

## Quality of Teachers' Professional Lives: Teacher stress, workload and satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

With the greater personal and professional demands made on teachers in recent years, it is reasonable to expect that the ways in which teachers viewed their responsibilities might have been affected. In common with all Australian teachers, demands on teachers employed by the NSW Department of School Education increased throughout the 1980s. However, from staff reductions and the initiation of the School Management Review in 1988, its implementation beginning in 1989 and continuing through 1992 to the present, the rate of change accelerated rapidly. Expectations of teachers have changed most markedly in the areas of workload, accountability and assessment.

This paper outlines some of the major changes in NSW, and compares self-reported levels of stress, workload and satisfaction of secondary teachers in the Hunter Region of NSW in 1989 and 1992. Four measures of stress were employed - stress arising from students and conditions, time pressure, administrative conflict, and lack of rewards and recognition; four measures of workload - administration, teaching, managing resources, and assessment of students; and three measures of satisfaction - workload and conditions, relationships with students, and relationships with administration and senior staff. Levels of stress, workload and satisfaction and changes over this period are related to overall changes in the social and professional context of teachers in the State and Region.

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Introduction

The election of a new NSW government in 1988 saw the announcement of several major policy changes and a different approach to educational administration at the highest level. As Minister, Metherall ensured that the role of the Ministry became far more pervasive in administration as compared with the Department of Education. Although there were considerable areas of common ground between the previous government and the new government, five New Liberalism principles Metherall identified were to have profound implications for education policy and practice in NSW (Bentley, 1990). The most influential policy changes were those associated with staffing formulae, performance testing and departmental restructuring (Bentley, 1990, p.22).

This paper is concerned with changes to teachers' professional lives particularly over a three-year period from 1989. Secondary teachers employed by the NSW Department of School Education in 1989 and 1992 were the groups of particular interest. Arising from the 1988 change in government, the major specific changes affecting teachers over the period of interest in NSW were the implementation of the Scott report concerning departmental management and restructuring, effects of the reduction in teacher numbers in 1988, and the introduction of school principal appraisal. Increased retention of students in the senior secondary school was also an important change, although not one

resulting from state political or bureaucratic action. Each of these changes is now described and discussed briefly in turn before turning to an examination of self-report measures of teachers' lives: perceived workload, stress and satisfaction.

#### CHANGES IN EDUCATION 1989 - 1992

##### The Scott Report

1989 was a significant year for teachers in schools under the responsibility of the NSW Department of School Education. Following the 1988 elimination of 2500 teaching positions, in June 1989 the summary report of the Management Review (which had been commissioned in April 1988) was presented to the Minister, recommending major changes to the management of schools in NSW to be implemented over a five-year period. The final report, available in March 1990, provided some detail of what was referred to as lowered morale and raised cynicism among teachers within the system.

In particular, the report referred to declining satisfaction with teaching which was likely to affect the quality of education. Causes identified were described either as external, such as stress associated with social and economic pressures or as internal, such as frustration, lack of acknowledgment and reward, and declining self esteem (Scott, 1990, p.87). Some of the remedies suggested to reverse these trends were, in summary, "additional opportunities for professional development, for career path planning and for promotion by merit" (Scott, 1990, p.xiv).

The changes recommended by Scott were far reaching and, politically, were touted as constituting a major "reform" of education. The ploy of politicians and bureaucrats referring to their educational changes as "reforms" has been discussed previously (Bourke, 1994, p.1). The Review recommendations may well have been seen as a reform by optimistic teachers, and the Review certainly was lauded as steering towards a genuine

improvement of learning and teaching and of students' and teachers' lives. Following the staff reductions of 1988, other teachers, perhaps either cynically or realistically, were concerned that the recommendations would lead to an increased intensity of demanding more of them while providing still less resources. In the view of the latter group of teachers, it would not be the first time that unpleasant and perhaps destructive changes had been dressed in the rhetoric of "reform".

Additional pressures on teachers in 1989 were the foreshadowing of a form of professional appraisal of teachers, and challenges to the public service seniority provisions which were also likely to affect them (Scott, 1990, p.88). Although a source of concern, the latter would have been seen as potentially positive by many teachers, but as negative by others. Erosion of other conditions such as uninterrupted long school vacations (threatened by in-service expectations) and tenure of appointment (reduced by shortage of permanent teaching positions and increased use of contracts in some areas of education) were also in the offing or already existed. Scott recommended that some of these measures be implemented and thus become actual rather than potential sources of increased workload and stress. The recommendations included performance appraisal of teachers to be used as the basis of promotion on merit, and dismissal procedures to be greatly accelerated. Scott further added to stresses by recommending that, while reduction in the size of classes was financially precluded, schools

should adopt a more flexible approach to class size (Scott, 1990, p.93). Student assessment was also to be more based on outcomes and more centralised. Other recommendations concerned with decentralisation of in-service programs to Regions and schools were more generally applauded.

