Research Note

Exploring Work Intensification in Teaching: A Research Agenda

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Abstract

This paper looks at work intensification in the Australian public education sector, an industry sector where the intensification of work has not been fully investigated. Beginning with a review of the literature on work intensification in general, the paper proceeds to examine the literature on the intensification of work in the education sectors in the UK, the US and Australia, in order to identify areas that require further research. While there is some evidence suggesting that teacher's working hours have increased and that their roles have expanded, there is nonetheless, a paucity of research on work intensification in this sector. In particular, the causes and effects of work intensification for teachers and school principals are not well understood and there is little evidence on the roles of key industry stakeholders, such as unions, in developing supportive systemic responses to the issue of work intensification. This paper discusses three key areas for further study in Australia: research focussing separately on causes and effects of work intensification on individual teachers and principals, and research to examine strategic responses to work intensification from teacher unions.

Introduction

Work intensification is an area of increasing interest in the management and industrial relations literatures, as it has far reaching effects for individuals and implications for communities and organisations. This paper analyses the concept of work intensification in the context of the Australian public education sector. This sector is both interesting and complex. On the one hand, education is touted as underpinning current, national, economic and social goals. It has undergone profound change philosophically and structurally in recent decades in order to be properly aligned with these goals. Teaching, as an occupation, has changed substantially, and it is reported that teachers are victims of work intensification. Simultaneously, the education sector is one which displays numerous structural and image problems: there are shortfalls in new recruits, high levels of stress among current workers, and there are a multitude of micro-issues relating to this occupation, such as lack of career options and professional standards. Thus, the question arises as to the relationship between work intensification and the problems plaguing the sector. At the same time, recent research calls

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for further investigation into specific instances of work intensification, in order to clearly target the contributing factors in the attempts at developing solutions. This paper responds to the call for further research. Our aims are firstly, to examine the manifestations, causes and effects of work intensification in this sector, and secondly to discuss areas requiring further research. The paper begins with a general definition of the concept of work intensification drawn from international literature based on various industries. Following from this, the paper proceeds to the analysis of specific UK, US and Australian literature on work intensification in their respective education sectors in order to identify gaps in the literature and to outline areas of potential for further study.

Work Intensification

Broadly speaking work intensification refers to increases, either in time or in workload within a given job. Having said this, the literature indicates there is some conceptual ambiguity. Green's (2001) definition of work intensification distinguishes between 'extensive work effort' (time spent at work) and 'intensive work effort' (the rate of physical/mental input to work tasks). However, Green also (2002) represents it as a 'process of change at workplaces' stemming from technological and organisational change, including new HR policies (Green, 2002). O'Donnell, Peetz and Allan (1998) propose two main dimensions of work intensification. The first dimension refers to employees "doing more", or having extra roles or increased tasks. The second dimension refers to "coping with less staff" in workplaces, either due to downsizing, staff attrition or not hiring new staff. In another paper, Peetz et al 2002, look at work intensification in terms of work 'pressure' and work 'changes'.

Beynon, Grimshaw, Rubery and Ward (2002) suggest that while 'external market conditions' account to some extent for work intensification, organisations play a key role in changes to work. These authors argue that although the organisation is 'constrained by external regulatory forces […] the power of the organisation in structuring employment has to be recognised within any account of employment change' (p. 20). This is because organisations 'determine the terms under which people are employed [and] design what kind of work' is done (p. 20). More specifically, Beynon, et al (2002) propose that work intensification results from three main types of managerial control strategies: firstly by insisting on the 'sovereignty' or 'dominance of the customer'; secondly, by the 'redesign of job tasks', and thirdly, by implementing 'new control technologies", to increase the 'pace of work and the quality of performance', including the plethora of HR techniques and complex output measurements' (p. 268). Some recent research in the health sector uses Beynon et al's (2002) three dimensions of managerial control to explain the intensification of the work of nurses (White & Bray, 2003). White and Bray, (2003) thus suggest that customer-focus (or how customers become defacto supervisors, exacting greater effort); the redesign of jobs (especially the widening of responsibilities) and the use of new, auditing and performance measures have increased the pace and effort of nurses' work.

