

‘The pupils will suffer if we don't work’: teacher professionalism and reactions to policy change in Scotland

Alastair D McPhee and Fiona Patrick

University of Glasgow

Recent policy introductions in Scotland have led to a contractual statement that teachers' work should be capable of completion within a 35 hour working week. However research by a team at the University of Glasgow found that teachers worked 45 hours per week on average and found it difficult to reduce their work to fit within a regular 35 hour pattern. This may be because teachers do not conceptualise their work into essential and less essential tasks, something that would allow them to prioritise which work should be done within a 35 hour week and which set aside to allow effective time management. The article concludes that any policy which is introduced to manage time needs to be based on an understanding of teachers' sense of professional duty and obligation if it is to change workplace practice.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses recent policy initiatives to limit teachers' working hours in Scotland. The concept of a 35 hour working week has been introduced following contractual changes that have arisen since the Scottish Executive¹ set up the McCrone Committee in 1999 to conduct an independent enquiry into professional conditions of service for teachers. The report of the committee of enquiry² outlined suggestions for enhancing teacher professionalism in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2002). These suggestions were then used to develop a statement of conditions of service in *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century: Agreement* reached following recommendations made in the McCrone Report³. One important aspect of this agreement is the framing of teachers' working hours as capable of completion within a 35 hour working week.

Findings from our earlier study of teacher working time (Menter et al, 2006) indicate that, while teachers welcome some aspects of the new conditions of service, they view the 35 hour week with scepticism – even, at times, with

¹ Now the Scottish Government.

² *A Teaching Profession for the 21st Century*, commonly referred to as the McCrone Report.

³ We will refer to this as the *McCrone Agreement* or *the Agreement*, and it represents the contractual agreement reached between the then Scottish Executive, local education authorities and teacher unions on behalf of their members.

derision. In this article, we focus on qualitative data collected for the 2006 project to give insight into why teachers are resistant to the idea that their work can be limited to a specific weekly timeframe. We believe that the frustration shown by the teachers in our research arises from a mismatch between their views of individual professionalism (resting on complex attitudes, values, beliefs and emotional commitment) and the view of collective professional work underpinning the McCrone Agreement.

The teachers we interviewed found it difficult to limit their working hours partly because they were reluctant to categorise their work into essential and non-essential tasks. In addition, they showed a strong sense of professionalism rooted in the idea that to ensure quality provision you must work as long as it takes, and that to do less is to risk that your pupils 'will suffer' in terms of the education they receive. Tensions were therefore evident between policy intention and policy implementation. The contractual approach to the 35 hour week taken by the McCrone Agreement serves as an example of how policy intentions can be interpreted as unrealistic by practitioners, in this case adding to an atmosphere of workload intensification.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

The data discussed here was collected for research commissioned by the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT)⁴. The original research purpose was to assess whether or not a 35 hour working week was being achieved by teachers following the recommendations in the McCrone Report and the subsequent statement of conditions of service in the Agreement (see Menter et al, 2006).

The McCrone Report highlighted several areas of concern surrounding teachers' conditions of work. In particular, the issue of professional morale was noted: many teachers who gave evidence to the committee felt 'overworked and underpaid' (Scottish Executive, 2000: 2). The enquiry was set against a background where the Scottish Executive wanted to see progress towards a modernization of the teaching profession based on enhanced status for teachers within a system which rewarded excellence while providing a 'responsive and flexible system of professional conditions' (Scottish Executive, 1999: col 886). This call for flexibility can be seen as part of a global trend towards the reframing of teachers' work in line with what has been called extended professionalism, a term which recognises the more complex modern role of teachers within school and community culture (see Ozga, 2005; Locke et al, 2005).

