The Effects of Intensification on Rural Teachers' Work

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study exploring in-school intensification experiences identified by six experienced rural teachers as constraining their teaching practice. School organisational structures, school cultures, personal relationships within the school context, along with high self-imposed expectations can result in an increased workload and demands on teachers' time. This study examined the differing responses these teachers employed in an attempt to counteract or minimise the effects of intensification. The findings suggest that one adverse consequence of intensification may be the lack of time for teachers to critically reflect on their own pedagogical practice, and on the broader historical, social and political implications underpinning current policies and practices inherent within the New Zealand educational context.

INTRODUCTION

Many of the changes in New Zealand teachers' daily work have resulted from an ever-increasing control being exerted over teachers through curriculum, pedagogical, assessment, and school management changes since the 1990s (O'Neill, 2005). Reporting requirements have increased, as have accountability demands and administrative tasks along with the resultant paper work. Heightened community expectations, added social work responsibilities, as well as more communication and consultation with colleagues and parents, have also contributed to the intensification of teaching (Bartlett, 2004; Timperley & Robinson, 2000; Wylie, 1997).

Intensification can be defined as the increase in teachers' workload, often 'accomplished without sufficient resources or time' (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008, p. 47) and normally without reimbursement, financial or otherwise, for the effort, time, or specialised expertise (Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Hargreaves, 1992). Intensification can manifest itself in three ways (Valli & Buese, 2007). First, intensification may arise from the increase in the amount of tasks, often with increasing degrees of complexity over time. To illustrate, it is expected that student achievement data are collated and analysed at not only the classroom level in order to develop programmes to meet the needs of the children but also the whole school level, to review and improve learning programmes school-wide. Furthermore, this analysis needs to be compared with school level baseline data and, if available, with national benchmark information (Education Review Office, 2002). Second, intensification may derive from the increased

work expected within the classroom, often driven by accountability demands, and the compliance demands of numerous innovations; for example, recent pedagogical initiatives such as Inquiry Learning and the Numeracy Project (see www.tki.org.nz). Third, the intensification of teachers' workload may also come about as a result of the greater scope for teacher responsibility in work outside the classroom, often requiring collaboration with other teachers, specialists, or advisors (Valli & Buese, 2007). This may be particularly apparent in schools with a culture of 'distributed leadership' (Spillane, Halverston & Diamond, 2004) where a teacher may be delegated a curriculum leadership role.

Much of the work on intensification reports a common theme of increases in teaching time (both within and outside the classroom) and administrative tasks, together with decreased time for developing and maintaining professional relationships with colleagues, recreation, and personal life (Hargreaves, 1992; Merson, 2000). A 2007 survey of 351 New Zealand primary schools found less than 50 percent regarded their workload as appropriate and manageable and only 32 percent considered their professional and private life were balanced (Wylie, 2007). Even though all teachers now have access to regular non-contact time, 'most teachers continued to work outside school hours, with half putting in at least 16 additional hours a week' (Wylie, 2007, p. 4). This confirms earlier findings by the Ministry of Education (2004) where primary teachers spent more time on such activities as paperwork and administrative duties than teaching in the classroom.

DECONSTRUCTING RURAL TEACHERS' WORK

This research study drew on post structural theory and ideas of Michel Foucault, specifically those relating to discourse, power, and resistance. Discourse does not merely reflect reality but shapes how we perceive the world and what specific language we use to describe it (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). Accordingly, rural teachers and their work are 'constructed by and through discourses … contending for social power and capital' (Luke, 1999, p. 165). It is within social relationships that people's actions and thoughts are shaped by what Foucault (1988) terms technologies of the self. These technologies usually consist of covert persuasion by others in the group and the corresponding consent (either consciously or unconsciously) by the individual in conforming to the dominant discourses of the group (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999). The consequence of this coercion is that individuals participate in normalising activities whereby they evaluate, and amend if necessary, their own behaviour to achieve the desired norms of the group. However, as Brookfield (2001) describes it, Foucault did not hold a fatalistic view of people as helpless pawns destined to submit to the control of a dominant group. Power and resistance co-exist, for 'there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised' (Foucault, 1980, p. 142). Like power, resistance can be multiple; hence there is always the possibility of resistance at the local level of everyday social life.

