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Living by the clock: the tyranny of the secondary school timetable

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Abstract

This paper explores the impact of the secondary school timetable on the lives and work of a group of women teachers. It is based on interviews with six women secondary teachers of various ages, teaching career profiles and family circumstances, and begins with an explanation of why they chose to become secondary teachers. Their daily work is then investigated, highlighting, in particular, the ways in which the secondary school timetable mediates their relationships with the students and other staff, and their careers. This theme is continued in the third section of the paper which describes how the secondary school timetable influences other aspects of these women's lives outside of their paid workplace. More broadly, the paper is underpinned by three notions: that teaching is work, secondary schools are work places and that some of the workers are women.

Introduction

In 1985 Connell identified what is now a well-worn perspective of the occupation of teaching: "Teachers are workers, teaching is work and the school is a workplace (Connell, 1985, p.69). It is important to focus on the idea of teaching as work in order to counteract the concept of teaching as a calling and the image of teachers as adults who do what they do mostly because they love children. The association of such notions with *women* has historically shaped understandings of the occupational culture of teaching as maternal non-work, particularly when considering primary school teaching. Feminist studies of women primary teachers including Biklen (1986; 1995), Acker (1983; 1992; 1995a) and Burgess (1989) have sought to challenge this understanding. However, the secondary school workplace offers a different reading of the nature of teachers' work (Angus, 1993; Bailey, 1996; Cunnison, 1985; Robinson, 2000) which has not been explored to the same extent.

This paper is based on interviews with six women secondary teachers. It is designed to investigate: why women work as secondary school teachers, their work practices and the characteristics of their career histories. However, research that intends to provide an accurate picture of women teachers' lives and careers must encompass more than school based experiences. In 1995 Acker noted that there were hardly any studies that investigated exactly how teachers deal with the interaction between school and home (Acker, 1995b, p.130). A decade later, Cinamon and Rich (2005) contend that research on the relationship between work and family roles among teachers is still relatively scarce. They argue that many researchers do not perceive of women teachers as a fruitful target for such research because of the assumption that teaching enables a compatible relationship between work and family roles (Cinamon & Rich, 2005, p.366). Through the interviews that I have conducted I am able to provide some further insight into the issue of how women secondary teachers combine their home and school lives.

The six women teachers in this study vary in age, teaching career profiles and family circumstances. At 59 years, Annie considers that she is nearing the end of her teaching career. However, she has not always been a teacher having commenced this career in her early forties, following her undergraduate studies as a mature age student. Annie lives with her husband and an adult daughter and is a full-time Business Education teacher at metropolitan boys' school. Susan is also 59 years old and she has taught since graduating from university in her early twenties. Susan lives with her husband of thirty years and her sixteen year old son, and teaches English and Humanities in a regional co-educational school. Nicole is 28 years old and has been teaching for six years. Following a series of short term contracts after she left university, she has now procured a permanent position as an English teacher at a metropolitan boys' school. Nicole is married but has no children.

Rebecca, aged 32, is a part-time (0.8) Science and Mathematics teacher at a metropolitan girls' school. She has been teaching for nine years mainly in remote Australian locations and in schools overseas. However, now that she is a single mother with a two year old daughter, she has relocated to the city where her parents can provide some practical support. Chiara is also 32 years but her circumstances are very different from Rebecca. She has never married, has no children and lives at home with her mother. Sally is 30 years old and has been teaching for eight years. She has not taught continuously over this period as she has since married and has two pre-school children. Sally now works as a part-time (0.5) teacher in a regional co-educational school.

Why women work as secondary teachers

There have been numerous attempts to explain why women choose to work as teachers (Acker, 1995a, 1995b; Adler, Laney, & Packer, 1993; Burgess, 1989; Cinamon & Rich, 2005; Munro, 1998; Smulyan, 2004). According to Smulyan (2004) research suggests women generally enter teaching either because they "love children", because it is a socially acceptable role to family and friends, because they can envision making a difference in the world through teaching, or because in some cases they perceive limited opportunities for women in other fields (pp.516-517). Cinamon and Rich (2005) suggest that a career in teaching has been considered favorably by women as it has many attributes that are considerate of family needs and constraints, including a relatively short workday at the job site and no work in school holidays. My interview data reveals, however, that the reasons the women chose to work as a secondary teachers is at variance with many of these commonly held assumptions.