The studies cited above indicate that any ambiguity surrounding the work intensification construct may be explained by differences in terminology and the perspective taken by the researchers. While some studies clearly focus on the *meaning* of work intensification (Green, 2001; O'Donnell, Peetz, & Allan, 1998), others look at the *antecedents or drivers* of work intensification (Beynon, Grimshaw, Rubery, & Ward, 2002; Green, 2002; Peetz, Townsend, Russell, & Allan, 2002). It is reasonable that scholars adopt distinct terms, and focus on different aspects of the same concept, particularly where the subject of research is still being

mapped out. Implicit in all the research, however, are the issues of time and effort spent at work, or 'longer working hours and greater work effort' (White & Bray, 2003).

The twin dimensions of time and effort relate to the *meaning and manifestation* of work intensification and are the subject of a number of empirical investigations. As a social and industrial issue, work intensification appears to have reached epidemic proportions worldwide for many professionals, craft workers and other occupations (Burchell, Ladipo, & Wilkinson, 2002). It characterised European labour markets during much of the 1990s (Green, 2002), and is increasingly prominent in Australia. Evidence of work intensification is being documented in multiple sectors and contexts, including health (Allan, 1998; Bray & White, 2002; Willis, 2002); aged care (Allan & Lovell, 2003); finance (Probert, Ewer, & Whiting, 2000), and education (Bartlett, 2004, forthcoming; Burchielli & Bartram, 2003; Kyriacou, 2001; Pocock, Wanrooy, Strazzari, & Bridge, 2001; Probert et al., 2000; Troman, 2000).

O'Donnell, Peetz and Allan (1998) propose two main dimensions of work intensification. The first dimension refers to employees "doing more", or having extra roles, increased tasks and bigger workloads. The second dimension refers to "coping with less staff" in workplaces, either due to downsizing (lay-offs), staff attrition (whereby staff that leave are not replaced) or not hiring new staff. Clearly, the two dimensions are inter-related since 'doing more' implies the allocation of a greater number of tasks to a fixed (no growth) or reduced number of employees. Similarly, a frequent outcome reported for the "survivors" of downsizing, or for the remaining employees in workplaces shrinking in size due to attrition, is an increased workload (O'Donnell et al., 1998). Existing literature suggests there is support for these two dimensions. Examples from the health sector indicate a link between downsizing, cost reduction and increased workloads for employees, whereby nurses are treating significantly more patients, at a lower cost. In other words, nurses report doing more, with less staff (Bray & White, 2002).

The literature identifies numerous antecedents for work intensification, in particular, changes to work (Beynon et al., 2002), and especially the shifts in philosophy underpinning the development and use of management technologies, such as Human Resource Management (HRM) practices and 'high performance systems' (Godard & Delaney, 2000) which exert pressure for greater flexibility, productivity and efficiency (Allan, 1998; Willis, 2002). This has resulted in different manifestations of work intensification, such as changed work design and skills requirements (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, & Kalleberg, 2000); technological and organisational change (Green, 2002); the reduction in trade union powers, job insecurity, and more highly trained managers (Burchell et al., 2002). The myriad changes observed to the nature of work are explained by two contending theories. *Professionalization* suggests that work changes are resulting in occupations becoming more complex, more skilled and more satisfying, eg (Appelbaum et al., 2000). On the other hand *intensification* 'is broadly derived from Marxist theories of the labour process'(Hargreaves, 1992), and describes a trend towards the degradation of work and working conditions.

