in their descriptions of their work, it is possible to draw inferences about the professional knowledge landscape (Connolly et al., 1997) over which they travel. In this article a variety of metaphors reported by Cape Breton teachers are presented, and their perceptions of the influences of external factors on their professional lives are described and discussed.

#### *Philosophical and Methodological Underpinnings*

Through the locating of teachers' work within the "larger framework of antecedent (i.e., contextual) and mediating (i.e., school level) processes" (Heck & Hallinger, 1997, p. 13), a critical interpretation of the data was possible. This type of interpretive study falls under what Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have termed the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist approach recognizes and emphasizes that "what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 125). The teachers whose words are reported here "[bring] to the process of learning, personal schemas that have been formed by prior experiences, beliefs, values, sociological histories, and perceptions" (Lambert, 1995, p. 28). These personal schemas interact with, and sometimes act against, the personal schemas of students, parents, community members, even university researchers. Through consideration of the quantitative and narrative data presented here, each reader will make his or her own inferences and construct her or his own understandings. In the discussion section I present my thoughts on these data, but the conclusions drawn are not generalizable beyond the scope of the study.

As Heck and Hallinger (1997) observe, "these sorts of studies are more problematic in terms of trying to account for possible causal relationships. In this sense, qualitative studies that focus on the longitudinal collection of data

may be more useful" (p. 14). The qualitative method of critical interpretivism employed in the study and reported here addresses the first part of Heck and Hallinger's concern; the ongoing nature of the study addresses the second. Future papers will explore these data together with other themes and relationships that emerge.

#### *Method*

A number of different data-gathering and data analysis methods were used. First, three semistructured focus group interviews were conducted with an opportunistic sample of teachers. Second, the transcripts of those interviews were analyzed to identify themes. Third, the themes were used as the basis for the construction, testing, and revision of the questionnaire. Fourth, the questionnaire was administered and the responses analyzed. These analyses, which took the form of data retrieved, coded, and displayed through matrices (Huberman & Miles, 1994), are presented here.

#### *Focus Groups*

The initial data were collected from focus group interviews with 16 teachers who work in Cape Breton schools. Three focus groups were established, consisting of 4, 7, and 5 teachers respectively. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. I analyzed the transcripts, and from these data a number of themes emerged. These themes were then used to form the basis of the survey questionnaire.

#### *Survey Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was piloted with 20 teachers from an adjacent school board who would not be involved in the major study. As a result of feedback from the pilot study, two questions were rewritten and one was withdrawn. The revised questionnaire was then presented to senior staff at the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board for their review. No further changes resulted from this process. The document was distributed through the internal mail service of the board to those teachers who had been identified to be invited to participate in the study.

#### *Population and Sample*

At the time of the study the Cape Breton-Victoria Regional School Board employed 1,342 teachers in the 76 schools under its jurisdiction. The Board made the latest (September 1997) *Staffing and Enrolment Statistics* document available to the researcher. From this document, which lists all the schools and the teachers therein, every third teacher was identified. In March and April 1998 the survey was mailed to a total of 447 teachers. In addition to the questionnaire and a letter of introduction, each package contained a stamped addressed envelope to facilitate the return of the completed surveys.

#### *Limitations and Assumptions of the study*

The study is limited to the perceptions of the teachers who responded to the survey questionnaire. As such, it is assumed that the perceptions of respondents will closely reflect the perceptions of those other teachers who were not involved in the study. Further, it is assumed that the collected data are accurate and truthful reflections of what the respondents perceive.

As the staffing and enrollment statistics are organized by school, and as every third teacher on the staff list received a package, the identification process resulted in a numerical bias toward teachers in larger schools. As larger schools tend to be located in urban areas, one limitation of the study was the potential favoring of the views of teachers in larger urban schools over the views of teachers in smaller rural schools.

