NINE ‘TIL THREE? NOT LIKELY! A STUDY OF TEACHERS’ WORKLOAD

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The popular perception is that teachers only work school hours, 9 ‘til 3 o’clock. This paper challenges that notion and argues that school teachers work long hours and have a heavy workload. Large workloads have a negative effect on teachers’ health, well-being and work-life balance. The findings of the study indicate that regardless of gender, role, sector and employment fraction, the majority of all teachers work long hours. Further, many teachers are dissatisfied with their workload and balance between work and personal life. In light of the findings, it is argued that policies need to be developed to restrict teachers’ workloads. Without such policies, the flow of teachers out of the profession will continue.

Introduction

Ten weeks of paid holidays, short working hours, Monday to Friday, nine ‘til three. Sounds like the perfect job! The public perception of school teachers’ work could not be further from the truth. The workload of teachers is of significant concern, which when coupled with inadequate compensation, a lack of resources and low professional status, is forcing teachers out of the profession. A forecast teacher shortage within the decade renders workload one of the critical issues facing teachers in the modern workplace. This paper examines the workload of teachers and explores how it influences their lives. The article first outlines existing research in the area and then details how the study was conducted. Following this, the findings of the study are presented, along with the implications of the research for policy.

The paper is primarily interested in the workloads of primary and secondary school teachers in Queensland public schools, not early childhood or vocational education teachers. It does not enter the debate on public versus private education nor attempts to draw distinctions between workloads for private and public school teachers as existing data does not allow this comparison. These issues will be addressed in a later paper.

Existing Workload Research

Over recent decades, a trend towards longer working hours and an increase in pace and content have been the result of fundamental changes to work. Workload change for school teachers is no different. In the public education system, waves of reform and restructure have put employees under immense pressure, the outcome of which have been increased workloads for many teachers (ACIRRT, 1999; Hargreaves, 1994).

In Australia, there has been a gradual shift toward longer working hours since the 1980s. Research has shown that average weekly working hours have increased from 38 hours to over 41 hours in the twenty years to 2001 (Campbell, 2002: 93). Moreover, the proportion of workers who now work long hours (in excess of 41 hours per week) has increased to account for almost one-fifth of the Australian workforce (Campbell, 2002: 95). These trends are the result of labour market deregulation and strong organisational cultures, among other factors (ACIRRT, 1999; Skinner, 2002). ACIRRT (1999) identify an ‘overtime culture’ in which
employees take as much overtime as possible to maintain their desired living standards. Wooden (2000) claims that the majority of long hours are therefore driven by employees’ own preferences. However, empirical evidence suggests that long working hours may more likely be the result of perceived job insecurity or lack of job alternatives, rather than growing consumerism, as additional working hours are often sought in an attempt to avert the risk of income loss (Figart & Golden, 1998).

Existing research has also established links between large workloads and a number of other issues, such as difficulty managing work-life balance, increased stress, problems with health and general well-being and sleep deprivation. Pocock (2003) suggests that increased workloads have a detrimental effect on individuals, families and the broader community; individuals feel overworked and find it difficult to have interests outside of work, families suffer through conflict and time pressures, and as its members are unable to participate in community activities, communities suffer. Allan (1997) argues that difficulty managing work-life balance can be a significant source of stress and other work-related health problems. Further, large workloads manifest in fatigue, which presents significant occupational health and safety risks (Dawson, McCulloch, & Baker, 2001). The following paragraphs explore some of these issues in the teacher-specific workload literature to set out the scope and identify the research question for this study.

**Teachers’ Workloads**

In the modern workplace, school teachers are also experiencing the effects of being overworked. Hargreaves (1994) argues that the popular perception of teachers’ work is that which is performed only in classrooms, consisting of the tuition of children, the marking of work and correcting of mistakes. This contention, also noted by the findings of the Senate Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession (Parliament of Australia: Senate, 1998), is spurious as teaching involves and has always involved significantly more tasks, many of which have remained invisible as members of the public view teachers’ work from the child’s perspective (Hargreaves, 1994). This does not suggest that the actual role and workload of teachers has merely been overlooked and remains unchanged over recent years. Indeed there has been an increase in the volume and complexity of work required of teachers, along with compacted timelines and a broadening of the range of tasks that teachers are expected to perform (Burchielli, Pearson, & Thanacoody, 2005; Churchill, Williamson, & Grady, 1997). Rapid change in education occurs through reform and restructure (ACIRRT, 1999). These changes are often poorly resourced and can result in increased workloads for many teachers. Similar to an ‘overtime culture’, research suggests that large workloads are often driven by teachers’ own perception of their work: a professional career with considerable responsibilities (Hargreaves, 1994).