Work intensification is frequently discussed in terms of longer working hours, and in recent years, much has been written about the long and extended hours worked by the labour forces in both the UK (Green, 2001; Green, 2002) and the USA (Godard & Delaney, 2000). In Australia too, there is mounting evidence of a general trend towards longer working hours for full time employees (Watson, Buchanan, Campbell, & Briggs, 2003) and there appears to be a general movement away from the long-term trend of reducing working hours (Peetz, Townsend, Russell, & Houghton, 2003). There is some complexity surrounding working time,

since the longer working hours only affect certain types of employees. Green's (2001) research suggests that while there has been an increase in working hours for some workers, there has been a concurrent increase in households with no work at all. Similarly Beynon et al (2002) suggest that the extended hours of some employees are occurring simultaneously with the increase of a range of non-standard working arrangements, and should be seen in the broader context of the 'fragmentation of contractual statuses' (p. 18) and deliberate, managerial changes to the employment relationship (pp 203-207). Given the prevalence of employee flexibility, job expansion or job broadening (Allan, O'Donnell, & Peetz, 1999), there is mounting evidence to suggest that full-time employees are being given more tasks to undertake with inadequate time resources and that extended working hours are resulting in work overload.

The reported negative effects of work intensification include the decline of workers' health and well-being (Allan, 1998; Willis, 2002), job stress (Watson et al., 2003) and burnout (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998; Pocock et al., 2001), as well as low staff morale. In turn, this has corresponding costs to organisations due to increases in staff counselling, incident reports, workers' compensation claims and quit rates (Allan, 1998). The literature also suggests there are negative flow-on effects for the community, including high medical costs, social fragmentation, and work-family imbalance (Burchell et al., 2002; Pocock et al., 2001; Watson et al., 2003).

The literature on work and family issues suggests that achieving a balance is still very difficult (Boyar, Maertz Jr, Pearson, & Keough, 2003; Carlson, Derr, & Wadsworth, 2003; Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998). Work and family balance has been defined as being the extent to which a person can at the same time '*balance the temporal, emotional and behavioural demands of both paid work and family responsibilities*' (Hill, Hawkins, Ferris, & Weitzman, 2001). Certain studies have indicated that good work-life balance practices are meant to benefit both employers and employees (Churchill, Williamson, & Grady, 1997; Drago et al., 2001; Siegwarth, Mukerjee, & Sestero, 2001) and to have a direct impact on the financial benefits of the company, including increased productivity and performance (Grover & Crooker, 1995). However, it is also suggested that work and family benefits will only be helpful to employees if organisational culture is supportive for employees to use these benefits (Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999) .

Work intensification is associated with negative effects on individuals, relationships, family life, parenting, leisure, and the extended family (Pocock et al, 2001). Some researchers like (Pleck, Staines, & Lang, 1980) and (Voydanoff, 1988) consider work overload to be among the most important factor leading to work- family conflict. According to the Scarcity Theory (Goode, 1960), since individuals have a limited amount of energy to perform the various roles (work and family), it is expected that work intensification will lead to role stress. Moreover, work intensification will lead to work spill-over on family roles, which not only creates emotional, physical, and mental problems, but also negatively affects the family roles. Both time-based and strain-based conflicts would make it difficult for employees to fulfil family responsibilities (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Generally speaking, since women are more involved in their work and family roles, they are more prone to suffer from health problems (Smith-Major, Klein, & Ehrhart, 2002). Many women find themselves in a position where they are solely responsible for coordinating childcare and housework responsibilities, making it harder for them to adjust their work schedules, in comparison to their partners.

Given the different roles and responsibilities that workers have to perform, being involved in multiple roles is a very common thing. Multiple roles mean a variety of roles outside of an

occupation to which an individual is strongly committed (Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002). Holding multiple roles can be rewarding as it may increase self-esteem and levels of satisfaction (Danes, 1998). On the other hand, it can deplete individuals of their energy by increasing their burden. This is expected to result in stress, conflict, health problems, moods swing and lower levels of satisfaction (Voydanoff, 1988; Williams & Suls, 1991). Therefore, this trend tends to bring more conflict for women in balancing work and family roles (Wiley, 1987). Despite workplace arrangements, such as the provision of family leave, presumably designed to support work-family balance, balancing work and family responsibilities is still difficult. Australian research into the finance and education sectors suggests that, despite 'relatively good entitlements' in these sectors, 'employees face continuing difficulties in gaining access to these provisions' (Probert et al., 2000). This research clearly questions the authenticity of 'provisions' which cannot be accessed.