Once the mail-out was complete, a review of the *Staffing and Enrollment Statistics* document revealed that at least one teacher from every school except one had been sent a survey package. However, one small two-teacher school was not included on the list of schools to which at least one questionnaire had been sent. A survey package was then mailed to the first-named teacher for that school. Thus a total of 448 survey questionnaires were distributed.

#### *Data Analysis*

A total of 232 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 52%. This rate of return is acceptable for a mail-out of unsolicited survey questionnaires to teachers, approximating the return rates described by Goddard (1996), Kerlinger (1973), and others. The returns were from teachers representing 63 schools, or 83% of all the schools in the jurisdiction of the Board. Recording of the responses and analyses of the data began during June 1998.

The responses to the items on the survey questionnaire were collated and subjected to statistical analysis. Means and percentage frequency distributions were determined for each item. Qualitative analysis techniques such as item coding, frequency counts, and so forth were used to analyze the responses to the open-ended items.

#### *Findings*

Respondents identified specific social, cultural, and economic issues that they perceived to affect their professional lives in schools. These are necessarily interrelated, part of the broader societal fabric in which we dwell. In the context of Cape Breton the uncertainties of a region experiencing economic stress are perceived to have a direct effect on the social and cultural life of the community. No attempt is made here to establish a causal relationship between these various variables. There is an element of "optical validity" to the fact that when a coal mine closes and a father becomes unemployed, the subsequent loss of income will have a negative effect on the family of the miner, and the resulting stress will be exhibited in school by the miner's child. Further research is required to provide the statistical support for such apparent relationships.

Using the computation of means and percentage frequency distributions, social issues, and industrial situations that teachers perceived to affect their professional lives "quite a lot" or "most certainly" were identified. Similarly, metaphors that teachers reported using "often" or "all the time" to describe their daily lives are presented and discussed, as are teachers' perceptions of how the views of others about teachers' work "changed for the better." The findings are grouped according to four thematic clusters that represent the research questions that guided the study.

*What is the extent to which teachers believe that specific social issues have affected their professional work?*

As indicated in Table 1, teachers expressed the view that seven particular social issues (see Appendix A) have an effect on their professional lives. Of these, three were of statistical significance and are patently related: high unemployment leads to family breakdown and low family income, as well as other forms of social trauma. These in turn lead to the other social issues reported, namely, child poverty and a concomitant effect on the work of teachers in schools.

The social issues described reflect the weak economic environment of the region. Indeed, a recent study reports that Nova Scotia has a child poverty rate of 23.5%, the highest in the Atlantic provinces of Canada (Delaney, 1998). As Cape Breton is generally considered to be one of the poorest regions of a poor province, the issues described here come as no surprise. Social events that occur in the wider community do have a significant impact on the professional lives of teachers.

*What are teachers' perceptions of the effects of specific industrial situations on their professional lives?*

As presented in Table 2, four particular industrial situations were perceived to have an effect on teachers' professional lives. These were the changes to regulations governing the operation of the lobster fishery, the closure of the coal mines, the collapse of the cod fishery, and the increase in the number of people leaving Cape Breton. The latter is statistically significant and may be considered an outcome of the previous three situations. However, five industrial situations affecting the region generally score below the mean and might be considered to have less of an impact on the professional lives of teachers (see Appendix A) than might otherwise be expected.

The overall depopulation of Cape Breton is obviously a major concern for teachers. As families leave, enrollments drop, classes or schools are amal-

Table 1  
Extent to Which Teachers Believe Specific Social Issues Have Affected Their Professional Lives

