TEACHING & LEARNING: REVIEW OF WORKLOAD

Final Report to the NSW Teachers Federation

Susan McGrath-Champ, Business School
Rachel Wilson, School of Education & Social Work
Meghan Stacey, School of Education & Social Work
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Contents

- Executive Summary ................................................................. 1
- Introduction .................................................................................. 3
- Approach & Methods ................................................................... 7
- Findings ...................................................................................... 12
- Summary and Implications ......................................................... 32
- References .................................................................................. 34
- Contact Information ................................................................... 38
Executive Summary

The Teaching and Learning: Review of Workload was commissioned by the NSW Teachers Federation in the second quarter of 2017. This report constitutes the final report of the project. Here we provide an executive summary of the findings of the project, which is then followed by the report in full.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Workload of teachers and school leaders is a substantial problem.

2. A significant source of teacher and school leader workload is the ongoing institution of a range of reforms and policy requirements, instigated by state and federal education bodies and mediated at school level.

3. Teachers and school leaders were able to identify a raft of potential strategies that might be used in response to this issue, with the majority of responses focusing on the level of the NSW Department of Education and the NSW state Government.

4. We analysed data from across a range of diverse school settings and looked for patterns of response that were related to school geography, socio-educational status, and school type (primary, secondary and central). Some minor variation is reported in relation to the nature of work, and more particularly how this relates to meeting student needs. However there was surprising uniformity in responses in relation to high hours of work and administrative sources of workload.

5. The findings reported here provide more nuanced understanding than previous quantitative surveys, but they now need to been expanded to scale and confirmed in
a larger, more representative and generalizable sample of NSW teachers and school leaders.

LOOKING AHEAD
Very often shifts in education policy are targeted at particular kinds of schools (see, for example, NSW Department of Education, 2017), or may be targeted at all or a range of schools, yet have differential effects, intended or otherwise (for example, Gavin & McGrath-Champ, 2017; Considine, 2011). What is distinctive about our findings of increased workload, especially in relation to administrative duties, is that this overlays the usual patterning of differentiation between schools. While some specific policy approaches referred to below have been directed at particular schools, overall, increases in workload appear to be felt universally. This suggests that the issue is a systemic one, with a diverse and extensive policy settlement blanketing the entirety of the NSW public school landscape in a layer of increased requirements. As the problem is systemic, we argue that the solution must be, too: a longitudinal plan is needed, and any workload policy strategy must be integrated with other long-term education strategies so that key educational goals can be met.

Susan McGrath-champ
Rachel Wilson
Meghan Stacey

September 1, 2017
Introduction

This report presents findings of a workload study of teachers and school leaders in NSW public schools in 2017. The project was undertaken at the request of the NSW Teachers Federation arising from concerns expressed at the 2016 Annual Conference and at subsequent forums through 2016/17 relating to escalating workload of teaching and learning staff in NSW public schools. The preliminary report (in June 2017) provided a short account of initial findings in relation to current workload, sources of workload and strategies reported to be used to manage workload within schools. This final report provides a more detailed analysis, where we discuss the results of the project in relation to both classroom teachers and also those with school leadership roles. In addition we analyse interview data in relation to contextual factors, including: school type (primary, secondary and central), school socio-educational status (high, medium and low ICSEA\(^1\)), and school geography (metropolitan, provincial and remote).

RESEARCH, POLICY AND EMPLOYMENT LANDSCAPE

There is a broad range of previously published research which supports our approach and the analysis of our findings in this project. One such set of literature has detailed the complex demands of teachers’ work (e.g. Comber, 2016; Connell, 1985, 1993), while another has considered the impact and significance of teachers’ working conditions, including workload, though much of this is international (e.g. Bascia & Rottman, 2011; Butt & Lance, 2005). In New Zealand, increasing hours for school staff have been reported between 1992 and 2009, with a “‘wave’ of work approaching [that] was really more of a

\(^1\) The ICSEA, or Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, is a measure of the socio-educational advantage of a school’s student body, based on parent occupation and education, as well as school location and proportion of Indigenous students (ACARA, 2015).
tsunami” (Bridges & Searle, 2011, p. 431), anticipating references to ‘tsunamis’ of paperwork in some recent work of our own (Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Wilson, & Stacey, manuscript in preparation). In Australia, Howe’s (2004, p. 21) work for the Queensland Teachers Union found that “[t]eachers work long hours, many are dissatisfied with their workloads, and often have difficulty managing the balance between work and personal life.” Meanwhile, the Staff in Australia’s Schools (SiAS) report from 2013 notes an increase in workload for full time primary and secondary teachers since their report of 2010 (McKenzie, Weldon, Rowley, Murphy, & McMillan, 2014). Riley’s research has also documented a recent increase of hours for principals during term time, though some reduction during the holidays (Riley, 2015).