There is some evidence suggesting that innovations to work and HRM practices can result in positive outcomes. The literature puts forward that in the instances where innovative practices lead to greater worker participation, greater responsibility and autonomy, and better remuneration, such as in high commitment and high performance work systems, there are positive outcomes for both workers and the business (Appelbaum et al., 2000). The cases reported indicate that workers in these systems are better paid, have greater trust in their managers, feel greater motivation and satisfaction at work, and report no impact on stress levels. For the firm, the benefits are better performance. However, it seems that these results are highly contextual, and contingent upon numerous, co-existent factors. Firstly, it is noted that the evidence relates to specific manufacturing industries, and thus it may not apply to other industries, and occupations. It is equally important to note that the best reported outcomes relate to workplaces where a total constellation of new practices has been adopted, and where the core of these relates to very high worker control, including high involvement of the union (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Critics of these systems, however, are sceptical about any positive results. Some argue that 'only a minority of firms have comprehensively adopted these practices' and that a principal cause is the 'failure of managers to alter their values and beliefs' (Godard & Delaney, 2000). Others propose that autonomy is a myth (Harley, 2000) and that the likely effect of functional flexibility is work intensification (Allan et al., 1999; Godard & Delaney, 2000). In fact, it is suggested that work intensification can actually reverse the benefits of any autonomy, increased motivation or satisfaction, and lead to lower levels of productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness for organisations, as demonstrated in studies on the survivors of downsizing (Davis, Savage, & Stewart, 2003).

From a cost/benefit perspective, it would seem that work intensification has a greater amount of negative consequences. However, recent literature calls for further research on the issue at the micro level (Bray & White, 2002). More specifically, it is suggested that research should focus on the 'causes and consequences of it, including its relationship to workplace culture and the regulatory framework' (Peetz et al., 2002)

Work Intensification in Education

Increased working hours, increases in face-to-face teaching, increased responsibilities or 'expanded job roles' have been noted to characterise the intensification of work experienced by teachers in the USA (Bartlett, 2004), the UK (Hargreaves, 1992; Kyriacou, 2001; Troman, 2000) and in Australia (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003; Pocock et al., 2001; Probert et al., 2000). US and UK data indicate that teacher workloads have increased and that the role of the teacher has changed markedly in the past two decades (Bartlett, 2004), so that "classroom

teaching now constitutes only part of the teachers' work" (Troman, 2000). The concept of the "expanded role" for teachers is based on teachers' numerous responsibilities outside the classroom, including the following:

> *'leadership responsibilities and involvement in reform-oriented activity beyond the classroom. Teachers steward many aspects of the school including responsibilities like the school's assessment systems, pedagogical practices, and curriculum development. They work collaboratively and seek to coordinate student experience across the school.'(Bartlett, 2004)*

Bartlett (2004) dismisses the popular, but superficial notions of the teaching occupation as "easy and congenial work", or work that is "attractive to women". Instead, she suggests that these are urban myths, too narrowly based on certain, widely known award conditions (such as teachers' holidays), which ignore the harsher realities depicted in 'virtually all in-depth portraits of teachers' work [which] show it to be difficult, complex and emotionally draining work entailing long out-of-classroom hours' (Bartlett, 2004).

Work intensification for teachers in the US and UK is attributed to the pressures of 'managerialism', including the bureaucratic/government impetus to increase reporting mechanisms (Bartlett, 2004; Hargreaves, 1992; Troman, 2000; Woods, 1995). It is reported to have a range of negative effects including loss of collegiality and staff fragmentation; personal stress, burn-out, negative self-image and decreased levels of satisfaction (Kyriacou, 2001) and flow-on effects for teachers' families and communities. Bartlett (2004) questions why women, as the over-represented gender in this occupation, continue to tolerate the excessive demands of their profession and the punishing effects of their workloads. With the small number of exceptions that analyse the meaning of, and the causes and effects of work intensification in the education sector, the international literature indicates that further, context specific research is required.

