

## ***Too Much with Too Little: Shift and intensification in the work of ACT Teachers***

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Workloads have become an increasingly contentious issue for the teaching force. As in any public institutional sector of the past fifteen years, there has been considerable restructuring of work and downsizing of the infrastructure to support work. Governments - seeking to ease their burdens of fiscal constraint and at the same time declining political legitimacy - have placed unrealistic expectations on schools and teachers: in the name of “school based management”, they are to “do more with less”. Along with these governmental pressures, both “elite” and “embattled” students and families seek to have increasingly diversified social as well as educational needs met through schooling. Thus, factors of broader social, political and economic contexts shift and reshape the work of teachers in ways that are complex and not easily understood, even by the best intentioned policy makers, as well as various constituencies with vital stakes. Teachers themselves are only beginning to understand the effects of a decade or so of workplace restructuring.

This study reports on a small scale consultation with teachers of the ACT public system through focus groups with preschool, primary, high school and college teachers. Group participants responded voluntarily to random sample mailings sent to AEU members in the ACT teaching force, covering Levels 1 through 3. The study builds on considerable work sponsored by the AEU and others in Australia and elsewhere, investigating the changing nature of teaching in contemporary contexts.

The Australian National Schools Network (ANSN) was contracted to conduct the research. Four focus groups of eight to ten participants - one for each school sector - were convened in November 2001, facilitated by ANSN National Co-ordinator Viv White, and University of Canberra lecturer Lew Zipin, who also prepared the report. The focus group questions targeted four key domains:

1. Factors of work change and intensification.
2. School governance and teacher empowerment with regard to teachers’ work.
3. The interface between teachers’ work and changing social context factors in the lives of students, families, and communities; and
4. Impacts of work change and intensification on teachers’ health, emotions, professional identity and social relations (both within and beyond school).

As teachers in the four groups fielded questions prepared by the facilitators, further core issues and dimensions emerged. The section headings that structure the final report, as summarised below, reflect the flow of dialogic interaction among teachers in response both to the facilitators and, more significantly, to each other:

#### **1. School based management and its effect on school leadership and staff relations**

All four focus groups identified a strong shift in governance and work relations in schools, and between schools and the Department. In particular, teachers in all four sectors noted the escalating demands made on Principals and the efforts of the

Department to tie the work of Principals to centrally sponsored initiatives. School based management, and the accountability and performance appraisal tied to it, were seen as having a strong negative impact on the work of Principals, affecting the work of all school staff. Top down intensification of administrative work, and a widening range of responsibilities, also have escalating spin-off effects. Level 1 teachers cannot access the mentoring and curriculum leadership they need, as more senior staff, and often Level 1 teachers as well, “voluntarily” take on an intensifying and diversifying array of tasks to keep their schools going. This trend toward “voluntary” undertaking of too much work is augmented through career pressures on younger staff who typically are on contracts, thus further undermining schools’ capacity to focus on the learning needs of students. Small schools and the preschool sector are particularly hard hit by erosion of access to Executive staff.

## **2. Resource starvation**

Devolution of too many responsibilities, without sufficient funding, has expanded the work of administering programs and activities, such that all staff are affected. There are, according to participants, insufficient material and human resources; as a result, the expectation of “doing more with less” is now a “normal” base line. All staff are administratively loaded, as intensified labour compensates for shrinking resources. A bombardment of ICT initiatives intensify workload, especially as they are under resourced. Increased numbers of committees and accountability requirements deprive teaching and learning activities of needed human resources. College VET programs were also highlighted as acutely resource starved. Teachers indicated that centrally prescribed stand-down days reduce their capacity to meet professional development needs at the local level, and signify a general decline of commitment to resource the professional development of teachers. [The authors acknowledge that professional development from 2002 is increasing significantly as a result of the 2000-2003 teachers EBA.] While certain extra curricular activities, eg district sports, camps and excursions, were seen as appropriate work that furthers student learning, teachers nonetheless found that such activities have been intensified by added administrative and legal pressures, and by reduction in numbers of staff available to share the load. In the College sector, increased class sizes were an issue; whereas in other sectors schools were forced into an unfortunate tradeoff in which reduced class size meant loss of Executive staff. [This trend should be reduced by the ACT Government’s K-3 class size reduction program 2002-2004.]