Many teachers in Australia and internationally work long hours. Findings from two notable studies suggest that teachers work well in excess of the hours specified in their employment contracts. From their study of teachers in American elementary schools, Drago et al. (2000) found that those contracted to work a certain number of hours actually worked two hours in excess of those per week. Further, in their study of Australian school teachers, Probert et al. (2000: 37) found that on average, classroom teachers worked 48 hours per week, while administrators worked an average of 54 hours per week. Probert et al. (2000) argue that as the result of large and increasing workloads, teachers are finding it increasingly difficult to manage work-life balance. Additionally, as the result of large workloads many teachers experience increased stress levels and often exhibit symptoms of burnout (Rudow, 1999; Thomas, Clarke, & Lavery, 2003).
There is little doubt that teachers work long hours. This paper addresses the question: *How does workload affect teachers’ lives?* The study aims to examine the working hours, the activities on which time is spent, and how workloads have changed over recent years for teachers in Queensland public schools. In addition, to pinpoint sources of variation, the study aims to analyse explanatory demographic variables that contribute to workload. Finally, using qualitative data, the study aims to explore, in-depth, other workload issues and the impact that large workloads have on teachers’ lives. In the next section the paper explores the methods used to address this research question and outlines how the study was conducted. Following this, a summary and discussion of the results is presented.

**Methods**

The study adopts a multiple method approach, utilising two distinct research methods (Buchanan, 1999). First, an existing large scale dataset, including time-diary data, gathered from Queensland public school teachers by the Queensland Teachers’ Union (QTU), and second, data collected in focus groups. The dataset is used to assess teachers’ actual working hours and explore any differences between teachers in terms of role, gender, sector and employment fraction. It also explores how those hours have changed over recent years. Data collected from open-ended questions in focus groups is used to examine workload issues in more depth and explore how workload influences teachers’ lives.

Triangulation of methods was deliberately used to complement the strengths and weaknesses associated with individual methods (Neuman, 2003). Without the use of different methods of data collection and analysis it is often difficult to ensure the validity of the results, as a problem is best considered from several different perspectives (Buchanan, 1999; Neuman, 2003). Through the use of multiple methods, research can therefore draw on different types of information that produce different insights (Buchanan, 1999; Strauss & Whitfield, 1998). Both quantitative and qualitative data was useful to address the research problem of this study and facilitated the interpretation of results, which are presented in the next section.

**Findings**

The findings of the research are presented in two parts corresponding with the methods outlined in the previous section. First, analysis of the QTU dataset provides details of actual working hours and time spent on individual activities. It also explores how workload has changed for teachers in recent years. In each case the data is disseminated by gender, role, employment fraction and sector. This analysis provides for a detailed understanding of the actual hours that teachers work, and how those hours are divided among a number of key work activities. Further, the analysis traces changing workload in the key activities, as well as generally, to illustrate that teachers’ workloads are increasing. Second, qualitative data gathered in focus groups is presented to explore teacher workload issues in more detail. Findings from the focus groups demonstrate how teachers’ work has changed, and how these changes are influencing teachers’ lives outside of work.

**QTU Dataset**

The demographics of the QTU sample were characterised by a large proportion of females and an equally large proportion of classroom teachers, concentrated in primary schools. The majority of respondents were in full-time employment. There are four main teacher roles:
principal, associate administrator, classroom teacher, and specialist teacher. The vast majority of respondents in the sample were classroom teachers. A greater proportion of women were classroom teachers; more men were in executive positions such as principal and associate administrator.

