

Q&A with

KRISTEN WEATHERBY

# A WORLD of IDEAS

INTERNATIONAL SURVEY GIVES A VOICE  
TO TEACHERS EVERYWHERE

By Tracy Crow

**JSD:** Could you give us an overview of the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS)?

**Kristen Weatherby:** TALIS was started in 2008. It was created to fill gaps in international data around teachers and teaching, but it also looks at teacher working conditions and learning environments. So it gives teachers a voice. In the TALIS survey, teachers are encouraged to talk about their own experiences in their schools and as teachers.

**JSD:** What does TALIS tell us about professional learning?

**Weatherby:** In TALIS 2008, (see links to web resources from the study in the box on p. 26) we looked at professional development in particular, and we asked teachers about the kinds of professional development experiences they have access to. We asked them, for example, over the last 18 months, how many days they had spent in professional development, what kind of professional development they had, whether it was a workshop or a course or a lecture or some other type of experience, whether it was in school or out of school. And then we asked them how that contributed to their own professional growth and their own development in the teaching profession.

We also asked teachers what kind of support they receive from their school or school district, if they are given time off for professional development, if they had the cost contributed to, if it was part of the workday, or if it was



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outside of working hours. We also asked if they receive any kind of salary stipend and if there were any barriers to professional development. For example, barriers might be that they didn't have time or there weren't enough quality offerings available for whatever they needed at that time.

We found that teacher professional development needs varied according to whether teachers were new or experienced. But 55% of all teachers wanted more professional development — they felt like they needed more help. New teachers also reported having more issues around classroom management: spending less time teaching than experienced teachers and more time on student discipline or classroom management issues. All teachers wanted more support in

particular on teaching special need students.

We also highlight some interesting things in a new report that looked at the data in different ways. First, we looked at what teachers say about the variety of classroom practices they're able to employ. For example, we examined whether the practices teachers report using are teacher-directed or student-led. We found that only a minority of teachers in every country reports a comparatively frequent use of a variety of teaching practices. This is significant because a variety of teaching practices is associated with student achievement. Greater variety allows teachers to reach more students in their classroom based on students' learning style or the speed with which they're able to grasp a particular concept. With more teaching practices, the teachers have more tools in their toolbox. This highlights a real professional development need.

The second finding we explored in this new report is around professional learning communities. The report defines a professional learning community as a schoolwide learning community with a shared objective of improving student learning along with sustained and systemic professional learning strategies.

We asked teachers about five different concepts and whether they are present in professional learning communities. We asked if they shared the vision for learning at their school and whether they contribute to that vision. We wanted to know if they were able to focus on learning at their school and if that was the primary focus. We also asked if they worked in a culture that encouraged reflection on practice, and if they taught as a team or were able to observe other teachers. Finally, we asked them if they had collaborative learning activities at their school — did they plan together, did they assess students together, did they have collaborative professional development?

We found that, even though countries and schools all over the world are talking about professional learning communities, very few teachers reported that they're part of a professional learning community. We're talking about this finding quite a bit because, while professional learning communities are a great opportunity for continuous support for teachers in school on the job — and even though schools think these are happening — according to our findings, they aren't, according to our definition. (See link to this report, *Teaching Practices and Pedagogical Innovation: Evidence from TALIS*, in box on p. 26.)

It's important to note that we don't like to look at any of these things in isolation. We talk a lot about teachers' reports of self-efficacy — how effective they feel they are as teachers — which is also associated with student outcomes, according to a lot of research. We found that teachers who

report higher self-efficacy are more involved in professional development, including professional development that occurs outside the school. They also get more feedback on their teaching. Teachers with higher self-efficacy also report that they participate in professional learning communities and that they use a variety of teaching practices. All of these things are related, and they're all really important.

## TEACHER EVALUATION

**JSD: At the recent International Summit on the Teaching Profession, your topic was teacher evaluation and its role in improving teaching. What did you hear at that summit?**

**Weatherby:** We talked about what teacher evaluation is being used for. Is it being used just to root out the bad teachers and fire them? Or is it being used to help teachers realize the areas in which they need to improve their practice and provide them the support to do that? There is a range of models.

In Finland, there are no national evaluation frameworks for teachers, and, in fact, there's no teacher evaluation in a formal sense. Every year, the school has a development plan, and teachers meet with their school principal every year to create a development plan based on the school development plan. They plan the kind of professional learning that they think they need and the school principal discusses it with them. There's a strong culture of reflection on practice and opportunity for observation.