The Agreement outlined fundamental changes to teachers' working conditions including the statement that 'from August 2006, at the earliest, the contractual obligations of teachers will be expressed in relation solely to a 35 hour week within which a maximum of 22.5 hours will be devoted to class contact' (see Scottish Executive, 2001: 5). However, the Teacher Working Time Research

⁴ The SNCT comprises members from teaching organizations, Local Authorities, and the Scottish Executive. Its remit is to consider salaries and conditions of service for teachers and others employed by Scottish Local Authorities within a collegiate framework for negotiations.

study found that teachers across Scotland worked an average of 45 hours per week (see Menter et al, 2006: 52). For both primary and secondary school teachers the majority of their working hours was spent on class contact time, preparation, and assessment duties (Menter et al, 2006: 32).

THE RESEARCH STUDY

The data reported here were gathered via regional focus groups (totalling 50 participants), individual semi-structured interviews (n=30), and a questionnaire sent to a stratified sample of teachers across 5 representative local authorities (n=500). The regional groups took place at locations accessible by participants from across Scotland and met twice. (We will refer to the focus groups in our analysis as FG1/2/3/4.) Interview and focus group transcripts, together with qualitative comments from the questionnaires, have been analysed to try to better understand teachers' responses to the idea of the 35 hour working week, and to explore the concepts of professionalism which frame their experiences of working time. The analysis is contextualised with reference to wider research which indicates that generic professional habits and dispositions among teachers affect how they perceive their work (see Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2008; Vanderstraeten 2007; Kelchtermans, 2005; Hargreaves 1992; Nias 1989).

Research for the original Teacher Working Time study included analysis of time-use diaries sent to a representative cross-sectoral sample of teachers (n=2400) drawn from all local education authorities in Scotland (see Menter et al, 2006: 22). The working time figures we refer to here come from this earlier analysis and indicate that, while average hours varied slightly across different school sectors and across career stages (headteachers reported working up to 55 hours per week), 'all categories of respondent in all sectors, worked on average more than 35 hours in total per week' (Menter et al, 2006: 25).

The aim of this present study is to examine the ways in which participants in the Teacher Working Time research conceptualised the nature of their work and invested their work with emotional and professional meaning which made a reduction in working hours difficult to achieve. Key to our analysis is the teachers' sense of professional self-concept as manifested in statements which we categorised as aligning with specific professional characteristics. These characteristics are:

- a strong commitment to teaching quality within which teachers tend to see their work as open-ended (see Hargreaves, 1992);
- the notion of 'having to act' to meet the needs of pupils (see Vanderstraeten, 2007; Kearns and Gardner, 2007);
- the idea that issues of personal professionalism are 'at stake' when new policy has to be implemented (see Kelchtermans, 2005).

We will argue that these characteristics shaped our respondents' concepts of the nature of their work and therefore shaped their perceived ability to control their workload.

TEACHING QUALITY: NOTIONAL CONTRACTUAL HOURS OR OPEN-ENDED REALITY?

The general feeling from the focus group teachers was that their working week was as long as it needed to be to undertake all the duties they felt were required to provide quality teaching for their pupils. The striking thing from our data is the lack of positive comment about the notion of the 35 hour week, with many participants stating that it bore little relation to the actual hours they worked. The strongest comments called the 35 hour week 'mythical', 'a fantasy' and a 'matter for hilarity'. Caution should be noted here because there are limitations in terms of how representative the views expressed in the focus group and individual interviews are. However, the sense of dismay at the concept of the 35 hour week was also articulated in comments from the wider representative sample in the questionnaire element.

Most teachers distinguished between the contractual 35 hours and the reality of their working lives: 'The feeling in my experience in different sectors is that whatever your contractual hours are, it seems almost irrelevant to when you're working and you're going right through to finish any job that's required [FG1].' This comment reflects the overall view of the participants across the focus groups. Few of the teachers in our study saw the 35 hour as a contractual limit to be met. Only one teacher spoke of the issue in this way:

I had a meeting with my head just prior to Christmas because I had submitted a memo to him saying that [the local authority] were breaching my contract, because my workload had not been reduced, or was not capable of being completed within 35 hours. And he spent the first 20 minutes trying to convince me that [the local authority] would never ask me to take on a workload which was going to breach my contract. And I said to him, well how come I'm here at half seven in the morning and sometimes here at six at night? But, I mean, you either say 35 hours is 35 hours and you don't go beyond it, or you just do the job that's to be done, and I think that's... the situation I'm in. I was adamant that I wouldn't work more than 35 hours but then my work just keeps piling up. [FG1]

However, it seemed to be the contractual nature of the 35 hour working week which gave rise to many of the issues highlighted by our participants, in that an expectation had been set up by the McCrone Agreement that teachers' work could be done within a tighter timeframe. This expectation was then seen as unrealistic: 'it's quite simple. The job can't be done in 35 hours... when I put my questionnaire in, I added it up and it was 60 hours I'd spent that week and it wasn't a particularly frantic week' [FG1].