## **3. “Performative” intensification of teachers’ work**

Teachers do not reject reforms in knee jerk fashion; they agree that schooling should change with changing times. However, successive waves of reform and restructuring - both well advised and ill advised - have rarely been resourced adequately, according to focus group participants. Also, reforms are typically abandoned too quickly as political actors change and ideological climates shift. Thus, teachers are “reform fatigued”, and skeptical that any new reforms - including those to which teachers’ agree in principle - will prove viable. Due to lack of consultation about the design and implementation of proposed initiatives, unrealistic expectations and criteria of success are established, undermining what could otherwise be useful innovations. Teachers also agree that assessment/accountability reporting is a valid feature of their work; however, they find that “performance outcome” and reporting regimes have become overblown, adding to workload and stress while having more to do with surveillance and control of their work than with constructive change. Competition between schools to enrol students has brought pressures to market

one's school and enhance its image, leading to inflated emphasis on "gifted and talented" programs while diminishing capacity to recognise important areas where teaching and learning really need improvement.

**4. The work impacts of shifting social contexts in the lives of students and their families**

Teachers from all sectors noted the increasing needs and struggles faced by families, with effects that students carry into the school environment. This is an area of exacerbated tension, creating demands for new approaches in teaching and learning as well as new roles that teachers need to play in dealing with communities. Teachers expressed a certain ambivalence about how to deal with these changes. They recognised that shifts in the social contexts of students and families impinge upon schools, calling for changes in pedagogical as well as pastoral care practices. They also recognised that parents present greater needs of their own, as well as concerns about their children, which call for time, attention and service provision as part of teachers' work. Focus group facilitators found, however, that teachers sometimes express overly individualist and "deficit" explanations of student and family plights, reflecting current trends of populist politics that blame victims for their plights, instead of seeing them as social structural effects in need of systematic institutional address. Teachers indicate that opportunities are limited for discussions in which the broader social contexts of student and family "behaviour problems" could be understood. This would appear an important area for professional development.

**5. Work change, emotional labour and the health and satisfaction of teachers**

Complex pressures of work shift and intensification are internalised by teachers, finding symptomatic expression in both personal and professional aspects of their lives. Some consequences are stress related illnesses (both physical and emotional), fatigue, burnout, demoralisation of professional identity, and crises in family and friendship relations. Teachers report that they increasingly lack time for restorative breaks, and for self sustaining social relations. Concerns were expressed about burnout of incoming teachers on contract who, questing permanency, feel pressed to do too much, including tasks for which they are neither prepared nor mentored. In struggling to balance responsibilities to students and colleagues, and responsibilities to others outside the work context, emotional labour and tensions heighten as teachers feel unable to meet any responsibilities satisfactorily. Teachers increasingly work when ill, with a sense of guilt about adding to the burdens of over worked colleagues, especially given the decreased availability of relief teachers (as part of a general decline in resource provision). Indeed, teachers testify to strong "guilt feelings" if they do not match the exertions of colleagues, including Executive staff who model the chronic acceptance of over work. It appears that a syndrome of guilt based collegial relations now drives staff at all levels to escalating degrees of overwork.

**6. The governance of teachers' work and teachers' professional agency**

A high cost of the intensification and diversification of teachers' work is debilitation of teachers' sense of professional identity and satisfaction that a healthy focus on teaching and learning sustains. Principals and others in school Executive positions are unable, according to teachers, to buffer them from distracting effects of non-teaching work factors. Teachers do not tend to blame their Executives, whose own workloads and ambivalent struggles for focus they can visibly see; but they do blame

“the Department”, which is more opaque to them. Focus group participants, including those in Executive positions, expressed frustration about what they experience as Departmental inflexibility and lack of consultation in imposing policy/reform dictates. Teachers expressed need for more time and venues - both informal and formal - for collegial dialogue about curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; but they testified that, if anything, time and space for such activities is shrinking. The facilitators asked whether professional community could be built among school staff, as a means to mobilise collective agency to resist work intensification and proactively reinvigorate a teaching and learning focus. Teachers indicated that this would be desirable, but were pessimistic about conditions needed to enable it. The facilitators conclude that such would be desirable, and would require concerted co-operation and effort across school, Department and Union agencies of governance.

The full report quotes extensively from the words of teachers in order to be faithful to their voices and powers of analysis, and to record for a wider audience their experiences of how the current pace and trends of work change and intensification are affecting themselves, their students and the profession more broadly. The ANSN is particularly grateful to the teachers who volunteered their time and effort to participate in these focus groups, and trusts that their contributions will be duly recognised by others who read and reflect on these testimonies of their professional knowledge of the sector.

Although a small scale study, its rich data of teachers’ voices gives striking evidence of the significant shifts in conditions and practices of teachers’ work, as well as how these changes constrain and reshape the identity formations in which teachers’ experience themselves as “professionals”. Teachers in the focus groups were articulate about the complexity of factors, and the indeterminacy of outcomes, in which work transformation is an ever active and ongoing process. The recommendations which follow thus cover several domains in which action is seen as needed, with particular attention to supporting teachers through instigating desirable change processes at systemic and local levels.