Adler et al (1993) and Johnson (1990) both note that many women enter teaching by default rather than deliberate choice. For some the decision stems from the fact that they did not know what else to do. For more than one of the teachers whom I interviewed, decision by default appears to be a significant reason for entering teaching. Susan describes her pathway:

Most girls in those times took up teaching, nursing or banking. I knew banking was never a viable option for me, not active enough and not enough meaningful contact with people. Nursing never really appealed to me. I finally decided at the end of my schooling that I wasn't going to be able to occupy my mind enough with nursing, and that teaching was my destiny.

Chiara also appears to have made a decision by default:

In Year 12 I was given the sheets for your choice and I think I decided that I would do a better job than some of the teachers I had. I got in and I thought, 'Well, I'm in. What am I going to do now?' But I wasn't going to rock the boat or change my course half way through or any of that.

The desire to work with children and the compatibility of teaching with home and family have, in the past, been proposed by some researchers (Adler et al., 1993; Johnson, 1990; Lortie, 1973) as two chief reasons that women choose to teach. I found little, if any, evidence to support such contentions. These factors were of minimal importance to the women in my study. Not one of the women alluded to choosing teaching because of the potential to satisfactorily combine the career with family responsibilities. Only Nicole indicated that her choice was based on a desire to work with children:

I've always wanted to be a teacher. I don't think there was every any doubt about that. I was always thinking I want to be a primary teacher.

It is interesting to note that after a period of work experience in a primary school she changed her mind:

I went to my old primary school, thinking I wanted to be a PE teacher at primary school and got there, did a week and absolutely despised it. Couldn't cope with young children and all their whinging. I realised I still wanted to be a teacher. I enjoyed the whole aspect of being that role, but not teaching that age group.

My interviews indicate that the prime motivation for women pursuing a career in *secondary* teaching is the desire to continue studying and then utilising a discipline they knew and enjoyed. Rebecca explained her decision-making:

After having deferred from Maths/Science [undergraduate degree], the reason I applied for PE teaching and Maths teaching or PE/Maths combination was that one of my lecturers at the university advised, because of my sport, that I go and do sport and Maths teaching. That's the reason I ended up re-directing.

Annie's reasons resonate with Rebecca's:

I did the Accounting and Secretarial [teaching diploma] course because I'd done that in the business world and that was the most logical step. I loved accounting and I'd done shorthand and typing. I took on English because I love English and I did Sociology because I enjoy that as well.

And Sally explains her choice:

I had an interest in [a career in] food so I thought that teaching would be the career for me. I could incorporate the food aspect.

My interviews, therefore, indicate that some of the women may have entered teaching by default and for others secondary schools enabled them to make use of familiar and satisfying subject disciplines. My research involving women secondary teachers does not support the traditionally held views that women choose to teach because of a desire to work with children or the compatibility with home and family responsibilities.

The secondary school as a work place

Many occupations have a strong association with specific workplaces – journalism in a newspaper office, carpentry on a building site, aged care in nursing homes and teaching in schools. However, a work place is more than just a physical setting: it incorporates how the work is divided and done, how it is scheduled, supervised and regarded by others. Johnson (1990, p.3) describes the school workplace thus:

Teachers' workplaces are easily distinguished from those of dentists or journalists. Schools are complex, busy institutions where licensed workers are responsible for batch processing the education of large groups of clients for several months at a time. Teachers need not generate work; it comes to them. Their time, but not necessarily their performance, is closely watched by principals whose administrative span of control is large and who assume many and varied managerial responsibilities, from monitoring instruction to monitoring buses.