Table 1: Demographics of the Sample (percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Male (n=512)</th>
<th>Female (n=1219)</th>
<th>Total (n=1731)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (n=1731)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Fraction (n=1730)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles (n=1718)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Administrator</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teacher</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist Teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector (n=1731)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: QTU Dataset

Actual Working Hours

Adopting working hours categories established by Watson et al. (2003), the study found that the majority of teachers in the sample worked either long or very long hours (see Table 2). The paper now turns to examine these hours in more detail to explore how demographic characteristics influenced working hours, and how hours were divided among key work activities. Multiple regression was used to identify the key demographic variables that influenced working hours. Chi-square analysis was used to analyse differences by gender, sector, employment fraction and role, in time spent on key work activities.

Table 2: Distribution of Total Weekly Hours Worked

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours</th>
<th>Percentage of Sample (n=1729)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Short P/T (1-15 hours)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantial P/T (16-34 hours)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard hours (35-40 hours)</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long hours (41-49 hours)</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very long hours (50+ hours)</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: QTU Dataset

Regression Analysis – Teachers’ Working Hours

A multiple regression was conducted to explore the relationship between the key demographic variables and the number of hours worked per week. The regression identified the extent to which the variables role, sector, gender and employment fraction were determinants of working hours. The following equation was used:

\[
\text{WORKING HOURS} = \beta_0 + \text{ROLE} + \text{SECTOR} + \text{EMPLOYMENT FRACTION} + \text{GENDER} + e
\]
The dependent variable in the equation was total actual hours worked per week (continuous, as calculated from the time-diary). Independent variables in the equation were role, sector, employment fraction and gender. Each of the independent variables were categorised using dummy variable coding.

The results, shown in Table 3, reveal that role was a significant determinant of working hours with principals working, on average, over 11 hours more per week than a classroom teacher (constant). Similarly, the associate administrator variable was positively correlated with working hours. As might be expected, employment fraction was negatively correlated with working hours. On average, part-time teachers worked nearly 16 hours fewer per week than full-time classroom teachers. Finally, gender was positively correlated with working hours, indicating that female teachers worked slightly longer hours per week than male teachers, controlling for other variables. No other significant differences were found.

**Table 3: Regression of Total Working Hours**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unstandardised Coefficients B</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Constant – Classroom Teacher)</td>
<td>43.259</td>
<td>.564</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principals</td>
<td>11.431</td>
<td>1.196</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Administrators</td>
<td>6.480</td>
<td>.784</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialist Teachers</td>
<td>-1.315</td>
<td>.711</td>
<td>0.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sector (Primary=0; Secondary=1)</td>
<td>-0.359</td>
<td>.539</td>
<td>0.505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment Fraction (F-T=0; P-T=1)</td>
<td>-15.694</td>
<td>.795</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Male=0; Female=1)</td>
<td>1.623</td>
<td>.552</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: QTU Dataset; $R^2$=0.274; N=1731

**Time Spent on Individual Activities**

The workload diary in the questionnaire asked teachers to apportion their time among eight activities during the census week. This data was analysed to identify the activities on which teachers spent the majority of their time. The items in the workload diary included key activities (teaching, administration and management, and planning and assessment\(^1\)); and other activities (professional development, student supervision, extra curricular, travel time, and other). Only the time spent on key activities is discussed here as they constitute the majority of hours worked per week. Time spent on the activities was divided into categories to summarise and present the data in a simple table. Chi-square tests were used to examine differences by role, gender, sector and employment fraction.

Respondents spent the majority of their time on planning and assessment, administration and management, and teaching (see Table 4). As might be expected, a chi-square test revealed principals and associate administrators spent more time on administration and management than did classroom and specialist teachers ($\chi^2$ (12) = 276.109 $p$<.001). Similarly, classroom teachers spent more time on planning and assessment and teaching-related activities ($\chi^2$ (12) = 466.996 $p$<.001; $\chi^2$ (12) = 872.298 $p$<.001).