These recommendations arise from the descriptive and analytical commentary of staff who participated in the focus groups, as well as from analytical considerations of the facilitators. They reflect potential and existing relationships across Union, Department, school Executives and staff at all levels, and other vital stakeholders such as families and communities. The recommendations are also in keeping with current theoretical developments in the research of teachers’ work nationally and internationally.

1. That the ACT Branch of the AEU accept this report and workshop its findings and recommendations for further action.
2. That the ACT Branch of the AEU, hopefully in collaboration with the Department (towards which end the Union should enter into negotiations), sponsor and promote a range of modes, venues and targeted groups for professional development and other initiatives among ACT teachers and other vital stakeholders. These include:
  - (a) For beginning teachers: Build into induction processes the examination of teachers’ work and strategies for developing professional support and community, in order to alert new teachers, and teachers new to the system, to strategies and pitfalls relevant to their positions. This should include raising

consciousness to the dangers of taking on too much work, and the need for participation in professional learning communities which act to protect new teachers against over subscription and over diversification of work responsibilities at early career stages. The strongest protection provided by such professional communities would be to develop, and to keep all staff reminded about, the warrants for why teaching and learning is the core both of professional identity and educational service to students, communities and society.

- (b) For level 1 and 2 teachers: Examine ways to build professional learning communities in schools and across schools, with particular emphasis on support for innovation in teaching and learning.
- (c) For Principals and Executive teachers: Examine ways to buffer teachers from administrative and accountability requirements that detract from the development and sustaining of excellent teaching and collegial activity. Principals and Executive staff should be encouraged to lead in the promotion of professional community with a teaching and learning focus. This will require that they contemplate constructive ways to resist being models themselves of the chronic acceptance of overwork. That is, they need to lead in breaking the cycle of acquiescence to internalised guilt feelings that drive workload escalation.
- (d) For clusters of teachers and/or other interest groups: Provide opportunities, whenever new initiatives are announced, for teachers to discuss the wisdom of desirable innovations first among themselves, and further with families, communities and, hopefully, the Department. The dialogic context of such communication across interested stakeholders must be open to hearing as well as presenting views, in order to reach an informed consensus that transcends the partiality of interested standpoints. In these dialogues, teachers should be in a position to explain how workloads might be increased through otherwise desirable initiatives; and constructive discussion should follow about what sorts of resourcing would prevent workload intensification in the implementation of desired innovations.
- (e) For all interested school staff: Workshops on emotional labour and recognising its dimensions in the workplace.
- (f) For Union representatives, AEU Industrial Officers and interested members: Seminar on identifying the signs of excessive workload and escalating demands in the workplace, including ways to undermine guilt reactions and initiate potential areas for action.
- (g) Provide a list of possible topics for fellowship research to contribute to the priority areas discussed by teachers through the AEU, perhaps in collaboration with the ANSN and the University of Canberra.
- (h) In the various efforts to develop professional community among school staff, priority should be given to research circle and learning circle approaches, such as those that have been facilitated in the ACT by the ANSN for the Year 9 Exhibitions Project and other professional development initiatives.

3. That the ACT Branch of the AEU, in Enterprise Bargaining negotiations with the Department, include the following:
  - (a) Take a strong “zero tolerance” stance with regard to any further workload intensification, ie all reforms and other new initiatives that the Department expects school staff to implement must first be vetted as to what resources are necessary - and the resources must then be assured - to avoid intensification of workloads. The vetting process should include representatives from all levels of school staff, as well as Union representation.
  - (b) Develop criteria for defining “reasonable” workloads, ie that sustain health, job satisfaction, and time for wholesome life away from work - and implement timetables for gradual reduction of workloads to decent levels for staff whose workloads are “excessive” according to the benchmarks for “decency”.
  - (c) Attenuate the top down and negative devolutionary effects of “school based management” trends by developing transparent, consultative and participatory processes for making decisions which affect the work conditions and workloads of school staff. These processes should include Departmental officers, representatives of school staff across work and governance levels, Union representatives, and, when relevant, other interested stakeholders.

As the Senate Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession noted in its report *A Class Act*, teachers’ status is not commensurate with their level of responsibility in the society, and it is highly politicised. However, many people have a stake in the work of teachers and those who experience public education most directly - the students and their parents - do tend to value teachers’ work and expertise. The society relies on the quality of teachers, even where this work is relatively poorly paid. Teachers now juggle an increasing array of tasks, in a context of increased accountability to multiple constituencies. The importance of building a stronger sense of professional community, agency and identity among teachers thus cannot be overstated.