| Item                          | Not at all<br>1 | Not much<br>2 | Not sure<br>3 | Quite a lot<br>4 | Most certainly<br>5 | No response<br>9 | Mean   |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|---------------|---------------|------------------|---------------------|------------------|--------|
| Alcoholism                    | 0.4             | 7.2           | 15.7          | 40.0             | 34.9                | 1.3              | 4.115  |
| Drug abuse                    | 0.4             | 10.2          | 19.1          | 35.7             | 33.2                | 1.3              | 3.987  |
| Single parent families        | 0.0             | 11.5          | 6.4           | 46.0             | 34.9                | 0.4              | 4.111  |
| Family breakdown <sup>a</sup> | 0.0             | 2.6           | 7.2           | 46.4             | 43.0                | 0.4              | 4.329* |
| Low family income             | 0.0             | 5.5           | 8.1           | 50.6             | 34.9                | 0.4              | 4.196* |
| Child neglect                 | 1.3             | 6.8           | 20.0          | 34.9             | 34.9                | 1.3              | 4.072  |
| High unemployment             | 0.0             | 2.6           | 4.3           | 40.0             | 52.8                | 0.4              | 4.451* |

N = 235.

Note. Percentages do not always add up to 100% because of rounding.

<sup>a</sup>N = 234.

\*p<0.05.

Table 2  
Extent to Which Teachers Believe Specific Industrial Situations Have  
Affected Their Professional Lives

| <i>Item</i>                                            | <i>Not<br/>at all<br/>1</i> | <i>Not<br/>much<br/>2</i> | <i>Not<br/>sure<br/>3</i> | <i>Quite<br/>a lot<br/>4</i> | <i>Most<br/>certainly<br/>5</i> | <i>No<br/>response<br/>9</i> | <i>Mean</i> |
|--------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------|
| Collapse of cod fishery                                | 8.1                         | 26.0                      | 23.9                      | 28.1                         | 14.5                            | 0.4                          | 3.174       |
| Discovery of Sable<br>Island gas                       | 11.5                        | 29.4                      | 40.9                      | 9.8                          | 6.8                             | 0.4                          | 2.800       |
| Closure of coal mines                                  | 3.4                         | 13.6                      | 7.7                       | 43.8                         | 30.6                            | 0.4                          | 3.894       |
| Increases in tourism                                   | 4.3                         | 26.8                      | 33.6                      | 23.4                         | 10.2                            | 1.7                          | 3.187       |
| Mercury levels in tuna                                 | 23.0                        | 25.1                      | 40.9                      | 5.5                          | 4.3                             | 0.4                          | 2.498       |
| Increase in pulp wood<br>harvest                       | 18.7                        | 26.4                      | 37.0                      | 12.8                         | 3.8                             | 0.9                          | 2.638       |
| Construction of new pulp<br>mill at Stora              | 14.9                        | 24.7                      | 28.5                      | 21.7                         | 9.4                             | 0.9                          | 2.911       |
| Increase in number of<br>people leaving<br>Cape Breton | 1.7                         | 3.8                       | 5.1                       | 43.8                         | 45.1                            | 0.4                          | 4.289*      |
| Changes to the lobster<br>fishery                      | 4.7                         | 18.3                      | 29.4                      | 31.5                         | 14.9                            | 0.9                          | 3.409       |
| Regulation of mineral<br>exploration                   | 15.7                        | 23.8                      | 46.8                      | 9.4                          | 3.8                             | 0.4                          | 2.643       |

*N* = 235.

Note. Percentages do not always add up to 100% because of rounding.

\**p* < 0.05.

gamated, and teachers are made redundant. The travails of major employers such as the region's coal mines and lobster fishery have a direct impact on the economic health of the region. This also has an indirect effect on teachers due to the catalyst impact on the development of social issues described earlier.

*What are the metaphors that teachers use to describe their professional lives?*

One strategy to identify how teachers respond to the effects of perceived external environmental factors on their professional lives is to examine how they describe their work. Teachers' perceptions and understandings of what they do are often reflected in the metaphors they use to describe that work.

As shown in Table 3, teachers identified seven metaphors that they use often or all the time to describe their work and one metaphor that they never or rarely use. Teachers' self-image appears to be strongly associated with the teaching and learning process, specifically the idea that the role of the teacher is as a transmitter of knowledge. The most preferred metaphors are of teachers as leaders, as knowledge dispensers. Although disciplinarian is also a common metaphor, respondents stress that they do not use the more negative image of a prison guard.