Another country that does that same thing really well is Canada, in Ontario specifically. Teachers develop or update an existing professional development plan every year, they have growth objectives and an action plan, and they work on that with the school principal over the course of the year.

In Singapore, they do something similar, but it's more competency-based, and it does play a role in how teachers are evaluated as well. But what's great about Singapore is they have a career structure for teachers that allows them to develop and progress while they stay teaching. There is a master teacher career track so teachers can continue to advance as classroom teachers.

## TRUST

**JSD: As you discussed teacher evaluation, did you see that countries covered the whole range of a spectrum that had evaluation at one end strictly as an accountability tool and at the other end as a purely developmental tool?**

**Weatherby:** The range is pretty spread out because there are a couple of countries that actually test teachers and then the Nordic countries tend to be like Finland,

where they don't have a national framework for evaluation and there's an ongoing practice of reflection. One example is a national project in Norway, where the larger union of teachers and the national student organization have gotten together to look at how teacher appraisal can include student feedback. The students are given a survey that focuses on their experience with the teacher's practice because students have a very important voice in this. The feedback is given to the teacher in such a way that it's anonymous and really focuses on positive development for the teacher.

In Sweden, teachers will conduct a survey among their own students to get feedback on their teaching, and the results are not made public. They're only used by the teacher who is giving the survey. That reflection on practice helps teachers to figure out whether they're meeting the needs of their students. It's not tied to any kind of high-stakes assessment of teacher performance. It's just for development.

Trust was another really big aspect of the discussion at the teacher summit. Teachers have to trust the people evaluating them, and they have to trust what they're being evaluated against. Also, they have to trust that it has some benefit for them, and that the person evaluating them has the capacity to do it.

New Zealand and Australia are good examples of countries that work to establish trust in their systems. They've done a lot of work around developing teacher standards that are developed with and by teachers and taken it to an extreme. Australia conducted online surveys and focus groups all in every state and territory. They surveyed more than 6,000 teachers and hundreds of schools to develop these standards, so everybody trusts them.

## REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

**JSD: Where else are you seeing countries with strong reflective practices that encourage ongoing learning?**

**Weatherby:** They have a culture in Singapore where everybody working in education is expected to be a lifelong learner. There's so much work in Singapore with mentoring and participation in collaborative groups. Teachers in Singapore view other teachers teaching practice lessons, and they videotape the lessons and use those videos to give feedback and decide how to build the lessons together.

This is also starting to happen in China. One of the problems that we've talked about in earlier teacher summits is that Shanghai is growing so quickly and there tends to be higher-quality teachers in the schools in the center of Shanghai because that's where everybody wants to be. Then as you get further out from the center of Shanghai, it's more difficult to provide high-quality teachers. So they've taken high-performing teachers and school leaders from retirement and brought them into some of these newer schools as mentors. They don't just come in and give a class, for example. They stay in the schools to observe the practices, help teachers develop lessons, and help build capacity amongst the staff.

## MENTORING AND INDUCTION

**JSD: In addition to what's happening with reflective practices and learning communities, what other professional learning trends did you learn about through TALIS?**

**Weatherby:** One trend we're seeing is the use of mentoring and induction programs for new teachers. We have a report for TALIS that looks specifically at teachers who have been teaching for two years or less versus more experienced teachers. We're able to look at where new teachers felt they have needs for professional development, what their challenges are in terms of teaching, and how much time they're spending teaching as opposed to other activities. We've found that the use of mentoring and induction programs is becoming more popular and might extend beyond just the newest teachers in the school. And the induction programs aren't just administrative to the school. They might be focused on supporting the new teachers in their teaching practices.

**JSD: Do you have the sense that educators in other countries share a feeling that one-shot workshops without follow-up or disconnected inservice days are not tied to what a teacher needs to learn, and that perhaps other practices are more useful for teacher growth?**

**Weatherby:** Yes, there is that sense. I just came from working for four years in the United Kingdom in England, Scotland, and Wales, in particular. Recently, there have been many cuts to government departments, and many schools have become more independent from their local government structures. What that means is many schools don't have a central place to go for access to professional development. Because of this, many schools are required to find their own professional development solutions. I have worked with many head teachers, principals in the U.K., who are simply freeing up teachers' classroom time so they can observe other teachers, the kind of work that can be ongoing, free, and can create a culture of reflective practice. These kinds of activities are happening both because taking teachers out of the school for training is expensive but also not as effective in many cases.