The focus of this research was on rural teachers and their work in light of the regimes of intensification identified by six experienced rural primary school teachers as constraining their teaching practice, and the counter discourses taken up in response. The politics of resistance, or otherwise, employed by

these teachers in an attempt to counteract, or minimise, the normalising influence of this discourse were also analysed. The participating teachers (Maree, Bea, Violet, Rose, Emma and Jane) were employed as rural primary school teachers in the south of the South Island, had at least thirteen years teaching experience within the primary sector, and had trained prior to, or at the beginning of, the introduction of the New Zealand educational reforms initiated by the *Picot Report* (Department of Education, 1988). Consequently, these teachers had already experienced and responded to comprehensive changes within their teaching career. Data were gathered in 2007 through five in depth interviews with each teacher over a seven month period, and from teachers' reflective journals. Teachers chose and critically reflected on constraints they perceived in their teaching practice and how they responded to these constraints. These data were analysed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995). However, it is acknowledged that the selection and interpretation of the data was also 'strongly influenced by the theoretical framework' (Wilson, 2001, p. 296) and the researcher's own experiences as an experienced rural teacher.

Although this research offered an opportunity to amplify rural teachers' voices in a climate where they seemed to be excluded, it is not claimed to be representative of all experienced rural teachers. It is acknowledged that some of the constraints of intensification identified by these rural teachers could likewise apply to urban teachers. However, factors such as smaller staff numbers requiring teachers to take on extra responsibility within the school organisation, limited employment prospects, and the relative isolation from larger population centres with their specialist assistance and extra educational opportunities, highlight the uniqueness of the rural educational context.

RURAL TEACHERS SPEAK

The complex nature of teachers' work makes it difficult to clearly define the parameters of their roles and responsibilities. Even the *Professional Standards*, which constitute the official account of teachers' responsibilities and requirements against which teachers are annually appraised, can be somewhat vague. To illustrate, two of the dimensions outlined in the *Interim Professional Standards for Primary School Teachers* (Ministry of Education, 2005) encompass 'support and co-operation with colleagues [and] contribution to the wider school' (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 21). Experienced teachers need to 'support and provide effective assistance to colleagues' as well as 'successfully organise aspects of programmes within the school' with the overall aim to improve and 'promote teaching and learning' (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 21). The lack of precise parameters defining these dimensions tends to leave the interpretation open to different understandings by teachers and others. Consequently, there can be 'multiple sources of intensification' (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006, p. 212). These sources tend to come from, firstly, external compliance regulations and the pressures of policy makers and other agencies like the Education Review Office, and secondly, within school sources such as the principal and other teaching colleagues, or teacher self-imposed sources (Ballet & Kelchermans, 2008). The impact of intensification can also vary from teacher to teacher (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008) reflecting the different ways teachers can interpret the calls made on them. In other

words, what one teacher perceives as a threat, or potential overload: 'I get frustrated … as I am being asked to do more complex things that take more of my personal time' (Maree), others may view as normal expectations: 'We just work around things because that's the deal in teaching' (Violet). The following analysis focuses on some of the within-school intensification discourses identified by experienced rural teachers.

The expectations of others
School organisational structures can affect 'the impact of intensification' because they can 'determine the organizational "space" for interpretation and negotiation' (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006, p. 214). Maree was grateful to have a part-time job that allowed her to concentrate in one of her areas of expertise, as opportunities for part-time specialist employment can be somewhat limited in the rural context. However, she soon found that the staff and management were increasingly using her qualifications and experience in areas other than the specialist area in which she was employed.

> I am being asked to do more complex things that take more of
> my personal time … what I am being asked to work on is not
> 'quick fix' stuff and while I can often see what to do, it all takes
> time - mine!
>
> (Maree)

She was, for example, called in to assist a young teacher after specialist help had failed to provide the assistance this teacher needed. After observing and identifying the issues, it took her 'all weekend to locate and present the information this teacher needed' (Maree). The principal asked for assistance with several items of policy and administrative work, but 'I basically ended up working on it in my own time to get it up to standard' (Maree). Existing systems of consultation within the school were often ignored and problems were brought directly to Maree, forcing her to point out that it would be better to 'try the system first and then if things don't work out, use me as a resource' (Maree). When she referred one of her students to the specialist learning services, the people involved who knew her and her skills were surprised that she did not solve the problem herself. Overall, she was finding that the staff seemed 'to have trouble getting their head around my current role and my determination to work within it' (Maree).