It is of interest that four other metaphors found in the popular media (see Appendix B) were not found to be reflective of teachers' self-image. Fewer than 66% of respondents reported that they used the metaphor of teacher as parent, as police officer, as babysitter, or as television substitute. Of further interest is

Table 3  
Metaphors Teachers Use to Describe Their Daily Lives

| <i>Item</i>         | <i>Never</i> | <i>Rarely</i> | <i>Some-<br/>times</i> | <i>Often</i> | <i>All the<br/>time</i> | <i>No<br/>response</i> | <i>Mean</i> |
|---------------------|--------------|---------------|------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
|                     | 1            | 2             | 3                      | 4            | 5                       | 9                      |             |
| Social worker       | 0.4          | 4.3           | 37.0                   | 45.1         | 13.2                    | 0.0                    | 3.855*      |
| Guide               | 0.4          | 0.9           | 21.7                   | 48.1         | 28.1                    | 0.9                    | 4.077*      |
| Facilitator         | 0.9          | 2.1           | 15.3                   | 49.8         | 30.6                    | 0.9                    | 4.145       |
| Knowledge dispenser | 0.4          | 1.3           | 15.7                   | 44.3         | 37.4                    | 0.4                    | 4.217*      |
| Leader              | 0.9          | 1.7           | 14.0                   | 38.7         | 42.6                    | 1.7                    | 4.328*      |
| Prison guard        | 46.0         | 28.1          | 14.0                   | 5.5          | 4.7                     | 0.9                    | 2.043       |
| Friend              | 0.9          | 4.3           | 21.3                   | 41.7         | 9.8                     | 1.7                    | 4.077       |
| Disciplinarian      | 1.3          | 5.1           | 18.7                   | 46.8         | 26.4                    | 1.3                    | 4.174       |

*N* = 235.

Note. Percentages do not always add up to 100% because of rounding.

\**p* < 0.05.

the truant officer metaphor. One third of respondents indicated that they never or rarely used this metaphor to describe themselves, whereas a further third reported using it often or all the time.

In addition to the metaphors presented on the questionnaire, respondents were asked to suggest others they used to describe their professional lives as teachers. These tended to reflect both the caring and organizational aspects of the profession. The human and intellectual caring role was exemplified in metaphors such as nurse (6),<sup>1</sup> dietician, counselor (3), advisor (3), listener, confidante (2), go-between, doctor, mentor, role model (2), and coach. The organizational detail required of contemporary teachers was evident in metaphors such as secretary, record-keeper, fundraiser, bank teller, and organizer. The darker side of professional life was revealed through the use of metaphors such as juggler, circus performer, humorist, and third-class passenger on the *Titanic*. Further research to explore the prevalence of these metaphors among the wider teaching population is required, as are longitudinal studies that explore how the metaphors used might change over time.

*What are teachers' perceptions of how the views of others toward their work has changed over the past five years?*

As indicated in Table 4, respondents expressed the view that the opinions of teachers held by many people who work both inside and outside of the educational enterprise have changed for the worse. Six particular groups are identified. Of these, only two groups are described as having changed for the better in their opinions of teachers.

It is evident that teachers consider that the perceptions of those groups farthest away from the daily realities of the classroom have changed for the worse over the past five years. Teacher aides and guidance counselors, who might be considered daily witnesses to the professional lives of teachers, are thought to have shown the greatest change for the better in their understanding of teachers' work. Conversely, politicians and others removed from the

