

0303

Tomorrow's Schools Today and Yesterday : Workloads of Primary School Leaders and Teachers in Self-Managed Schools

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Background

Primary teachers' work has changed during recent decades. Some aspects of 21st Century teachers' work resemble those familiar to their counterparts of the 1980s and 90s, while other roles, particularly around the use and modelling of digital technologies, have evolved considerably. Educational reform across 'the Western World' has seen the introduction and settling of self-managed schools; partnerships between educators and the community have changed in nature; and teachers worldwide are expected to take on burgeoning responsibilities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such perceptions are similar in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. If so, then it is logical to postulate that a changing role for teachers and school leaders must also bring about a change in workload. It is therefore useful to gather data regarding the nature, extent and sustainability of primary school teachers' work, together with their comments and opinions.

1st October 1989 saw the introduction of the Labour Government's *Tomorrow's Schools* legislation in New Zealand -the introduction of self-managing schools. Rather than centralised and regionalised Education Boards making decisions about local staffing and operational functions, the power to find appropriate solutions to meet local needs at the local level was devolved to the new Board of Trustees (similar to Board of Governors) of each state school.

In 1992, research was carried out investigating the impact of the legislation on the workload of teachers, senior staff and principals who had experienced both systems (author, 1992). The intervening period had been marked by a tension between the Government's desire to retain a 'community view' (welfare state perspective) while supporting a market / choice perspective of educational decision-making. At the subsequent election, the National (similar to Conservative) Government was elected and immediately began to unravel aspects of the 'community' provisions within education; pursuing instead the 'market' view of the New Right (Gordon, 1992).

Having reached the twentieth anniversary of *Tomorrow's Schools* legislation in 2009, several parallel circumstances were noted. This provided a timely opportunity to replicate the original study; re-examining workloads of primary teachers and making comparisons in the light of the many societal and educational changes that have occurred in the interim.

Research Questions

The paper aims to investigate and compare principals' and teachers' work and workloads over the twenty year period since the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools legislation; the coping strategies they use; and to consider sustainability for the future.

Specifically, the following research questions guided the study:

What is the nature of primary teachers' current workloads, and do they believe they are sustainable?

Have their workloads and roles changed in any way?

What do teachers like and dislike about the reforms/ initiatives and what are their overall reactions to them?

What effects do they think that reforms/ initiatives have had on their work/ home life/ health/ view of teaching as a career?

Do they believe that changes have led to enhanced learning opportunities for children?

Methods

Tools of the digital age such as blogs, wikis and fora allow teachers from across the globe to voice their triumphs and concerns and share views about a myriad of topics, including workload, in ways that were unimagined in the 1980's. Whilst valuable, it could be argued that this type of public forum is similar to talkback radio in attracting the participation of certain personality types; and that analysis of information gleaned from such sources must carry bias.

An online survey available to all teachers in the region, on the other hand, is a vehicle through which positions and opinions can be safely and anonymously voiced alongside the provision of objective and empirical data. The audience is private; avoiding the sense of 'performance' inherent in public postings. Participants choose to respond at any time and place convenient to them.

The survey invitation was made to schools via email. The anonymous survey was accessible online via the Survey Monkey tool, and in paper form on request. Permission to include results was included in the introduction to the survey, and respondents were able to withdraw from the process at any time up to the final submission.

Frame

The paper will explore the socio-political aspects of change between the two surveys, tracking elements of legislative and popular expectation which impact on the everyday work of educators in primary schools.

A mixed- method approach combining quantitative and qualitative data is employed. This is supported by the functionality of the Survey Monkey package which provides ongoing collation and partial analysis of data. The qualitative information is coded and categorised for common themes. Specific statements were also selected as representative and have been quoted verbatim. Results are discussed comparatively with similar NZ and UK (Campbell & Neill, 1994) research.

Research findings

The initial encouraging response to the online survey (77 respondents so far during their summer 'break') allows some early comparison of some items. For example the proportion of teachers who do not believe they can sustain this workload has risen from one half to two-thirds. This might signal real danger of burnout and attrition, which schools can ill afford.

Usefulness may lie in such signalling, enabling proactive responses by school leaders and employers. An unexpected outcome of the first study, alongside contribution to knowledge, was its use by the New Zealand Education Institute (the primary teachers' union) as evidence in their successful claim for pay parity with secondary teachers in 1994. Although such a practical outcome may not emerge from the current comparative study, it is anticipated that the important element of teacher voice combined with the timely investigation of the impact of teachers' workload and their ability to sustain it, will be of vital interest to educational leaders and planners in both the UK and NZ.

Campbell, R.J. & Neill, S.R. St.J. (1994). *Primary Teachers at Work*. Routledge: London.

Gordon, L. (1992). Educational reform in New Zealand: contesting the role of the teacher. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 2 (1), 23 - 42.

Lange, D. (1988). *Tomorrow's Schools*. Government Printer: Wellington.