The impact of workload intensification is not only mediated by the school's organisational systems, such as lack of clarity around job roles and responsibilities, but also aspects such as the school culture and personal relationships within the school organization (Ballet *et al*., 2006). School cultures often indirectly imply 'good teachers' will do everything in their power to provide the very best teaching and learning programmes for the children in the school (Bartlett, 2004). Teachers feel the need to meet their colleagues' expectations and this tends to result in a moral obligation to conform. Maree explained, 'I have found myself buying back into the "women's stuff" because now I feel an obligation again'.

What Maree defined as 'women's stuff' originates from the historical perception of primary teaching as 'women's work' and is accordingly linked with caring and mothering similar to the 'Good Mother syndrome' (Bascia & Young,

2001, p. 276). It is epitomised in the compassionate, nurturing, altruistic teacher who endeavours not only to develop, but also to maintain positive, supportive relationships with students and teaching colleagues (Bascia & Young, 2001). To illustrate, Maree considered she had a positive working relationship with her principal but found it difficult 'to actually step back and be professionally objective and draw boundaries around that relationship' (Maree). As a result, she experienced difficulty in refusing extra tasks the principal sought assistance with, for fear of jeopardising this relationship. This sensitivity and consideration of others' needs resulted in 'actions based on goodwill and the greater good, with less emphasis on meeting the needs of the individual self, especially if it compromises the needs of others' (Maree).

Often these actions are not publicly visible and sometimes the praise is attributed to others, but still teachers regard this philanthropic work as part of being a primary teacher (Hebson, Earnshaw & Marchington, 2007). Consequently, teachers feel obligated to share and do extra for the good of the school even though they will not always be compensated in terms of money, time, or recognition, as Maree explained: 'At times I would like to ask for extra pay or time but find this difficult because of the informal and consensual culture that exists in the school'.

Maree positioned herself as a cooperative team player who 'enjoys sharing and contributing … it makes the job more intellectually stimulating' (Maree). She was willing to use her expertise and experience to motivate, support, and help other team members. Her personal beliefs in the importance of team collegiality and solidarity meant that she was prepared to volunteer extra time and effort to work with her colleagues. However, she was mindful that this had to be within reason, as she was not a full-time teacher and therefore needed to watch the balance between her professional and personal time commitments.

In contrast, the school seemed to view these extra commitments as expected rather than voluntary. To illustrate, part way through the year the principal acknowledged Maree's extra work by awarding her part of a unit. Schools are entitled to a number of units that are paid to teachers for a variety of reasons including taking on extra responsibilities and to reward efforts. If the roll increases during the year, schools can be allocated extra units. Even though Maree appreciated this recognition by her principal, she viewed it as a constraint:

> I see it as another constraint for me because there is lack of clarity again about what exactly the money was for … and what the further expectations or the future expectations are on me. It's that underlying, unspoken expectation that now I can't say no.
>
> (Maree)

With no specific parameters defining her role and responsibilities, Maree felt she has no sense of where others perceived her commitments and responsibilities beginning and ending. There seemed to be an unspoken assumption that her professional expertise and time had almost become communal property and that not to share this with others would be regarded as letting down the team. Consequently, she considered she had lost control over

accepting or rejecting extra work tasks. She believed that 'they' now regarded it as 'an expectation rather than a favour' (Maree) that she would accept extra work, resulting in her having a strong sense of being almost entirely at the mercy of the principal's and school's demands. In effect, the unspoken expectations of her colleagues, both as individuals and as a group, coerced her to conform to the school's organisational norms that professionally responsible and proficient teachers would contribute to the improvement of the teaching and learning within the school. As a consequence, she participated in what can be described as normalising activities (Foucault, 1977) by 'buying back into the women's stuff' (Maree) in order that her behaviour would fit the discourses of this social group.

The degree of direct resistance demonstrated by Maree was negligible, possibly due to the power effects of this particular school's organizational systems and culture, as well as the personal relationship she had with the principal. Consequently, she viewed her teaching position as a short-term role, with reservations about continuing the following year as she would begin to feel frustrated and somewhat resentful of what she perceived to be the over-commitment, and the impositions on her personal time and specialist skills.