**Table 4: Time Spent on Activities by Role (percentage)**

\(^1\) According to the QTU time-diary, teaching is considered to be all teaching duties performed in or out of class (contact hours). Administration and management is time spent on staff supervision, budgeting and record keeping. Planning and assessment is preparation for teaching, testing, marking and development of work programs.
Item | Prin. (n=75) | A Ad. (n=207) | Class. (n=1192) | Spec. (n=244) | Total (n=1718)
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- | ---
Teaching Time*** (n=1715) | 0 | 43 | 24 | 17 | 3 | 6 | 1-5 | 21 | 17 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 6-15 | 12 | 56 | 17 | 43 | 25 | 16-25 | 24 | 3 | 78 | 46 | 62 | 26+ | - | - | 4 | 2 | 3 | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100
Admin/Mngt Time*** (n=1717) | 0 | - | 2 | 42 | 20 | 32 | 1-5 | - | 6 | 50 | 44 | 42 | 6-15 | 17 | 32 | 7 | 30 | 14 | 16-25 | 20 | 22 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 26+ | 63 | 38 | - | 3 | 8 | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100
Planning/Assess. Time*** (n=1716) | 0 | 37 | 23 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 1-5 | 27 | 30 | 12 | 30 | 18 | 6-15 | 36 | 36 | 55 | 53 | 52 | 16-25 | - | 10 | 27 | 11 | 22 | 26+ | - | 1 | 4 | 3 | 4 | Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100

Source: QTU Dataset; *** p <.001; Note: Errors due to rounding

While there was statistical difference in time spent on activities disseminated by gender and sector, these differences were more likely associated with diverse role requirements (similar to those identified using regression analysis for total hours), rather than differences associated purely with sector or gender. However, females did spend slightly more time teaching than males ($\chi^2 (4) = 35.290$ p <.001; possibly explained by a female skew in the classroom teacher role). As might be expected, differences in hours spent on individual activities by employment fraction were statistically significant, however when interpreting the data it is important to take into account the relatively small proportion of part-time teachers in the sample. Overall, despite differences in the working hours of different types of teachers, and the make up of those hours, the majority of all teachers worked long or very long hours. Working hours are long and have been increasing in recent years as the result of changes to the nature of teachers’ work. The following section explores some of these changes and examines the impact on teachers’ workloads.

**How Workloads are Changing**

When asked to identify how their workload had changed over recent years, many teachers indicated that it had increased. The findings, presented in Table 5, reflect this change. The activities on which teachers spent more time were overwhelmingly administration and management, and planning and assessment-related. This is the result of increasing accountability and a broadening of the tasks that teachers are expected to perform. Interestingly an equal proportion of respondents indicated their teaching time had decreased as had increased. This could be the result of a number of factors, including more time spent on other tasks at the expense of teaching time, or the shift of teachers into more senior roles with different role requirements. Overall, some two-thirds of respondents reported that they were spending more time in general on their work, while very few teachers reported spending less time on tasks compared to three years before. This data indicates a marked increase in workload in recent years that has implications for teachers’ lives outside of work.
Table 5: Time Spent Compared to Three Years Ago (Percentage)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Teaching, n=1668</th>
<th>Admin/Management, n=1628</th>
<th>Planning/Assessment, n=1673</th>
<th>Total hours, n=1553</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More time</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same time</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less time</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: QTU Dataset; Note: Errors due to rounding

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that compared to classroom and specialist teachers, principals and associate administrators reported spending less time on face-to-face teaching (F=19.360, p<.001) and more time on administrative duties (F=24.735, p<.001) compared to three years previously. Increased workload for teachers in terms of administration and management was especially marked in the secondary sector, while primary school teachers reported increased time spent on planning and assessment (though an independent samples T-test confirmed they were not statistically significant). Interestingly, changes in workload for both full- and part-time teachers were almost identical, indicating that the workload of teachers in general had increased. This represents a fundamental shift in the nature of work for all teachers. When asked to report how their workload had changed generally, an overwhelming proportion of all teachers indicated their workload had increased (see Table 6). Furthermore, a significant proportion suggested their workload had increased substantially. The following section reports data collected in focus groups to examine some of these issues in more depth, and considers the work-life implications of large workloads.

Table 6: Overall Workload Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Change in Workload</th>
<th>Percentage (n=1690)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased a lot</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased a little</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed the same</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased a little</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased a lot</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: QTU Dataset; Note: Errors due to rounding

Focus Group Findings - Workload Issues

An increase in workload over recent years has been the result of changes to teachers’ work. Increased workloads not only result in teachers having to do more, but they also influence work-life balance. Using qualitative data, this section identifies the most common explanations for workload change, as reported by teachers, and examines the impact of large workloads on teachers’ lives. Focus groups were conducted to explore three key aspects of workload, including: how workload has changed; why it has changed; and, how changing workloads impact on work-life balance.