Table 4  
Teachers' Perceptions as to How the View of Others Has Changed

| Item                              | Changed for worse |      | Stayed the same | Changed for better |     | No response | Mean  |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|------|-----------------|--------------------|-----|-------------|-------|
|                                   | 1                 | 2    | 3               | 4                  | 5   | 9           |       |
| Parents of children in your class | 8.1               | 25.5 | 42.1            | 23.4               | 0.4 | 0.4         | 2.851 |
| Guidance counselors               | 3.4               | 6.0  | 51.1            | 28.9               | 5.1 | 5.1         | 3.591 |
| Teacher aides                     | 1.7               | 2.6  | 41.7            | 32.8               | 5.1 | 16.2        | 4.340 |
| Central office administrators     | 8.9               | 24.7 | 47.7            | 13.2               | 1.7 | 3.8         | 2.970 |
| Provincial politicians            | 18.7              | 31.5 | 38.3            | 6.0                | 0.4 | 5.1         | 2.685 |
| Federal politicians               | 15.7              | 30.6 | 41.3            | 5.1                | 0.4 | 6.8         | 2.847 |

*N* = 235.

Note. Percentages do not always add up to 100% because of rounding.

classroom are perceived to have little understanding of the daily work of teachers.

#### Discussion

In locating the teachers' professional work reported here within antecedent and mediating processes (Heck & Hallinger, 1997), a pattern becomes evident. The respondents in this study considered school-level personnel to have the most positive view of their work. Teachers perceived that the greater the distance from the classroom, the lower was the view of others toward their work. This might be presented as a continuum of despair (see Figure 1). Such a finding is consistent with those of Tumalev (1997), whose research in St. Petersburg indicates that similar perceptions are held by Russian teachers in the post-Soviet era. Such consistency also suggests that teachers who work under conditions of stress and rapid change such as are being experienced in both Cape Breton and post-Soviet Russia may tend to withdraw into a tight professional enclave and develop perceptions that those who do not share their work cannot possibly understand the conditions under which that work is done.

If the notion of distance from the workplace as a predictor of attitude is correct, then one might hypothesize that on this continuum principals and other in-school administrators would be located between central office administrators and guidance counselors. Other teachers and colleagues in the same school would perhaps be found to the right of teacher aides, whereas community members might be located between parents and provincial politicians. Further research to test such a hypothesis is required.

#### Emergent Themes

The purpose of the study was to explore how teachers from northeastern Cape Breton perceive and understand the effects of external environmental factors on their professional lives. These factors, as described above, have been identified as a series of interrelated social, cultural, and economic issues over which



Such comments are indicative of the stress faced by teachers. Woods (1989), noting that “stress is endemic to teaching” (p. 84), suggests that the teachers most at risk to suffer stress are both probationary and/or inexperienced teachers and those career-aspiring teachers whose careers are blocked by extraneous circumstances: precisely the types of teacher found in many Cape Breton schools.

Claxton (1989) suggests that a breakdown of communication, an increase in disunity, a stance of nonparticipation, and the lack of a collective vision are all descriptors of a stressed institution.

I think we are top heavy with administrators.... All these coordinators and supervisors are spending their time trying to create ways to torture us! They must keep adding to our load and demanding we account for *every moment* of our time in order to justify their positions. (038, female, 16+ years of experience, medium elementary school, emphasis in original)

The bottom line is dollars, not student welfare. (multiple)

We have so few text books, and never class sets! (multiple)

I can accept lack of classroom books, supplies, etc., and still do a good job teaching. I do find it totally frustrating having a class (30) with children with learning problems and no resource help or teacher aide to give “one-on-one” to those who require extra help. (098, female, 16+ years of experience, large elementary school)

Respondents appear to be expressing their frustration at the changing nature of their work. The perceived lack of resources is of concern, especially given the prevailing climate of constant curriculum innovation. Initiatives such as a comprehensive model of inclusion, for example, are not critiqued on ideological or pedagogical grounds. Rather, teachers are concerned at not being able to do their jobs properly because of the restrictive reality of resource scarcity. As such, they seem to be ignoring Young’s (1991) caveat that “rational planning is possible only when growth is even and predictable” (p. 49). In a period of population decline and economic chaos, such rationality is chimerical.

Tumalev (1997) states that teachers who are overwhelmed by the daily stresses of their work tend to focus on the process and mechanics of teaching. They are concerned with getting it right, as it were, rather than meeting the individual needs of the students. This focus on process over people is an inevitable response to stress.