Intensification in the Australian education sector and areas for further research

There is very little literature that examines work intensification in the Australian educational context. For example, a review of the *Australian Education Journal* since the year 2000 renders no titles on this topic. In the most part, it is noted that the issue of work intensification in Australia is discussed within a number of related contexts; among these, *teacher stress* (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003) and work-family balance (Probert et al., 2000; Thomas, Clarke, & Lavery, 2003). A notable exception to this is the work of Pocock, et al (2001). In spite of the paucity of evidence, it is possible to draw some general conclusions from the research already cited. This suggests that Australian teachers' workloads have increased due to task expansion, the introduction of new responsibilities and new, time-consuming activities. A central concern for teachers relates to long working hours which are not reflected in contractual (award) arrangements. One study reports that full-time teachers are working over 48 hours a week, with secondary school teachers averaging an hour a week more than primary school teachers (Probert et al, 2000). According to the State of our Schools Survey (ACTU, 2003) the average teacher hours per week is 56.4 hrs per week.

Teachers report that they spend far longer hours at work, as well as bringing work home, and they attribute their longer working hours to increased workloads and responsibilities (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003; Pocock et al., 2001; Probert et al., 2000). The literature

suggests that the increased workloads are evidenced by numerous factors. Firstly, increased teaching related activities, such as preparation, marking, large class numbers, increased face-to-face teaching and behaviour management (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003; Pocock et al., 2001; Probert et al., 2000). Secondly, changes to curriculum (Probert et al., 2000) requiring changes in daily practices and increasing the need for training. Thirdly, increases in demands relating to reporting and accountability, such as preparing student and whole-school reports of outcomes (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003; Pocock et al., 2001; Probert et al., 2000). Fourthly, management and communication tasks such as parent/teacher nights, on-going training, various meetings with staff, parents and students (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003; Pocock et al., 2001). Fifthly, broader education related tasks that fall outside the classroom, and teachers' usual job description, such as activities linking schools with the wider community, fostering a school community outside the classroom environment, providing extra activities for students, improving quality of teaching programs, and extending assistance to students with special needs (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003; Pocock et al., 2001). Sixth, increases in needs for on-going professional development training (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003; Pocock et al., 2001).

There is mounting evidence suggesting that the role of school teachers has changed from essentially a teaching/educational role to encompass a much wider range of responsibilities, including counselling, welfare, social work, procurement of funding, reporting, government lobbying and community liaison. In other words, it appears that workloads have increased. However, since most of this evidence comes from the literature related to stress, which represents work intensification as a cause of stress, it does little to elucidate the causes of work intensification. While work intensification may share some of the antecedents of stress, we suggest that currently, there is only a partial picture of the causes of work intensification for teachers, which requires analysis. Numerous questions arise with regards to expanded teacher workloads; in particular, it seems important to identify the major sources of pressure for workload expansion and reasons for teachers' acceptance of these, and to explore ways of providing support to teachers. Anecdotal evidence implicates the profound ideological and bureaucratic changes which have affected education in the past two decades (Townsend, 1998). In any case, understanding the major *causes* of work intensification for teachers has important ramifications for policy development at all levels.

A similarly partial picture emerges in relation to the *effects* of work intensification for Australian teachers. Available evidence suggests that the effects of work intensification are far reaching and multi-layered. On a personal level, teachers are absorbing their increased responsibilities, and increasing their own work expectations (Probert et al., 2000). This suggests that teacher behaviours are contributing to work intensification. In addition, it is suggested that the expectation of completing an excessive range of tasks may result in reduced quality of teaching as teachers report not having the time to prepare and develop engaging material (Probert et al, 2000). Internalised pressure from overwork is also manifesting in self-questioning and crises of professional confidence (Burchielli & Bartram, 2003), as well as stress, physical illness and pressure on families (Pocock et al., 2001). According to a study carried out among Australian teachers, the old ways of working are not suitable to meet the current demands due to work intensity, long working hours, adopting new work methods and pressures to complete the tasks on time (Churchill et al., 1997). Therefore balancing work and family roles becomes very difficult for teachers. There is the additional danger that teachers may experience a degree of work overload that exhausts their enthusiasm and erodes their commitment. Management literature clearly links work satisfaction, employee motivation and commitment with both turnover and recruitment of employees. Currently, there is evidence to suggest an undersupply of teachers into schools (ACTU, 2003).