A secondary school is a unique workplace. Lieberman and Miller (1992) identify three major factors that distinguish the culture of a secondary school: bureaucracy, working with adolescents and the faculty culture. As a bureaucracy, a secondary school has a pyramid of authority: the principal at the apex, with descending tiers of incorporating deputy or assistant principals, faculty department heads, year level co-ordinators and finally classroom teachers at the base level. Teachers are in turn often ranked by the number of years they have taught and rewarded accordingly.

One researcher suggests that dealing with school bureaucracy can be an issue for women teachers. Casey (1993) recounts that the women in her study cited school administration as the most persistent and profound source of their school based problems. Complaints about specific administrators as well as against 'the system' itself, prevail in her narratives. Casey contends that underlying all these criticisms is a rejection of the masculine privilege upon which the organisational structures of schools have been traditionally based (p.195). Such a disparaging view of school administrators and the system within which they operate is not evident in my research. To the contrary, collaborative and collegial relationships are described as being the norm. Nicole, by way of an example, describes her relationship with her principal:

Just a really amazing man – very knowledgeable. Respect him enormously and his ideas and what he wants to do for the school. His vision for the school is just really very warming. He really does have the students at heart but is very business wise as well, which is very important.

Chiara has a similar relationship with her principal:

If I wanted to I would be more than welcome to go in and say “I’d like to speak to you about this situation”. The door’s always open.

Susan concurs:

I don’t have any problems with admin. Perhaps it may be their superb personalities and the ways in which they deal with things; it may be the way in which I approach things.

My research would appear to dispute Casey’s (1992) conclusion that administrative repression of women teachers operates as a chronic, covert, psychological force (p.199).

The division of secondary teachers into faculty departments is a universal feature of secondary schools (Dinham & Green, 2001; Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Little, 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Siskin, 1994; Visscher & Witziers, 2004). The faculty department dominates the social and political organisation of secondary schools and is the primary point of reference for most teachers. ‘What counts to secondary teachers is not simply *that* they teach, but *what* they teach’ (Siskin, 1994, p.155). This has the effect of creating ‘microworlds’ within the school (Goodson & Marsh, 1996). Siskin (1994) identifies four critical characteristics of a faculty department: it provides a strong boundary for dividing the school; it is a primary site for social interaction and professional identity; it is an administrative unit, determining what and how teachers teach and as a knowledge category it influences the decisions and actions of its members. The teaching ‘subject’ plays a major role in formation of teacher identity. As subject specialists teachers share a sense of who they are, what they do (Siskin, 1994, p.180).

Lieberman and Miller (1992) describe an additional unique subgroup culture that exists in secondary schools. These various arbitrary groups; smokers, non-smokers, men, women, those thrown together by common timetabling schedules provide a special reference point for secondary teachers. However, the social contexts of the secondary school workplace were of low importance to the women I interviewed. The part-time teachers with responsibilities for pre-school children were only at school for the minimum time. Others kept their school-based social relationships to informal passing interactions, preferring to socialise with non-teachers out of school hours. Very few of the women even attend staff social functions.

A number of researchers have described how in schools groups and individuals use whatever power resources they possess to maximise their own interests, often to the detriment or discomfort of women teachers (Acker, 1995b; Angus, 1993; Bailey, 1996; Coffey & Delamont, 2000; Cunnison, 1985; Robinson, 2000). Bailey (1996) identifies that boys’ schools are workplaces where women are undermined and discounted by male staff members and

subject to sexual harassment by both staff and students. The women I interviewed, who taught in boys' schools recount similar experiences. Annie recalls that:

When I first came here I felt that females were very much second class citizens. We weren't heard. We didn't count for anything and there were only such a few of us.

Both Robinson (2000) and Cunnison (1985) described how young women teachers encountered sexual banter that focused on their dress and appearance. Nicole has had to cope with such incidents involving both male staff members and students:

Being a young female I felt sometimes that I was something to look at and boys didn't take me seriously. The boys often feel the need to comment on your appearance, what you're wearing, what you look like, what your hair looks like, and I think that's really difficult. But they would think twice about it if I were a male teacher. Similarly, some of the older women are a little broader or older than I am, the same sort of things. They feel the need to comment on their appearance and I really do object. In fact I find some of the male staff members feel the need to comment on what you're wearing. There's a real pressure on women to look good.