Tumalev (1997) observes that

As long as schools are overburdened with classes, overcrowded, and sometimes simply uncomfortable both from the standpoint of material-technical and moral-psychological considerations, and as long as the most prevalent teacher is the one who is overburdened beyond his [sic] mental and physical abilities by all kinds of problems, it will be simply impossible for any other attitude to predominate. There can be no foundation for it. (pp. 66-67)

Such is the case in Cape Breton schools, where teachers face the kinds of overburdening described and respond to stress negatively in their relationships with the wider community.

*Professional relationship to the wider community.* The second theme, describing the relationship of teachers to the wider community, emerges from observations such as these:

[We have] almost constant feelings of unappreciation [sic], being overworked, and feeling that most people in your community think you have an easy life or the good life. (001, female, 16+ years of experience, large junior high school)

The school has become the "cure all" for many areas and problems that it previously did not deal with. (058, male, 16+ years of experience, large elementary school)

There has been a shift of responsibility from family to school. (multiple)

These observations provide some indication that the professional community feels isolated and unsupported. The respondents suggest that the community at large neither understands nor appreciates the work of teachers. There is a sense that schools are "taking up the slack" left by other institutions and that teachers are now required to play roles abdicated by church, family, and so forth.

The members of the wider community, however, are perceived as still thinking of schools from the context of their own past experiences and not recognizing the additional pressures of contemporary classrooms. This is manifested in comments such as the following:

Teachers with 2 months off, 5 day weeks and various other days off are seen in industrial Cape Breton by many as having a "free ride." (005, female, 16+ years of experience, small junior high school)

I believe the general public thinks we work very few hours for too much pay. (009, female, 0-5 years of experience, medium junior high school)

The teachers here do not reflect Lockhart's (1991) contention that the "status location of teachers falls well within the professional occupation range" (p. 82), nor Ray's (1991) assertion that "teachers throughout Canada feel fairly confident about the prospects of their profession" (p. 35). Rather, the teachers here reported feelings of exclusion and separation from the community at large. As a result, they tend to withdraw to the comfort of peers.

*Development of a siege mentality.* When teachers are beset on all sides by feelings of personal and professional inadequacy, a siege mentality appears to develop. Like animals caught in traps, teachers begin the process of chewing off their metaphorical feet. There is perhaps a recognition that sometimes teachers are the authors of, or at least contribute to, many of their own misfortunes. However, such self-flagellation reinforces the wider community belief structure.

Many of the stereotypes perpetuated by the general public are sometimes based in reality. (227, female, 6-15 years of experience, large junior high school)

There are many days when the teachers in my school can be heard remarking "this would be a great job if it weren't for the children!" Very sad to say, I've said it myself. Teaching isn't fun anymore. (203, female, 16+ years of experience, small elementary school)

Respondents appear to be displaying one of the three classic responses identified by Woods (1989). Rather than adjusting their ideas of what teaching is or adapting their practice to meet new realities, teachers are retreating from the profession as a response to the stress they experience.

In addition to the pressures felt by teachers in their relationships with the communities they serve, the threat of the future must not be discounted. In this case, however, it is the threat manifested by those who face the future at the expense of the present:

As a new teacher, it is hard to maintain enthusiasm and excitement when senior teachers are averse to change. (214, female, 0-5 years of experience, circuit [itinerant] teacher)

I am about to retire in June and am very glad to be leaving. (multiple)

We need to clean up our image from within.... I'm tired of hearing comments like "don't bother me with that, I'm gone in three months" (and this from an administrator!). (131, male, 16+ years of experience, large high school)

In accusing senior staff of contributing to the problem, respondents are reflecting Tumalev's (1997) claim that their acceptance of the primacy of process over individual need "compels [teachers] to look for someone else to blame for their own professional shortcomings in realizing the personal potential in the teacher-upbringing process" (p. 62). It is as if the teachers, subconsciously ashamed at their apparent failure to meet the individual needs of children experiencing a multitude of external traumas, are lashing out in frustration at the most conspicuous target.