However, the relationship of work intensification to teacher satisfaction, motivation and commitment, and to turnover and recruitment can only be guessed at. This leads us to conclude that an important area requiring the attention of researchers relates to the causes and effects of work intensification for teachers.

A second area for further research relates to school principals. The burden of increased responsibilities and workloads does not only affect teachers, as school principals are reporting similar issues (ACTU, 2003). School principals share parallels with "middle managers" in industry, since they supervise a group of workers, but have limited authority, and are answerable to a higher form of governance. In addition, a common problem among "middle managers", who have an interface with both workers and (governing) executives, but are alienated from both, is that they often bear the brunt of much organisational change (McConville & Holden, 1999). It may be argued that principals are the proverbial 'meat in the sandwich' in education, bearing the burden of increased pressure from overworked teachers, on the one hand, and a demanding bureaucracy, on the other. Since school principals are a key form of social support for teachers (Sarros & Sarros, 1992), this raises questions around the issue of support and alienation for all staff in the school context. Given their own increased workloads, are principals really in a position to support their staff? Who supports the principal? Moreover, local and overseas evidence suggests 'a widespread problem with principal recruitment' and points to 'reform policies' as the major culprit (Gronn & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2003). Limited research evidence clearly suggests that Australian teachers and principals are certainly "doing more" and with fewer resources. At the same time, it is clear that further research must focus on work intensification and its effects on principals, so that specific strategies can be developed to address the limitations in their crucial role in the education system.

A third area which requires greater understanding relates to the development of systemic responses to the issue of work intensification. While the discussion above suggests a need for developing a (supportive) response at a bureaucratic level, there is some evidence to suggest that teacher unions, and union strategy, may contribute both to overwork and its solutions. For example, Probert, et al (2000) hold teacher unions partly responsible for work intensification because of their role in bringing about award restructuring and enterprise bargaining. These authors challenge the unions to 'rethink' their strategies. Additionally, if there is indeed any truth to the claim that Enterprise Agreement provisions are not being accessed (Probert et al., 2000), then one would expect that teacher unions would have an interest in identifying and eliminating the barriers to access. Thus, agreements in this sector lend themselves to being critically analysed. Recent industrial action undertaken by the Australian Education Union (AEU) has focused on workloads, reflecting the currency of these issues in the school sector, and also suggesting that this is a strategic policy area for teacher unions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the occupation requires attention to issues such as greater career pathing, training and remuneration, and that these factors may alleviate the intensification of work in this sector. Clearly, further research is required to analyse union responses and strategies with regards to work intensification in education. Although the industrial climate is generally hostile, especially after the re-election of the conservative Howard government in 2004, with its aggressive industrial relations reform agenda, the current under-supply of teachers may provide a favourable environment for teacher unions to make some gains.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that work intensification in the Australian public education sector results in many negative consequences for which there are as yet, no clearly articulated, systemic solutions. The review of the literature however, strongly suggests the need for further research. Three specific areas are highlighted. Firstly, we call for further research focussing on the individual teacher, in particular to examine the causes and consequences of work intensification but also to examine the relationship between work intensification and teacher compliance. Secondly, within a management context, further research is indicated analysing the causes and effects of work intensification on school principals, as middle managers. Finally, within an industrial relations context, there is scope for analysing teaching agreements, and union strategies to address work intensification. We suggest that research in these three areas can result in positive practical implications for teachers.

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