Our own research in this area has focused on pressures for principals (Gavin & McGrath-Champ, 2017; McGrath-Champ et al., under review) and for teachers (Fitzgerald et al., manuscript in preparation). Our work, however, is explicitly situated within the context of neoliberal approaches to education policy. Other Australian research also approaches the issue from similar perspectives. Particularly relevant for our purposes is work which has considered the effect of economic rationalism on the intensification of teachers’ work, and thus their workload, in Tasmania (Easthope & Easthope, 2000). Also relevant are discussions of national testing (Lingard, Thompson, & Sellar, 2016) and the experiences of school staff in regard to a related focus on ‘data’ (Hardy & Lewis, 2017; Hardy, 2015, 2016), ‘accountability’ (Kostogriz & Doecke, 2011), and impacts on teachers’ time (Thompson & Cook, 2017). Also useful is work which considers the ways in which neoliberal approaches may be forcing greater responsibility upon teachers (Price, Mansfield, & McConney, 2012; Stacey, 2017), and straining relationships between teachers, principals and other school executives (Connell, 2013; Keddie, Mills, & Pendergast, 2011). Our study is further informed by a well-established body of work on such issues from the UK (e.g. Ball, 1990; Ball & Youdell, 2007; Helsby, 1999).
The specific policy context of NSW, however, has not seen much targeted attention, apart from ‘Local Schools, Local Decisions’ (Gavin & McGrath-Champ, 2017; Martin & Macpherson, 2015) and ‘Great Teaching, Inspired Learning’ (Stacey, 2017), largely by members of our own research team. And yet, the current NSW policy settlement is far more complex than this. On the Department’s website, under the banner ‘Our schools, our story’, the Department summarises their current policy approach as including “a range of reforms to improve the quality of teaching in schools, to improve outcomes for all students, and to give schools greater authority to meet the needs of their communities.” (NSW Department of Education, 2017) As at August 2017, the sidebar links on this page list the following such reforms, which are in addition to those already mentioned: ‘Quality Teaching, Successful Students’; ‘Supported Students, Successful Students’; ‘Innovative Education, Successful Students’; ‘Connected Communities’; the ‘Rural and Remote Education Blueprint’; the ‘School Excellence Framework’; ‘Early Action for Success’, the implementation strategy for the also-listed ‘Literacy and Numeracy Strategy 2017-20’; new ‘Leadership Pathways’; and the ‘Award Initiatives’ of standards-based pay, introduced in 2016 (NSW Department of Education, 2017). Despite being separated out by the Department in this list, however, these reforms are not distinct, but interwoven and interrelated in a complex amalgam of demand and provision, with potential implications for school staff that range in both nature and extent. With such an agenda for change on hand, part of our own approach in conducting this project was to find out what some of those implications might be, particularly as regards teacher and school leader workload.

For, importantly, we also situate our study within teachers’ employment landscape. The hours that a teacher works reflects required teaching periods, daily school hours and some requirements to work beyond those daily hours. There is no specified upper limit on teachers’ total hours of work, nor specific arrangements concerning how teachers, supervisors or principals should monitor, manage or allocate workloads.
Circumstances requiring attendance outside standard school hours can include participating in staff meetings, involvement in professional development activities, attending parent-teacher interviews, undertaking bus supervision and responding to exceptional and emergent circumstances. While the principal’s role in these matters is evident (NSW Department of Education, 2016), given the potential for duties or meetings outside normal school hours to impact on teachers’ personal, family and/or community commitments along with the benefits of building a collaborative workplace culture, it is important that all staff are consulted as part of the process of determining what meetings are necessary, how they will be organised and conducted, and given adequate forward planning and notice (NSW Teachers Federation, 2016).

International surveys, reported by the OECD (2014), make it clear that, according to 2011 data Australian primary and secondary teachers’ teaching hours are high, more than 100 hours above the OECD average per year. In relation to how teachers’ time is spent, the proportion of Australian teachers’ time devoted to actual teaching and learning is below the OECD average; and a larger than average proportion is spent on administrative tasks and on keeping order in Australian secondary school classrooms (OECD, 2014).