*Impact of students' attitudes.* The changes in teachers' attitudes described above appear to be often grounded in a feeling that students have lost respect, are not motivated, are rude, and are not disciplined in their own learning. For example,

Lack of respect is a big issue; students demand more attention and show less respect to adults and fellow students. (032, female, 16+ years of experience, small elementary school)

Teaching is becoming more stressful and respect is much lower. More work added, nothing ever deleted. How many hours do I have in a school day? (205, female, 16+ years of experience, medium elementary school)

Teaching is a much more difficult job today than earlier. Children seem to demand more attention and show less respect to adults and fellow students. (032, female, 0-5 years of experience, small elementary school)

At the same time, there are indications that "teachers' feelings about pupils (with the exception, interestingly, of negative ones such as frustration or irritation) are submerged beneath a professional ideal of fairness and impartiality" (Claxton, 1989, p. 134).

Evidence, much of which is hidden, indicates that a very high percentage of students do not attend school on a regular daily basis. Consider the impact this lack of attendance has for teachers trying to present a sequential lesson. (084, male, 16+ years of experience, large junior-senior high school)

The students aren't willing to do any work and the parents make excuses for them, thinking that they are helping, when in fact they are doing terrible

damage. The biggest problem I face is that because the students have no self-respect, they respect nothing or no one else! (001, female, 6-15 years of experience, large junior-senior high school)

In suggesting that parental attitudes may be causing harm, respondents are once again removing any blame from their own action or lack of action. The feeling is also expressed that students themselves facilitate their own failure.

At times I feel like I'm interrupting the students' social life with some teaching. (062, male, 16+ years of experience, large junior high school)

One might argue, however, that students' attitudes such as these often have their genesis in the void that lies ahead. Students from tight-knit, traditional communities such as those in Cape Breton are not motivated to work hard and achieve academic success when the result of such success is the need to "go down the road" in search of employment. The lack of future prospects is a significant element in the current alienation found among students. It would appear that unless teachers are willing to take on the role of social activist and use their position, both as an individual and as part of the wider collectivity of teachers, to address issues of social and economic justice in the wider society, they will not gain the respect of the students with whom they work.

#### *Conclusions and Implications*

In this article I explore the external economic, social, and cultural factors that teachers perceive as affecting their professional lives. The extent to which and how teachers believe these factors affect their daily work in schools are reported and discussed, as are the key metaphors that teachers use to describe their professional lives. Finally, the extent to which teachers perceive the views of others toward their work have changed over the past five years is presented.

It was observed that respondents cling to the notion of the teacher as transmitter of information and values. Further, it appears that the teachers who participated in the study have developed a siege mentality, where those outside the school are perceived not to understand the stresses and nuances of the contemporary classroom. Although no similar North American data exist, these findings are consistent with those reported in a European study (Tumalev, 1997). A continuum of despair that chronicles this distancing of *other* is presented as part of the discussion.

Classroom teachers throughout the industrialized world are facing the challenge of coping and adapting to organizational changes precipitated by the current globalization of economies and a pervasive shift in societal values. The data and analyses presented here show support for work conducted in post-Soviet Russia by Tumalev (1997). This suggests that teachers who experience high levels of externally induced stress react in similar ways, no matter where they might teach. Such findings have the potential of informing those educators and policy-makers who provide professional development and support to teachers. Moreover, the study reported in this article may provide a forum for a discussion of issues and exploration of possible ways that schools with a tradition of rigid organizational structures can survive and enhance the development of effective teaching and learning in our turbulent end-of-millennium environment.

This study investigated the experiences and perceptions of a small group of teachers who are living through a period of major social, economic, cultural, and political disruption in one specific part of Nova Scotia, Cape Breton. There may be similarities with the experiences of teachers in other parts of the province, and a comparative research study to address this question might be a useful next step.