The bureaucracy and faculty culture have already been identified major factors that distinguish the secondary school workplace. However, I contend that there is a further major factor that characterises the secondary school workplace and that significantly mediates the work of secondary school teaching: the timetable.

The tyranny of the timetable at work

The timetable is a fundamental organising principle of everyday life in secondary schools that shapes school life into a complex temporal sequence. For secondary teachers, the division of school time into 'periods', the beginning and end of which is marked by the ringing of a bell, is a taken-for-granted feature of their work lives. On a daily basis the timetable significantly influences the organisational and educational experiences of students and teachers alike, and is a crucial factor in the shaping and ordering of curriculum.

The origins of the secondary timetable can be traced to the institution of a measure, known as the Carnegie unit, early in the last century in the United States (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Tyack & Tobin, 1993). A Carnegie unit was defined as a course of five periods weekly throughout an academic year in secondary school subjects. A "period" was accepted to be about fifty to fifty-five minutes long. Although originally intended to improve preparation for college (colleges required fourteen Carnegie units for entrance), the Carnegie unit system of academic time keeping and the division of teachers into faculty departments provided a tidy framework for differentiating time and the curriculum as secondary schools expanded. Tyack and Cuban (1995) contend that this academic accounting device has become so firmly

established in the operating routines of secondary schools that any attempts to dislodge it have been unsuccessful (p.91).

Research by others over successive decades, both in Australia and overseas, has shown that the timetable mediates four critical aspects of secondary school life: the enacted curriculum, student learning, teachers' work and identity, and the use of space (Ball, Hull, Skelton, & Tudor, 1984; Cormack, 1999; National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994; O'Neil, 1995; Stobart & Stoll, 2005).

The school clock governs how families organise their lives, how administrators oversee their schools, and how teachers work their way through the curriculum. Above all, it governs how material is presented to students and the opportunity they have to comprehend and master it. (National Education Commission on Time and Learning, 1994)

The secondary school timetable usually divides the school day into forty or fifty minute blocks in which discrete subjects are taught by specialist teachers. However, based on my long experience as a secondary school timetabler, I would argue that many teachers do not consider that all of their lessons are temporally equal, depending upon what, when, how or who they are teaching. Research by Ball et al (1984, p.50) supports this contention. The practice of tying together, in the timetable, specialist subjects with differing time allocation needs results in poor articulation between the subject content to be covered and the lesson time provided in many cases. The varying nature of subject specialisations and associated learning activities mean that double lessons are too long for some and single lessons too short for others. Hence, the optimum delivery of the curriculum is frequently compromised by the length of the lessons.

The poor articulation between subject content and time allocated seems to be further compounded by the nature of the students and classes being taught. A common teacher *perception* is that the timetable frequently mediates student learning and behaviour depending when lessons are scheduled within the school day, or the school week. In my experience there is broad consensus among teachers that students are better behaved and hence lessons are more productive in the morning, rather than in the afternoon, especially Friday afternoons. This perceived relationship between student behaviour and the timetable further impacts on the curriculum and learning. Teachers tend to make 'allowances' for the time of day or the day of the week when lessons are scheduled and classroom tasks are arranged to minimise disruptive student behaviour or lack of engagement at particular times of the day or week. Research by Ball (1984) reached a similar conclusion: that teachers' expectations of what were reasonable and practicable classroom activities differed according to the time of the day or the time of the week lessons were scheduled. Research by others (Cormack, 1999; Stobart & Stoll, 2005) also indicates that because the inflexible secondary school timetable provides relatively short periods of time for teachers to interact with their students it is difficult for teachers to develop strong personal relationships with the students.

In addition to impacting upon the enacted curriculum, teachers' work and student learning, the secondary school time also determines the use of space in schools. 'The articulation of space through time is powerfully manifested by the timetable' (McGregor, 2003, p.364). The timetabling of discrete spaces in secondary schools usually results in a form of physical isolation where teachers rarely interact with each other. Space in a secondary school is also frequently associated with particular subjects, for example science in laboratories, and the timetabling of teachers into subject specific spaces further reinforces the influence of faculty departments in the formation of teacher identity in secondary schools.