A significant number of focus group participants reported that changes in planning and assessment, and administration and management accounted for workload increases. In relation to this, one teacher noted:
Further, as one teacher added, increased planning, assessment and administrative responsibilities came at the expense of quality lesson preparation and represented a significant source of increased workload for many teachers.

A number of explanations were given for increasing workload, the most common included constant changes in curriculum, policies and changing role responsibilities. One teacher explained that schools are increasingly being expected to offer more subjects and options while using the same staffing formula as before. Another observed that these and other policies accounted for increased workloads:

> Education Queensland produce too many policies at once and expect schools to implement [the policies] as well as teach. This filters down to classroom teachers doing more and more.

As the result of these changes, many teachers worked longer hours. This trend was confirmed by one teacher:

> We can’t really get into paperwork during the day. We start at 4pm, so that necessitates us staying back to 6:30-7pm at night to get these things done. It’s just impossible.

The changes also influenced teachers’ lives outside of work. Many teachers cited problems with relationships, sleep and less social time. One teacher noted that they were often too tired to enjoy social functions, were participating less in hobbies and spent more time working at home. This problem was reiterated by an administrator:

> My Husband still cannot understand why I can’t get everything done at school. My sons tell me I should ‘get a life’... My friends are cautious in their invitations and ask ‘are you busy?’... Teaching is exhausting!

Teachers work long hours, many are dissatisfied with their workloads and often have difficulty managing the balance between work and personal life. These problems are of significant concern for the education industry. In light of these findings a number of policy implications need to be considered to help reduce teachers’ workloads.

### Policy Implications

The retention of quality teachers is a significant issue for public education. A forecast shortage of teachers within the next decade, due to high labour turnover, is an impending crisis that needs to be addressed (Dept. of Education Science and Training, 2003; Webster, Wooden, & Marks, 2005). A significant factor influencing the retention of school teachers is workload. In light of the findings presented in this paper, several policy options should be investigated that aim to reduce the workload of teachers.

First, at a macro level, several European countries have implemented working time regulations that limit the number of hours an employee can work per week. Regulations have realised a marked downward shift in average full-time working hours for workers in these countries (Campbell, 2002; OECD, 2004). Teachers in this study agreed that an upper limit should be placed on hours. These findings indicate that a cap on hours may reduce teacher burnout and reduce labour turnover.

Second, initiatives to reduce ‘long hours’ cultures (Pocock, 2003) may be useful for the industry. Methods used to limit the number of hours, or discourage long hours, should be investigated. The inclusion of effective overtime provisions in the collective agreement,
along with a phasing out of unpaid overtime (among other methods), could provide some disincentive for long hours (Pocock, 2003). While previous attempts to do this in the Queensland public education system have proved problematic, teachers in this study suggested there is clearly a need to find ways of reducing their workload.

Finally, public education in Australia is under-resourced and under-funded. Many teachers in this study cited poor resource support as one explanation for large workloads, as a significant proportion of their time was spent doing paperwork in addition to lesson preparation and teaching. Funding for adequate staffing to cope with workload demand created by administration and growing public accountability would be helpful and would demonstrate a more effective use of human resources.

The implementation of these policies would represent an important development for the public education sector. These initiatives may help reduce labour turnover, providing part of the solution for the teacher retention crisis. Further, a reduction in teachers’ workload would allow for more effective work-life integration which would have a positive influence on the life of teachers and on the broader community (Pocock, 2003).

**Conclusion**

The popular perception of teachers’ work is that which is performed only in classrooms, consisting the tuition of children, the marking of work and the correcting of mistakes. This paper argued that this perception is incorrect; teachers’ work has always included far more diverse responsibilities that extend beyond traditional school hours. In recent years, the work of teachers has undergone change. Teachers are now required to take on additional tasks and perform a broader range of functions. These responsibilities have added to teachers’ already large workload. The paper also discussed how increased workloads can influence stress and tiredness, cause problems with relationships and make it more difficult to manage work-life balance. Unless teacher workload issues are dealt with at the policy level, the retention of quality teachers will remain a significant issue for the education industry as more and more teachers leave the profession.

**Acknowledgements**

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**Reference List**