Further research to consider the similarities, if any, in teachers' perceptions among those in other provinces may also have some utility. Do teachers in Alberta, British Columbia, Ontario, or Newfoundland, for example, have similar perceptions about their work? Such research should include both teachers from provinces experiencing social and economic disruption and those from provinces with more stable economies.

It is apparent that schools are not isolated from their communities. Teachers do not and cannot cocoon themselves in their classrooms. The social, economic, political, and cultural disruptions of the wider society have been found to have an impact on the professional lives of teachers in Cape Breton. As economic forces shape and reshape our social and cultural identities, so the ramifications ripple into our classrooms. This study has revealed a complex relationship between a turbulent external environment and the professional lives of teachers, continued exploration of which might facilitate the identification of specific causality, with further implications for the preservice preparation and inservice professional development of teachers. It appears that only through such systemic change will schools provide teachers with the supportive professional environment needed for them to weather the social, economic, cultural, and political storms of the early 21st century.

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#### Notes

1. The number of respondents presenting this metaphor.
2. The three-digit number identifies each individual returned survey instrument in order of receipt.

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*Appendix A*  
*Social Issues and Industrial Situations That Affect Work as a Teacher*

| <i>Issue/Situation</i>                    | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|-------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Family violence                           | 4.123       | 1.130     |
| Alcoholism                                | 4.115       | 1.101     |
| Drug abuse                                | 3.987       | 1.138     |
| Gambling                                  | 3.668       | 1.177     |
| Single parent families                    | 4.111       | 1.052     |
| Suicide                                   | 3.494       | 2.996     |
| Family breakdown                          | 4.329*      | .780      |
| Low family income                         | 4.196*      | .889      |
| Spousal abuse                             | 3.791       | 1.203     |
| Child abuse                               | 3.962       | 1.299     |
| Child neglect                             | 4.072       | 1.180     |
| High unemployment                         | 4.451*      | .734      |
| Collapse of the cod fishery               | 3.174       | 1.254     |
| Discovery of Sable Island gas             | 2.800       | 1.250     |
| Closure of coal mines                     | 3.894       | 1.185     |
| Increases in tourism                      | 3.187       | 1.291     |
| Mercury contamination in the tuna fishery | 2.498       | 1.231     |
| Increase in pulp wood harvesting          | 2.638       | 1.258     |
| Construction of the new mill at Stora     | 2.911       | 1.319     |
| Increase in people leaving Cape Breton    | 4.289*      | .892      |
| Changes to the lobster fishery            | 3.409       | 1.238     |
| Regulation of mineral exploration         | 2.643       | 1.070     |

\* $p < 0.05$ .

*Appendix B*  
*Metaphors Used to Describe Professional Life as a Teacher*

| <i>Metaphor</i>          | <i>Mean</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| Leader                   | 3.664*      | .775      |
| Social worker            | 3.855*      | .775      |
| Police officer           | 3.323       | 1.127     |
| Guide                    | 4.077*      | .883      |
| Facilitator              | 4.145       | .941      |
| Priest                   | 2.085       | 1.118     |
| Truant officer           | 2.996       | 1.245     |
| Knowledge dispenser      | 4.217*      | .867      |
| Arbitrator               | 3.617*      | .799      |
| Negotiator               | 3.591*      | .869      |
| Referee                  | 3.570       | .995      |
| Learner                  | 4.328       | 1.050     |
| Babysitter               | 2.872       | 1.368     |
| Parole officer           | 2.489       | 1.463     |
| Entertainer              | 3.460       | 1.067     |
| Prison guard             | 2.043       | 1.404     |
| Friend                   | 4.077       | 1.118     |
| Child protection officer | 2.966       | 1.294     |
| Disciplinarian           | 4.174       | 2.872     |
| Parent                   | 3.715       | 1.314     |
| Television substitute    | 2.340       | 1.498     |

\* $p < 0.05$ .