The tyranny of the timetable at home

'The organisation of time in schools affects the way individuals, and especially women, structure both their private and public lives' (Tamboukou, 2000, p.473). The interviews that I conducted with women secondary teachers illuminated just how time and the school timetable mediates their lives outside of school and even their careers. Tamboukou (2000) notes that the arrangement of time is exceptionally important in lives that run in between work obligations, childcare and personal expansion (p.471). Many of the women in my research were experiencing a feeling that they were swinging between two worlds of work: the school world and the home world.

I don't think about home when I am at school. [Once home] school is eclipsed for a while for household considerations. (Susan)

Sally's transition from the school world to the home world is more urgent:

At quarter to one when the bell went I only had a little bit of time to pack up because I've got to be at the childcare centre at one. If I'm a minute late they charge me so I don't have a lot of spare time. It's one dollar per child for every minute you're late.

Women teachers' home lives are affected in a number of unique ways that are a function of their work as teachers. All of the women in my research reported the need to regularly undertake schoolwork at home. For those with household and child rearing responsibilities the possibility of remaining after school to complete their teaching work is diminished. This work frequently occurs at the end of the day, after several hours of domestic duties have been completed:

I eventually sit down and start marking, going through materials used during the day, organising the next topic. (Annie)

I do the dishes, get her [daughter] things ready for the next day, get my stuff ready and then about ten o'clock I have some marking to do. (Rebecca)

Our meal is out of the way by eight-thirty, then I get back to the schoolwork again for two or three hours. (Susan)

Spencer (1986) claimed that those who took some paper work home extended their work day by at least one hour, and that the home lives of those who spent over two hours a night doing

schoolwork were significantly affected. She observed that secondary English teachers usually take inordinate amounts of work home (p.182). Susan's account above would support his assertion.

Whether or not they take schoolwork home, teachers' lives can be influenced at home by school-related factors in ways that make their work ever present (Spencer, 1986). Rebecca's struggle as a single mother consumes her thoughts:

I've got decisions to make about whether to continue or not. So I'm in quite a stressed position at the moment. I love my teaching but it's getting tough, I'm tired. I don't think [it's worth] the extra money. One day you want out of it, and then something happens and you want to be in it. I've been processing that every day.

There is ample evidence that the work of women secondary teachers affects their home lives. However, the reverse is also the case: women teachers' home lives affect their school lives. Women teachers who have children have even more complicated home lives, which can affect their school lives in a number of ways. Those with very young children or babies come to work suffering from the sort of long-term exhaustion that arises from frequently broken sleep. Children's illness results in particular problems for women teachers because it may cause them to be distracted at work due to anxiety and tiredness and it also results in a higher rate of absenteeism from work. This is an issue that is a cause for concern for both Sally and Rebecca:

With Elizabeth [daughter] having her operation and then we have to go down for check-ups really quite regularly, I don't want to put any more stress on anyone else at the school. [I wonder] about staff resentment, in particular since I'm part-time already. (Sally)

I find it really hard. Sophie [daughter] has been sick so often she's needing doctor's appointment, need to go to paediatricians and trying to manage that while working nine to whatever is really difficult. (Rebecca)

It could be argued that problems associated with combining work and family responsibilities are not unique to secondary teachers. These are issues with which all women who work in paid employment must contend. However, there is a factor unique to the secondary school work place that complicates the tensions between home life and the work place. This is the tyranny of the secondary school timetable.

Many women with young children, who desire to work part-time, are able in many other occupations to work for two or three days each week in order to take advantage of several full days away from their work place. This type of arrangement is generally possible for women primary school teachers. However, the implications of the secondary school timetable are that most classes have one lesson each day, so a part-time teacher can be required at work for five days a week. Additionally, some secondary schools operate on a rotating six, seven or eight day timetable cycle. This means that no set day or part day can be taken off to accommodate fixed childcare arrangements or regularly scheduled family commitments.