Tensions between personal commitment and intensification

Despite increasing external pressures and the increase in their workload, many teachers still adhere to their personal teaching beliefs and values (Ballet, Kelchtermans, & Loughran, 2006; Easthope & Easthope, 2000). Consequently, the desire to do the very best for children's learning and well-being can often drive some teachers' responses to intensification (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008; Ballet *et al.*, 2006). To illustrate, Maree was not able to fully implement a programme for which she was responsible because of other school-wide curriculum demands. Concerned that this could compromise the effectiveness of the teaching and learning for the students involved in this programme, she alerted the teachers involved to the situation and notified the principal of the need to have a meeting. She spent several weeks researching, consulting, and putting a case together that supported her claims, set up an agenda, photocopied notes for the meeting, and then chaired the meeting. In effect, she was creating a system wherein an agreement could be negotiated through discussion and compromise. She explained:

> I tried to create a professional environment where I can meet my needs. I am trying to do it with good intent but I am trying to use a process to do it, to work constructively, to meet my professional objectives and *what I perceive* to be my professional responsibilities.
>
> (Maree, emphasis added)

Maree's desires to do well clashed with the desires of others. As a result, she personally invested a substantial amount of 'time, effort, and communication skills to make it work' (Maree), but was prepared to do this in order to resolve the issue in a manner that she perceived would result in satisfactory outcomes for the students and their learning.

The desire to ensure beneficial changes for the children seems to drive teachers to attempt to meet high self-imposed expectations for their

performance (e.g., Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2008). This priority that 'the children always come first' (Violet) means the teachers are willing to place the children's needs ahead of their own.

To further illustrate, Bea considered her school's policy of bi-annual reporting was not giving quality information to the parents of underachieving children. This policy directed that comments should 'be positive … don't ever say "but" … don't make negative comments' (Bea). Bea felt that if parents weren't 'skilled enough to read between the lines with our report forms' they may not realise their child could possibly be underachieving. Consequently, she created her own system to use within the context of her own class by keeping parents informed through regular informal discussions, written comments in the child's homework notebook, and extra interviews.

CONCLUSION

The teachers in this study were constructed as 'managed professionals' (Codd, 2005, p. 193) who were expected to conform to existing organisational practices in order that teaching was undertaken in an efficient, effective manner. However, the philosophy of teaching accrued through their career and theoretical knowledge gained through professional study continued to dominate their teaching beliefs and values. They sought to remain committed to their child-centred philosophy and thus were not prepared to compromise their beliefs and standards (Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Woods & Jeffrey, 2002). When faced with practices they regarded as having controlling as opposed to educational purposes they invested a substantial amount of their own personal time and effort in consciously engaging in counter resistance.

Disciplinary power can result in not only conformity but also individual forms of resistance (McHoul & Grace, 1995). This can be seen in the way these teachers differed in their approaches to their counter discourses. Maree took a managerial or technicist approach by endeavouring to establish organisational systems through the existing school leadership hierarchy that would enable the specific learning outcomes of her programme to be attained in an efficient, orderly manner. On the other hand, Bea was more humanistic, approaching the issue from an individualized stance, with the emphasis on the regular provision of relevant, up to date information to parents about the progress of their child.

What this analysis has revealed is that intensification can be viewed as another example of discipline at work with its tendency to extract 'a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use' (Foucault, 1977, p. 154). Intensification seems to be 'voluntarily supported by many teachers and often misinterpreted as professionalism' (Hargreaves, 1992, p. 90). Ironically, the very act of taking on board these extra roles and responsibilities tended to limit teachers' time to critically reflect on their practice. Therefore, the intensified demands of teaching tend to emphasise the technical 'doing teaching', or the humanist caring for the students and their achievements, rather than the critical examination of teachers' underlying pedagogical practice (Ballet *et al*., 2006).

Furthermore, the critical reflective practitioner discourse is often regarded as challenging the technicist and managerial practices inherent in an education system that tends to emphasize assessment according to outcomes and accountability regimes as ways to improve teaching and learning in schools (Down, 2006). Consequently, the lack of time to critically reflect on the broader

historical, social and political implications underpinning current policies and practices inherent within the New Zealand educational context can place teachers at risk of being positioned as mere agents of the state, unwittingly recreating and preserving the status quo of their social context.

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