It should be said that putting in place a contractual limit of 35 hours was not the intention of the McCrone Report. What can be seen is that the spirit of the Report in this instance was redirected by the Agreement from a flexible suggestion to a specific number of hours – something which Gavin McCrone would characterise later as 'working to rule' (Rice, 2002: np). While this redirection tries to ensure health and safety considerations in respect of the workforce, it is arguably based on a reductionist view of professionalism within which policy begins to divorce working hours from overall professional context. But the importance of professional context to workload can be seen from our

study, where participants characterised their work as having an open-ended nature because the hours worked depended on teachers' concepts of what it took to meet their own ideas of good professional practice. It was clear that a contractual framing of working hours did not fit well with teachers' professional self-image (within which they tended to link number of hours spent to increased professionalism). One stated: 'I did not go into teaching expecting to count my hours... There are times throughout the year when extra time and effort is necessary to make sure my job is done to my highest standards' [questionnaire comment].

This wider interpretation of professional role accords with Hargreaves' study of primary teachers' in the 1980s which notes that the time teachers commit to

their preparation and teaching comes not so much from grudging compliance with external demands as from dedication to doing a good job and providing effective care within a work context that is diffusely defined and has no clear criterion for successful completion. (Hargreaves, 1992: 95)

Criteria for successful completion of professional duties were not often made explicit by the teachers in our study. Instead, the participants revealed a generalised sense of the 'good' teacher and a sense of professionalism related to personal, organizational and structural constructs (such as meeting pupils' needs, curricular development and change, providing extra-curricular activities, implementing policy initiatives and fulfilling management tasks).

For most of the teachers in our study there was a sense of resignation that a 35 hour week was unreachable. Moreover there was a belief that the Agreement would have little impact on working time: 'I was rather cynical about McCrone when it came in. I just thought, well someone said 35 hours, what difference is that going to make to me? None... I just keep doing what I'm doing' [FG3]. The teachers tended to refer to their work in the open-ended and diffuse terms mentioned by Hargreaves (1992), although one teacher did acknowledge the role she played in allowing her work to take up more of her time at home. She said:

I have been working more than [35 hours] and it is possibly because I have allowed it to happen because my own family are now at the stage where they are at university and there is perhaps now more time in the evenings... [FG1].

Another factor which became apparent was the need to respond to the demands of the education system. Responding to these demands could make it difficult for teachers to delimit the nature of their work:

One thing that's happening now, and I think also bears out the fact that you can't do the work within the 35 hours... they create new tasks for you to do like target setting. I mean, I have to do target setting for all subjects for all pupils every term and that's a huge amount of time. We are trying to speed that up by putting it on to computer and having a system whereby it is easier and quicker to do. You still have to think up the targets and negotiate the targets with pupils and parents. [FG2]

This statement presents an interesting conceptualisation of 'they': those outside the school within bureaucracy who think up new things for teachers to do. Another teacher referred to outside pressures in this way:

The harder you work to do things, the more things you're given to do, combined with also all the additional reports that are coming in. There isn't the time to read all those and take them on board... I'd like to know if anybody logs all the number of items that the Scottish Executive send out, expecting teachers to do in schools. [FG1]

Some of these new aspects of work were considered to be of varying levels of importance by the teachers in our study, but there was a sense that they all had to be attended to if high standards of professionalism were to be maintained.