## NATIONAL POLICY

**JSD: In what other ways do you see national policies impacting professional learning?**

**Weatherby:** A lot of the policy requirements for professional learning are about the number of hours or days that teachers get access to. They range quite a bit. In England, teachers get five days of professional development per year, and in Scotland, they get 35 hours plus five days. In Estonia and Iceland, teachers get 150 hours of professional development. In Iceland, they get that every year, and in Estonia, they get that only for five years. So it's really interesting that kind of variation in policy just even around how much access teachers have.

In very few countries, there is mandated content in policy

recommendations on the kind of training teachers get. Almost half of the professional development the teachers have access to in Japan is mandated. There are certain courses that they have to take every year. But in Belgium, England, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, and Iceland, teachers can do whatever they want for the state or whatever they've agreed on with their school principal. In a lot of places, there is policy guidance that school principals and teachers have to meet together to determine a professional development plan. I mentioned earlier this happens in Finland.

### STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

**JSD: Are you seeing anywhere that communities in general — not just the educators — believe that professional learning has an essential tie to student achievement, and that this premise makes those societies more supportive of professional learning?**

**Weatherby:** I think it's difficult in any country to make that link unless you have the data to prove that professional development is linked to student achievement. It's really difficult to find that data. This gets to the bottom of any kind of education policy shift — how is this going to improve student achievement? I worked in education technology for years, and without the data that shows using information and communications technology actually improves student achievement, a lot of school districts and governments don't want to make those kinds of investments.

There's a lot of talk now about developing teaching as a profession. If we want teachers to provide the kinds of learning experiences where students will be able to solve the problems of tomorrow, to become lifelong learners and so forth, and if we want to get more high-quality people into the teaching profession, we need to treat teaching as a profession. But when you compare teaching to other professions, such as the medical profession, teachers in general aren't exposed to cutting-edge research on what makes a better teacher or what teaching practices are most successful. And exposing teachers to that kind of work and giving them the ongoing support that they need to apply new practices — it doesn't happen any kind of systemic way.

### SELECTED RESOURCES

The reports below showcase the data and information highlighted in the discussion with Weatherby and lead to other resources useful in understanding international contexts and conditions.

#### OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2008

The website offers an overview of the 2008 TALIS survey, detailing how the survey was conducted and outlining results by category: school leadership, recognizing and rewarding teaching, professional development, and teaching practices and beliefs. Also includes links to TALIS questionnaires, reports and databases.

[www.oecd.org/education/school/oecdteachingandlearninginternationalsurveytalistalis2008.htm](http://www.oecd.org/education/school/oecdteachingandlearninginternationalsurveytalistalis2008.htm)

#### Teaching Practices and Pedagogical Innovation: Evidence from TALIS

Using TALIS data, the report identifies and arranges profiles in relation to two areas: classroom teaching practices and participation in professional learning communities. It compares these profiles across different educational systems and examines evidence and links to inputs and processes.

[www.oecd.org/edu/school/oecdteachingandlearninginternationalsurveytalispublishingsdatafilesvideosandlinks.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/oecdteachingandlearninginternationalsurveytalispublishingsdatafilesvideosandlinks.htm)

#### 2013 International Summit on the Teaching Profession

The website for the summit gives an overview of the summit's agenda and discussion topics, with links to video, webinars, publications, and policy briefs.

[www.oecd.org/site/eduistp13](http://www.oecd.org/site/eduistp13)

#### Teachers for the 21st Century: Using Evaluation to Improve Teaching

The background report on the 2013 International Summit on the Teaching Profession outlines available research about effective approaches to teacher appraisal and examples of reforms that have produced specific results, show promise, or illustrate imaginative ways of implementing change.

[www.oecd.org/site/eduistp13/backgroundreport.htm](http://www.oecd.org/site/eduistp13/backgroundreport.htm)

#### OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2013

TALIS 2013 surveys teachers and principals of lower secondary education. The website gives an overview of the survey and links to a conceptual framework with details about the survey's content focus.

[www.oecd.org/edu/school/oecdteachingandlearninginternationalsurveytalistalis2013.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/oecdteachingandlearninginternationalsurveytalistalis2013.htm)

This conversation about teaching as a profession and developing teachers as professionals is really important. We need to think of teachers as knowledge workers, frankly, who are then able to provide experiences for students that will benefit countries in the long run. And, of course, professional learning is a huge part of that.

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