#### Performance Appraisal of School Principals

In 1991, within the period of particular interest, a trial system of

performance appraisal of school principals was implemented in the Region. The system became obligatory in 1992, and was at that time seen as a precursor for a system of teacher appraisal. Apart from this additional "threat", with appraisal pressures on principals there would be considerable impact transmitted to teachers through increased demands.

In the course of a small study evaluating the trial appraisal system, when principals were asked why they thought performance appraisal had been commenced, their responses differed considerably from the reasons they gave as to what should be the motives for appraisal. Whereas professional development, linking of teaching and learning to school goals, and improved student outcomes were considered to be legitimate motives, the actual motives they saw as pivotal were community accountability and satisfying the government's corporate plan (Clayton-Jones et al, 1993, pp.117-118). In general, the principals accepted accountability as a legitimate concern to be addressed by an appraisal process, but expressed some cynicism about differences between the ideal and actual reasons for its implementation (Clayton-Jones et al, 1993, pp.129-130).

#### Increased Retention Rates

Another major change to secondary education which was taking place throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s included increased retention into the senior secondary school. Ainley and Sheret (1992, p.2) illustrated that school retention rates into Year 11 and to Year 12 in NSW had increased considerably throughout the 1980s (from about one third to more than one half), and most dramatically in the latter half of that decade (from about 42 per cent to 57 per cent). The increases continued into the 1990s, with more than two-thirds staying on to Year 12 by 1992 (ACE News, 1994, p.11). In the Hunter Region participation rates were not as high as the State average, but they had also increased considerably from a much lower base in the 1980s, rising from

about 28 per cent in 1984 through 42 per cent in 1989 to 55 per cent in 1992.

It is not only the requirement of a much higher commitment to teaching and organisation for the senior years, necessitated by the numbers of students staying on, which affected the schools. Perhaps more important were the differences in academic levels and curriculum interests of the "new" students compared with those students previously completing secondary school. A range of alternative courses was required, both within the existing disciplines taught and in curriculum areas not previously seen as appropriate for the senior secondary school.

These were some of the key changes affecting secondary teachers between 1989 and 1992. Teacher reactions were assessed by a combination of measures of workload, stress and satisfaction with teaching.

#### SOME TEACHER RESPONSES TO TEACHING

In May 1989 all teachers at a sample of six government secondary schools in the Hunter Region of NSW were asked to respond to a mailed questionnaire seeking their attitudes to various aspects of their workload, stress and satisfaction associated with teaching. The response rate was 55 per cent, eventually providing a total of 199 usable responses. The levels of perceived workload, stress and satisfaction have been reported by Smith and Bourke (1992).

In 1992, as part of a larger study, a sample of 460 secondary teachers at 24 government schools in the Hunter Region was asked to complete the same questionnaire. Usable data were obtained from 258 teachers, a response rate of 56 per cent.

#### Description of the Questionnaire

Scales developed within each of the areas of workload, stress and satisfaction were refined through confirmatory factor analysis of the 1989 data. There were four response

categories offered for each item, with high numerical values indicating higher workload, stress or satisfaction. The scales in each area are now described briefly. For a more complete description of the scales, see Smith and Bourke (1992, pp.33-36).

**Workload.** Four scales were developed totalling 28 items. The scales were Workload arising from: Administration (duties outside the classroom), Teaching (demands associated with face-to-face teaching), Resources (demands of finding, developing and producing teaching resources), and Assessment (the demands of student evaluation).

**Stress.** Four scales were developed totalling 26 items. The scales were Stress arising from: Conflict (staff tensions and role conflict), Students (stress arising from interactions with students and with the teaching environment in general), Time pressure (having to do too much in too little time, with work intruding on home life), and Rewards and recognition (stress from lack of monetary reward and status of teaching, and lack of recognition of professionalism of teachers within the education system).

**Satisfaction.** Three scales made up of a total 14 items were developed. The scales were Satisfaction with: Workload and conditions (the amount of teaching and support for class teaching), Students (nature and level of relationships with students), and Administration (relationships with administration and senior staff of the school).

#### Levels of Workload, Stress and Satisfaction

There are no earlier data with which to compare the perceived levels of workload, stress and satisfaction in 1989 and 1992 although, of course, comparisons can be made between the levels reported in 1989 and 1992. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the 11 scales on each occasion, and also provides a comparison of means between 1989 and 1992 using t-tests for independent samples. All scale means ranged between 2.0 and 2.9, the range including 2.5, the mid-point of each distribution. Thus

there were no mean responses approaching 1 or 4 which were the theoretical extremes of the scale distributions.