A tension can be seen here between the metrics of accountability and teachers' concerns for what they regard as the core of their professional practice (see Ball 2003: 223). Not to meet the demands of external pressures can undermine a sense of professional duty and accountability:

...it's the amount of time for example I have to spend on questionnaires, like National Priorities. You know, all these kind of things where people are always asking for information which is very time-consuming sometimes, and I'm sitting there at my computer doing these things knowing that in the background there's things going on in the school I would like to be involved in but I can't get there... I can't say forget all the rest of the work and just go to the classroom and forget it, because people are saying 'I want this returned by a certain date' and I've got to do it. And there are countless of those, day in and day out. [FG1]

This feeling of pressure from 'outside' can be linked to innovation fatigue as well as work overload: 'There are so many new initiatives coming in... and you can't turn around and say 'no I'm not taking them on'. You have to - and that, to a certain extent, ties you down as to what you have to do' [FG1].

The teachers in our study were willing to implement new initiatives, but wished for more time to fully engage with them and to understand them in the context of their own schools: 'Yes, some of it is very valuable. I'm really quite inspired by the Curriculum for Excellence⁵. If I could get time to see where it sits in my school and how I can really embed that and feel that my staff are secure in it and ready to take it forward' [FG2]. In addition, teachers also noted pressures arising from the extra-curricular aspects of teaching and from duties that have to be completed outside of the working day: 'how do you account for things like the fashion show, the parents' evenings, the extra things, you know the ski trip, the dance club... where does all that fit in? It just doesn't' [FG3].

Different pressures can also arise depending on professional role. For example, headteachers in the focus groups highlighted the time spent on leadership and management issues. Data from the Teacher Working Time research indicated that working hours increased with level of promotion (Menter et al, 2006: 27). One primary headteacher commented:

Over the past 2 yrs I have made a major effort to reduce my workload. I am highly organised and good at delegating. I have reduced my hours from 80 plus a week to 70 plus. But I am still very dissatisfied with this having discussed this at courses with colleagues, [and with] line managers... I am exhausted, have been ill, and going to opt for early retirement - but I still love my job. [Questionnaire comment.]

⁵ Curriculum for Excellence is a new national curriculum initiative in Scotland. Development is ongoing and the aim is for it to be fully implemented across all curricular areas in primary and secondary schools from August 2009.

Another headteacher said that the work associated with management took her/him out of school and away from the normal workload:

[I] have head-teacher meetings that can take a whole day but what happens then is that you go back to school and your management tasks for that day are still there so although you've done a full day's work you then still do around two hours of management tasks. [FG4]

These comments illustrate the tensions which professionals in positions of leadership and management can feel between their responsibilities towards maintaining policy and accountability systems and their responsibilities to the school and its pupils. Overall, regardless of career position, the teachers' views in our study illustrate the point that 'concerns about the quality of care' can supersede concerns about time even where opportunities exist to try to improve working hours (Hargreaves, 1992: 100).

HAVING TO ACT: TEACHING AS DUTY AND OBLIGATION

Vanderstraeten (2007: 624) mentions an important aspect of professionalism when he argues that professionals feel that they have to act within given situations in order to ensure that the needs of their clients are met. They can therefore see a range of activities as being crucial to quality performance. This attitude was summed up by one joint secretary of a local negotiating team who stated to us that many teachers 'still have this idea that in some sense the pupils will suffer if we don't work and therefore we tend not to prioritise - and the idea of prioritising work is quite a new idea for many teachers and very few of us are successful at it' (Menter et al, 2006: 17).

The sense of having to act is apparent in some of our respondents' statements:

In theory [workload] should be reduced but as we know one thing in school leads to another and the clock never stops. I have to work before days begin, during lunch, after finish and evenings and weekends – not exactly a strategy – just a way of staying on top. [Questionnaire comment.]

Due to working within a multi-composite situation, I find it almost impossible to work a 35 hr week. In order to manage my classroom effectively, I have to work on average 45 hrs per week. This I find (as does my family!) is becoming more unacceptable. [Questionnaire comment.]

To some extent there are cultural factors evident here in that many teachers are inured to working as many hours as it takes to complete their work to their satisfaction. Prioritising tasks is not straightforward for them since they tend to view everything they do as being important to doing their job well.