Taken together, the current employment, research and policy context for school teaching and learning staff indicates the need for a recent, in-depth account of their workload; one that explores the complex and dynamic interplay of work within schools, including why that work is undertaken and where it comes from. This study fills that gap, with a primarily qualitative, in-depth telephone interview survey that contributes new understanding of such matters as the volume, intensity, sources and effects of workload and work-related demands in NSW Public schools, as well as what might be done about it. The following section presents the research approach and method, followed by discussion of findings regarding the nature and sources of workload, strategies for managing workload, and the implications of the study for future policy and research.
Approach & Methods

**RESEARCH STRATEGY**

The study was designed to answer three research questions:

I. How do teachers and school leaders in public school workplaces describe and explain their current workload?

II. What do teachers and school leaders understand the source/s of this workload to be?

III. What strategies do teachers and school leaders report as positive in managing their workload?

Whilst there is quantitative information available regarding some aspects of workload and work conditions in schools, from research on principals (Riley, 2015; Gurr & Drysdale, 2016) and from national reviews (McKenzie et al., 2014), there remains a need for more qualitative and nuanced data that can provide a fuller account of how these issues sit within the complexities of diverse school settings and an ever-changing, highly charged political landscape. Thus we adopted a largely qualitative approach to fulfil this need and provide an account of issues that considers the complex contexts and dynamics currently at play across NSW public schools. In doing so we are able to provide a detailed, thorough scoping of teacher’ and school leaders’ perspectives on their workload. The data were gathered through thirty-one telephone interviews conducted by researchers in the University of Sydney Business School and School of Education and Social Work from a sample randomly generated from the Federation’s database by Federation staff in consultation with the researchers.
RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The sample included a range of public school types (primary, secondary and central), geography (metropolitan, provincial and remote\(^2\)) and socio-educational settings (low, mid and high ICSEA\(^3\)). A total of ninety-nine potential participants contacted the research team to volunteer their involvement; the thirty-one telephone interviews were with participants selected in order to ensure sufficient spread across the desired categories.

Table 1 summarises the numbers of participants involved across each of the categories outlined above. Two comments should be made here. First, that the empty categories broadly reflect the nature of NSW schools in regard to geography and levels of advantage. Second, there is nonetheless an obvious over-sampling of participants from low-ICSEA schools. This is the result of a conscious choice due to an awareness of what is often the greater complexity of such settings (Comber, 2016); however, this is also off-set by our inclusion of additional participants from the high-ICSEA, metropolitan categories (6 respondents). In total 14 school leaders (3 principals and 11 other school executive) and 17 teachers participated in the study. This balance of teachers and school leaders was selected purposively, so as to reflect the current mix evident in NSW public schools.

The qualitative approach, with a relatively small number of respondents from across NSW schools, means the study cannot make strong claims as to representativeness of the sample, or the generalisability of the findings. However, substantial efforts were made to draw the participants from a wide and diverse range of school settings and to build

\(^2\) While the My School website now uses the categories of ‘Metropolitan’, ‘Regional’, ‘Outer Regional’, ‘Remote’ and ‘Very Remote’, we retain the earlier and broader categories of ‘Metropolitan’, ‘Provincial’ (here including both ‘Regional’ and ‘Outer Regional’) and ‘Remote’ (here including both ‘Remote’ and ‘Very Remote’).

\(^3\) A ‘low-ICSEA’ school had an ICSEA of less than 950; a ‘mid-ICSEA’ school had an ICSEA of between 950 and 1050; a ‘high-ICSEA’ school had an ICSEA of over 1050.
representativeness through a randomized quota approach. Efforts were also made to assure participants of the confidentiality and anonymity of their reports (to maximise participants’ openness), and to explore and analyse hitherto unexamined issues surrounding workload, so as to build an authentic picture of the issues in this area and maximise the ‘ecological’ validity of the research.

Table 1: Participant Teachers and School Leaders within a Diverse Quota Sample of NSW Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>High ICSEA</th>
<th>Mid ICSEA</th>
<th>Low ICSEA</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Primary Schools</strong></td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>3 teachers</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 leader</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>1 leader</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 leaders</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary Schools</strong></td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>2 teachers</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 leaders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>2 leaders</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>1 leader</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central Schools</strong></td>
<td>Provincial</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 leader</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remote</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>1 teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 leader</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers and school leaders were invited to participate through an email sent by the Federation to the schools which had been randomly selected to fulfill the quota in Table 1. Participants who volunteered their involvement to the research team were then entered into a database that allowed the team to track role type, school type, school geography and ICSEA status and request interviews as needed.