Table 1. LEVELS OF WORKLOAD, STRESS AND SATISFACTION: COMPARISONS OF 1989 AND 1992

SCALE	1989		1992		T	DF	PROB/SIG
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Value		
<b>WORKLOAD</b>							
Administration	2.01	.63	2.17	.55	2.68	393	.008**
Teaching	2.29	.64	2.43	.52	2.59	371	.010**
Resources	2.52	.69	2.62	.60	1.65	391	.099
Assessment	2.56	.70	2.70	.56	2.41	374	.016*
<b>STRESS</b>							
Conflict	2.04	.64	2.12	.67	1.37	453	.173
Students	2.04	.56	2.07	.51	.49	454	.626
Time pressure	2.62	.80	2.67	.70	.68	455	.498
Rewards & recog.	2.57	.60	2.75	.71	2.93	449	.004**
<b>SATISFACTION</b>							
Workload & cond.	2.02	.61	2.06	.63	.70	452	.487
Students	2.38	.60	2.37	.58	.17	452	.867
Administration	2.77	.57	2.90	.60	2.46	451	.014*

Significance levels \*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$

#### Teacher Workload

The means for the Workload scales indicated that teachers believed their workload was between "slightly" and "quite" demanding with Assessment being the most demanding, followed by Resources, Teaching, and finally Administration. The pattern of results for 1989 and 1992 was consistent in order of the Workload scale means, although the perceptions of Workload in 1992 were consistently higher than in 1989. These differences were statistically significant between the two occasions for three of the four scales, the Resources scale being the exception.

Within the Assessment scale, the setting of homework exhibited the greatest increase in workload, while items concerned with workload from marking examinations, assessment tasks, assignments and notes also increased between 1989 and 1992. These specific changes and assessment workload generally may have been more extreme because of the senior secondary focus of the 1992 study.

Items in the Teaching scale which indicated greater workload were concerned with assisting individual students, particularly those with special needs, while reported workload due to sport decreased somewhat. The integration of students with special needs into regular secondary classes began gradually in the mid 1980s and continued throughout the late 1980s and the early 1990s. In addition, the increased retention into the senior secondary school of less-academically-inclined students no doubt increased the need for individual student support.

The greatest changes within the Administration scale were found for items concerned with committee work and other participation in policy development and school organisation generally. These increases to workload of teachers are entirely consistent with the decentralisation of school management recommended by Scott, and with the development of school policies being important for principal appraisal.

In summary, the teachers in 1992 were no doubt reflecting the increased demands made on them in several ways. Changes to an increasing centralisation of curriculum placed greater demands on the non-class times of teachers to keep up with changes to the structure and content of the curricula they teach. Consistent with the argument presented above concerning conflicting movement of responsibility between schools, regions and head office, the school was charged with the task of implementing the enforced changes in their own way, and this activity was (and remains) demanding of

teachers' time and energy. Changes to curriculum also required teachers to spend more time preparing new lessons, as did changes to the clientele of the school, occasioned by higher proportions of students staying on to complete secondary school.

#### Teacher Stress

With respect to the Stress scales, there was some consistency in the patterns of means between 1989 and 1992. Teachers responded that their stress level was between "a little" and "a fair bit". The stress from Students scale had a considerably lower variance than the other three scales, and the lowest mean value. The Time pressure and (lack of) Rewards and recognition scales had much higher means than the other two scales on both occasions, although Time pressure was the more stressful for the teachers in the 1989 sample, and lack of Rewards the more stressful for teachers in 1992 where the mean approached a moderate level of stress (it was much closer to "a fair bit" of stress than "a little" stress).

Although Stress was consistently higher in 1992, only for one scale was there a significant difference in Stress between 1989 and 1992, with teachers in 1992 reporting a higher level of stress from the lack of Rewards and recognition. Items within this scale which exhibited the greatest decline included those concerned with poor pay given the required levels of skills and responsibility, lack of opportunities for promotion, and two items more concerned with professional responsibility: being restricted in doing what was preferred, and disagreement with the current educational system. With a mean value of 3.06 (on a scale of 4), the last mentioned item was indicated as causing the highest level of stress related to lack of Rewards and recognition.

The period between 1989 and 1992 was marked by increased focus on what was seen as inadequacies of schooling, particularly the secondary school. The Scott Review was occasioned by such concerns. Schools were blamed for what was seen as the

unemployability of many young people who were considered to have not been prepared adequately for work. Teacher inadequacy to prepare students for work has been seen as a major source of the problem. Teachers have been urged to get out into the "real world" of industry and commerce, in essence devaluing the different nature of the work they do. Consistently with this type of demand, pressures on Faculties of Education for competency-based courses are increasingly seen as being necessary to train, rather than to

educate, pre-service teachers. Further, short in-service training in restricted areas, normally related to administration and management, has been increasingly preferred by the Department of School Education in NSW rather than providing opportunities for higher degree study by teachers.