The notion of having to act is bound with concepts of duty and obligation. These in turn are deeply held within the professional culture surrounding teaching, and there is then interplay between personal and cultural constructs of professionalism which combine to legitimate the teachers' sense of having to act to ensure the needs of pupils are met. How teachers think and feel about their work is set within general professional expectations as well as within normative practices which impact upon how teachers respond to a policy such as the 35

hour working week. Policy which attempts practice change can therefore be at odds with teachers' understandings of the nature of their work and the nature of professionalism. Kelchtermans' research with primary school teachers in Belgium has led him to argue that policy measures that are 'not congruent' with teachers' 'deeply held beliefs about good teaching' can contribute to the teachers experiencing a sense of 'vulnerability and emotional disturbance' (Kelchtermans, 2005: 997). This sense of disturbance is often implicit, and at times explicit, in our respondents' comments, where a sense of frustration emerges and a feeling of being 'overwhelmed' by workload [questionnaire comment]. One teacher spoke of feeling that teaching was a 'vocation' and said (s)he envied those who could 'switch off' from their work [individual interview]. Another mentioned ill health that had arisen because (s)he could not 'switch off' [individual interview].

Stating the 35 hour working week in contractual terms may have heightened teachers' sense of failing to manage workload, which may then have led to psychological tension (perhaps alleviated to some degree by simply positing the 35 hour week as 'a joke' or as unattainable). However,

[n]ot being able to adequately respond to calls for change threatens teachers' sense of competency and skill, and eventually can result in the loss of self esteem and identity as a teacher... Teachers try to cope with the new demands in order to maintain their social recognition as competent ('proper') teachers and colleagues, a recognition which is a central aspect of their professional identity. (Ballet and Kelchtermans, 2008: 48)

The importance of professional identity has been widely commented upon, notably in the work of Nias who argues that the perceptual basis of teaching can have profound effects on how teachers view the nature of their work (see Nias, 1989: 13). Wider professional culture is thus interpreted through the perspectives of each teacher to produce a situation which is unique to each individual (Nias, 1989: 13). The teachers in our study brought both an individual and a broader professional perspective to the focus groups, but the sense of duty and obligation appeared to have been internalised and to drive the belief that '[as] more things come in... they have to be done' [FG4: emphasis added].

PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS OF PROFESSIONALISM: MORE THAN JUST A JOB

Professionalism is as much a set of attitudes and dispositions as it is a set of practices, so professional experiences have an emotional as well as a rational dimension (Schmidt, in O'Connor, 2008). The work of teaching is often invested heavily with a sense of self. Hargreaves (1998:836) points out that there are dangers in over-personalizing work, because, at times of rapid structural change, professional activities are made more difficult and teachers run a risk of guilt, stress and burnout. Risk of burnout is often seen in those 'whose professional demands include both a high sense of ideals and a high degree of interaction with other people, for instance teachers and medical personnel' (Evers et al, 2005: 425). None of the teachers in our focus groups spoke in terms of burnout, but some did mention feelings of illness and exhaustion, and of not switching off.

One said: 'I really enjoy what I'm doing, but I never stop thinking about the job, whether it's Saturday night, driving to work, it's just never-ending' [FG3].

Within our sample, the sense of stress may have been compounded by a policy which (no matter how well-intentioned) is predicated on too simplistic an understanding of the nature of teachers' work. Complex professional roles require flexible approaches to working and may not be capable of being done within a stated weekly timeframe. The Agreement and the McCrone Report tend to take a view of teaching which can be summed up as 'teachers teach': anything which is additional to teaching can be carried out by support staff. This belies the complexities of teaching and it could be that all the activities which go towards providing effective teaching are too complex to be reduced to a regular 35 hours.