DATA COLLECTION

Interviews, conducted at a mutually convenient time for both interviewer and participant⁴, took approximately 60 minutes, and were audio recorded with the explicit permission of the participants. The interview format included both semi-structured and structured interview approaches. The interview began with questions regarding respondent demographics (gender, age, school role and employment). School context information was already largely established from the sampling frame. A mix of both open and closed questions were used to enquire about workload volume, nature and perceived sources. A final series of questions asked about the strategies used at schools to manage workload; and also what might be done to further manage workload at school, NSW Department of Education and broader NSW government levels. Data collected in relation to questions which had a quantifiable element were entered directly into an excel database during the telephone interview. Interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

⁴ We are grateful for and acknowledge the assistance of Paul Kidson, in undertaking interviews, and Mihajla Gavin, in undertaking interviews and conducting secondary source research, during the course of this project.
DATA ANALYSIS

To directly address the three research questions, a combination of descriptive statistical analyses of quantitative items and qualitative analysis of responses from open questions were used. Descriptive analysis of the workload data (hours, duties, changes) are provided, but the small number of participants mean these must be treated as purely indicative – identifying issues for future research in larger, more representative samples, where generalisability can be established. We present the quantitative data here for transparency and also so that any observable trends might be used to triangulate findings evident in the qualitative data. Qualitative data was reduced through a coding and categorising approach, based upon inductive thematic analysis as described by Clarke and Braun (2014). Initial analyses explored emerging themes, and the quantified reports of workload, for all 31 participants. This was reported in the preliminary report. Additional analyses were conducted by disaggregating the data so that variations between school type (primary, secondary, central), geolocation (metropolitan, provincial, and remote), school SES (ICSEA) and staff role (teacher or school leader) could be assessed. Thus in this final report we report on more detailed analyses, specifically designed to examine how workload is experienced across a range of diverse and complex school settings. The next section considers key findings from the study.
Findings

CURRENT DESCRIPTIONS OF WORKLOAD
We asked respondents to provide information on the hours they worked, the nature of their work and changes that had occurred in the size of their workload over the last five years.

Teachers and school leaders reported their hours of work at the workplace and at home in a typical week (see Figure 1). The total working hours ranged from 36 to 75 hours per week, with the majority reporting a total between 56 and 68 hours. The total average reported hours in this, non-representative, sample was 56 hours per week. This presents as high, relative to working hours suggested in industrial documentation, and as reported in other studies – the SiAS report puts the average hours of primary school teachers in NSW at 50.2 hours per week, and 49.4 hours for secondary teachers (McKenzie et al., 2014), while Riley’s (2015) study of principals reports 76% working upwards of 51-56 hours per week. It is also high in comparison to other professions. For example, GPs work an average of 42 hours per week, three hours less than the average for specialists (45 hours)\(^5\). In comparison, people employed in occupations other than GPs and specialists work an average of 37 hours\(^6\) (Austats, 2013). While it must be remembered that teachers’ and school leaders’ work varies considerably between teaching weeks and non-teaching/school holiday weeks, the long working hours reported in this study are consistent with international data which suggests Australian teachers are working longer hours than the OECD average and doing more administrative tasks. The most recent OECD

\(^5\) Disaggregated by gender, male doctors were more likely to work long hours, with 17% of male GPs and a quarter (25%) of male specialists working 60 hours.

\(^6\) Data from 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census. The 2016 census data at this level of disaggregation was not available when this report was compiled.
data shows that across Australia teachers reported an average of 42.7 hours per week, compared with the OECD average of 38.3 hours, and spent 7.4 hours doing administration or management, compared with the 4.5 hour OECD average (OECD, 2013). Our findings, from this small NSW sample, show reported hours that are higher than previous national averages and the reported hours are consistent with data from elsewhere in the interview confirming that teacher and school leaders report on increasing workload over the last five years.

![Figure 1: Self-reported working hours of 31 respondents.](image)

We examined the reported work hours for a range of different groups. Within our small sample there was no significant difference in the total hours worked by classroom teachers and staff with leadership roles (see Figure 2). Although it was evident that school leaders spent more time working at school, this was offset by the finding that classroom teachers spent more time working at home, doing lesson preparation and marking.
While variation in reported working hours was reported across the 31 interviews, there were no major differences or trends evident in relation to school type (primary, secondary, central), level of advantage (low, medium, high ICSEA) or school geography (metropolitan, provincial, remote). Quantitative reports were consistent with the qualitative reports of workload which were consistent across the respondents. All interview participants commented on working hours being a challenging and difficult issue.