Rebecca works in a secondary school with a seven day rotating timetable cycle. Her appointment is a 0.8 fraction of time, but she only gets one afternoon off every seven school days.

If I could work in a job where you could do two or three days, it would be great, but I can't here. I can't reduce my time to 0.5 because I would still need to be here most of the day. It just doesn't work in secondary.

Sally also works in a secondary school with a seven day rotating timetable cycle. Her appointment is for 0.5 fraction of time and she gets three full days off every seven school days. Sally has had to fight hard for this family friendly arrangement:

I try to make it clear to Admin that I'm not trying to be selfish here. I was thinking about my kids. I need to get the best out of it [the timetable] just so that I could be with the kids and childcare worked out. I did often have feeling about "I'm mucking up the timetable". The fact is I really only want to be here so many days a week. Somebody else is going to end up with all afternoon lessons, or someone's going to see their Year 8s three times in a row and they won't see them again for four days. If someone's got a problem they can say it or they can tell other people but the bottom line is if they came to me I'd say "Well I'm just doing this for my family and kids".

For Rebecca and Sally the constraints of the secondary timetable are clearly mediating their careers as both are considering their future options with regard to their work as teachers. Rebecca is very tired, and her daughter is sick. On a 0.8 fraction of time she only has one afternoon off every seven school days. She is wondering whether the difference between the money she is earning as a teacher and the sole parent pension is worth the stress. Ideally, she would like to work two or three days per week. However, this arrangement does not easily fit in with the secondary school timetable and Rebecca is considering looking for work in a primary school. Sally is taking the following year off work. She has become tired of balancing work and family. She is frustrated that she is unable to more fully contribute to school life but she wants more time with her children.

Conclusion

This study, based on interviews with six women teachers, illuminates their reasons for choosing secondary teaching, their career profiles, the characteristics of their school work places and the impact of the secondary school timetable on their lives and work, both at school and outside of school. Contrary to the traditionally held view that women choose to teach because of a desire to work with children or its compatibility with home and family responsibilities, my research reveals that some of the women entered teaching by default, rather than by deliberate choice, and for others secondary schools enabled them to make use of familiar and satisfying subject disciplines.

The secondary school is a unique work place characterised by: a bureaucratised administration, the division of teachers into faculty department and an adolescent student body. Earlier research (Casey, 1993) indicated that school administrators were the most persistent and profound school based problem for women secondary teachers. However, difficulty working with school administrators was not evident in my research. Instead, collaborative and collegial relationships were described as the norm. However, some of the women reported continuing verbal harassment, especially comments made with regard to their personal appearance, at the hands of both male students and male staff members.

The secondary school timetable dominates teachers' work in the secondary school workplace. Johnson's (1990) descriptive explanation gives some indication as to why:

Bells ring to signal the passing of classes, each of which will spend some parcel of time with the teacher in his or her classroom. Though students may move throughout the building, high school teachers often never leave their rooms in the course of a day. For every 'period' or 'hour', there is a routine: taking attendance, continuing from yesterday, introducing today's material, winding down. Repeated five times a day. (Johnson, 1990, p.6)

Previous research has revealed that the secondary school timetable has a significant bearing on the enacted curriculum, student learning, teacher identity and the use of space in schools. My study also reveals that the incompatibility of the secondary school timetable with women teachers' home lives. For some of these women, the timetable is ultimately mediating their careers.

Women secondary teachers with young children who work part-time are frequently required to be at school every day. In 1978, Byrne questioned why women allowed such circumstances to exist suggesting that if men were affected likewise this state of affairs would be rectified (Byrne, 1978, p.238). Over twenty-five years later it seems that not much has changed. On the basis of my research I propose that secondary school structures have failed to reflect the reality of women teachers' lives. Further research involving a larger group of respondents would shed more light on the extent of impact of the secondary school timetable on women teachers' lives and work. Such research may well inform a range of more flexible timetabling practices that would enable women to access employment patterns which accommodate family and other personal commitments and still allow them to pursue a professional career.

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