In order to manage workload, teachers would need to perceive their work as separable into components which are core and those which can be done by others or left to a later date. They would also need to be able to distance themselves psychologically and emotionally from their work in order to leave aside things not done within a time-limited working week. Kearns and Gardner (2007) note the importance to time management of having a clear overview of career aims and purposes to enable professionals to decide which activities should be prioritised at any given point and to then decide which strategies should be used to meet those purposes or aims. If there is no overall clarity of purpose it becomes difficult to effectively manage workload and this can be a significant cause of stress (Kearns and Gardner, 2007: 236). Those who can plan strategically towards goals successfully 'are more likely to believe themselves to have higher work-related effectiveness and morale and are less likely to report work-related distress' (Kearns and Gardner, 2007: 240).

However, in order to prioritise, professionals need to be able to separate tasks into those which are essential, those which are non-essential, and those which can be delegated. The teachers in our study simply did not conceptualise their work in this way. Instead they felt that most of what they did was necessary:

I only do what is essential for my work. I don't go seeking wee extra tasks and it still takes me on average between 45 and 50 hours per week to get through the essentials. But I think it's down to that thing about, you're a professional and you do the job to the best of your ability and you want to do as much as you can for the pupils you're working with. [FG3]

The distinction between essential and non-essential is, I'm afraid, far too simple, because what we do really, is you prioritise tasks and something that's further down the priority list will be coming up the priority list later. And basically as professionals you know we never waste our time on non-essential tasks. I would find it insulting for someone to suggest that I'm doing something that is non-essential. [FG3]

Where then does knowledge about successful time management leave teachers who have a strong sense of professional identity which leads them to view attempts to limit working time as in fact limiting their ability to achieve a high professional standard? A key issue relates to whether teachers are willing or able to define tasks as essential or non essential, but it also relates to whether their concept of professionalism extends to being able to delegate key activities to school support staff.

In addition, the statement of the 35 hours as a contractual element raises expectations that conditions of service will alter to accommodate the working time change. For some teachers in our study there was a perception that the McCrone Agreement would alter working conditions and practices to enable workloads to be managed and reduced. When workload did not lower, dissatisfaction followed:

McCrone has, in my opinion, not been a positive experience. Teachers' workload has dramatically increased. I and my colleagues (some with 20 years experience) have stated they have never worked so hard or felt so undervalued! ...At the moment the work/life balance is a work/work balance! [Questionnaire comment.]

Several teachers responded similarly. Given that perceived workload has not decreased, the only option for these teachers is either to do everything (and work as long as it takes to do this), or to prioritise by re-appraising what they do so that they can delegate and/or leave less essential tasks aside. However, the emotional investment of self in their work may mean that to do the latter is to place their sense of professional identity at stake.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We have argued elsewhere (Patrick et al 2003: 240) that the McCrone Report constituted a missed opportunity to redefine expectations of the teaching profession. The Report and the Agreement ultimately reinforce, rather than challenge, moves towards performativity by linking professionalism with education standards, promotion, reward and enhanced salary. Professionals should be paid a salary commensurate with expertise and the service they provide should be one of quality, but the way towards enhanced professionalism is not through structural change alone.

In Scotland, professional reform in education has been predicated upon outdated managerialism (Kennedy, 2007) emphasizing structures over participants. In spite of numerous statements from successive government ministers suggesting that teachers are hugely valued and that they should be reprofessionalised – whatever that means – the rhetoric is not usually borne out in practice. There has been repeated failure at policy level to understand the complexity of the contexts within which teaching is carried out. Combining cultural factors with individual constructs of what it takes to do a job effectively means that changing professional practice needs to rest on changing professionals' attitudes and beliefs. This requires consideration not only of how policy is implemented, but of who implements the policy.

When problems such as workload become apparent, '[time] and time again, the profession puts the blame on the organization. This situation evokes a related reaction; namely, one of constantly reviewing the search for different organizational formats' (Vanderstraeten, 2007: 627). This is what seems to have happened with the McCrone Report and Agreement: structural and organizational change is assumed to be the answer to problems of professional status and working conditions. These issues are by no means limited to Scotland. However, our research suggests that policy makers should give professionals a real voice: if they listen to that voice they will better understand

how policy impacts on teachers' concepts of professional identity and how policy change might then impact more positively on professional practice.

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