It would be surprising if teachers did not experience stress from lack of rewards and recognition of their profession, when even that is challenged from within Education Departments as well as by powerful elements in the community generally.

A focus on the perceived inadequacy of teaching continues today when high-profile commentators such as Ashenden (1994) describes the classroom as a "19th century workplace"... "inefficient, and inequitable ...". One might reasonably expect that teacher stress arising from lack of rewards and recognition will have increased subsequent to the measure taken in 1992.

#### Teacher Satisfaction

For the Satisfaction scales there was again consistency between 1989 and 1992. Satisfaction levels indicated were between a little and a fairly high level of Satisfaction, with relationships with Administration having the highest mean, followed by relationships with Students, and finally Workload and conditions where only "a little" satisfaction was obtained. Only for the Administration scale was there a significant difference in Satisfaction between 1989 and 1992, with teachers reporting a fairly high level of

satisfaction in 1992. Within the Administration scale, teachers were particularly more satisfied with their relationships with senior staff and other teachers in the school, and the expectations that senior staff had of them.

As was pointed out by Smith and Bourke (1992, p.45), higher levels of satisfaction are not inconsistent with higher levels of workload and stress. This may be particularly so when the staffs of schools, including senior administrators, feel the same pressures from the Department, the Ministry and from the community generally. If schools were to respond to the pressures by working together, in a common cause, it is reasonable that teachers would experience higher levels of satisfaction with the senior administration of the school.

#### Summary and Future Projections

It seems clear that the limited decentralisation of policy and administration to schools which took place over the period of 1989 to 1992, desirable as it may have been, resulted in an increased workload for many teachers, and these Hunter Region

teachers perceived this to be the case in the areas of administration, teaching and assessment. This was consistent with the reactions of teachers to similar restructuring changes in the Western Australian Department of Education (Dimmock and Hattie, 1994, pp.50-51). No general compensating structures, such as specialist teachers or greater administrative support, were put in place to alleviate the increased workload. In fact other aspects of teachers' work, such as assessment tasks, also increased, and continue increasing.

Indications are that the introduction of the current trial of student profiling as a mode of assessment has led to an increased workload for teachers. There is significant anxiety among teachers, with some schools expending considerable effort on profiling while other schools seem unsure of what to do. The Department has given priority support for Years

7 and 8 Key Learning Area profiles in 1994 and 1995 (Boston, 1993, p.22), although progress in 1994 has not been marked. There is obvious potential for impact on teacher stress in the present period of anxiety and uncertainty.

With respect to teacher performance appraisal, while there has been no move towards a formal system, what seems to be an effective informal system is operating. Teachers seeking merit-based promotion are expected to conform to general criteria applicable to all positions as well as to criteria specific to the advertised position. In some cases, teacher level appointments are also merit-based and general "conformity" criteria apply, including work references from superiors. Almost 20 per cent of the 6383 positions filled during 1993 were by local selection on merit, mostly following advertisement (Boston, 1993, p.40).

Other pressures during the period 1989-1992 arose from general criticism of educational standards, of teachers and of teaching resulting in frustration and cynicism among teachers (Porter, 1990, p.149). These commonly-expressed views would have impacted specifically on teacher stress from lack of rewards and recognition which did increase significantly between 1989 and 1992 and had the highest stress levels in 1992. The criticisms of teachers continue as indicated above.

Teachers' poor working conditions were also identified by Porter (1990, pp.154-155) as contributing to a "crisis" in the teaching profession. It would be expected that these conditions would impact on the scale measuring teacher satisfaction with workload and

conditions. Teacher satisfaction in this area was considerably less than their satisfaction with their school's administration and with students, although it did not differ between 1989 and 1992.

Perhaps the change which has the potential to cause most disruption to secondary schools,

at least in the senior school, results from the Directions policy released by the Minister in 1993 (Chadwick, 1992). Directions allows senior students in NSW from 1994 onwards to follow alternative "pathways" to the Higher School Certificate (HSC) and to study in more flexible time frames. The HSC pathways combine school-based study, TAFE-based vocational education, industry training, and courses from private training providers (Chadwick, 1992, p.3). Provisions for "dual accreditation" and "credit transfer" between providers, for example Joint Secondary School/TAFE programs (Woodburne & Lambert, 1994), HSC "accumulation" over a five year period (Board of Studies, 1994a, 11.9), and "acceleration" of advanced school students into University, TAFE, or special "Distinction" courses (Board of Studies, 1994b), desirable as they may be, create new concerns and workloads for teachers. Most notably these provisions create new categories of part-time school students with new administrative, assessment and disciplinary demands.

It would seem clear that most of the education changes implemented in the late 1980s are continuing to impact on schools and teachers, and more recently the associated workload and possible stress have been added to by the adoption of several new policies which affect teachers or require implementation by teachers. We suggest that the changes and their effects on teachers' professional and personal lives require continued close monitoring.

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