In the 31 interviews, 27 respondents reported an increase in workload over the last five years, two respondents said their workload had remained the same, and two said that their workload had decreased (see Figure 3). The two cases who reported workload decrease were both early-career teachers who explained that their workload had reduced only as relative to that experienced in their first few years on the job. As each explained this was “only because I have found ways to manage” and “through conscious effort”, rather than being due to reductions in overall work content. When asked to estimate the size of the workload increase responses ranged from 20 to 50%.
Teachers and school leaders were asked to provide qualitative descriptions of their work duties, including extra-curricular and/or parent/community engagement activities. Connell (1993, p. 59) once described trying to “list all the jobs done by teachers I could find mentioned in a set of interviews”, but “[giving] up after I had reached nearly eighty and was still going strong.” Our experience was similar, with this question prompting a rich account of teachers’ work. Text analysis produced a word cloud (see Figure 4), which provides proportional representation of the language used in describing total work duties (A) and non-core work duties (B – where language describing dominant work duties has been removed).

It is clear, but not surprising that meeting students’, parents’, and to a lesser extent community, needs is central to the work that teachers do. Teaching classes and programming lessons also feature prominently (A). More noteworthy is the diversity of other duties (B) reported; which ranged from what might be conventionally expected:
TEACHING & LEARNING: REVIEW OF WORKLOAD

arranging and managing sport, parent-teacher meetings, playground duty, awards nights; to some more surprising responses: providing catering, completing daily online reporting to parents, and maintaining technical equipment.

Figure 4: What teachers do - description of duties word cloud

All respondents reported attendance at a range of meetings, the majority of which fall outside the start and finish times of school. These included: staff meetings (ranging
between 1 to 3/week, plus faculty meetings in secondary); learning support and student welfare meetings; parent meetings (both formal and informal); and professional association meetings. Several teachers commented on the associated duties in preparing for and documenting meetings. Seven of the teacher respondents described leadership duties within their work, and three reported involvement in formal mentoring programmes.

Concerns were also reflected in responses to questions about work demands. Some 24 of the 31 respondents reported ‘never’ (12/31) or ‘rarely’ (12/31) having sufficient time for their work, supporting findings made by others within the Australian context (e.g. Thompson & Cook, 2017). The demands of work were felt broadly among both teachers and school leaders, who reported high levels of conflicting demands (17/31 reported these occur ‘often’); frequent requirements to work very fast (23/31 report ‘often’); and to work very hard (26/31 report ‘often’). Furthermore 18 respondents reported that their work sometimes required “too great a work effort” and a further 11 reported that this was often the case.

**SOURCES OF WORKLOAD**

The first section of these findings explored the kinds of activities teachers and school leaders reported doing in their work, and whether the overall amount of it had changed over the past five years. In this section, we delve deeper, in an attempt to further understand the dimensions of this workload. We explore the aspects of work that teachers and school leaders viewed as superfluous to their primary focus on matters of teaching and learning, as well as asking where some of the recent increases that have contributed to it may have come from. We also consider the effects of such demands.

Teachers and school leaders were asked to comment on any tasks, requirements and activities in their job which they felt were not necessary or were unproductive. Comments
most frequently reflected the view that many meetings and much paperwork was unproductive but in many cases teachers and school leaders clarified their responses by explaining that the tasks might be productive if done by other staff: “I feel like there’s things that I do that probably could be done by someone without my knowledge and experience, like administrative tasks”; or that the tasks in themselves were not unproductive but that the workload meant they could not be properly executed:

“Well we seem to have endless meetings ... not necessarily that things are unproductive, but [because] that (sic.) we are so busy all the time that we don’t have time to absorb and put in place...we never get things done properly.” (leader, low-ICSEA remote central school)

This view was further reflected when teachers and school leaders were asked to comment on any tasks, requirements and activities in their job which they felt were necessary, and related directly to teaching and learning, but which were poorly implemented or managed. Here again time constraints featured strongly in responses, for example:

“I would like to have more time available to be really concentrating on teacher quality, through tools such as the teacher observation and the ... quality teaching framework, and so on... the thing that makes the biggest difference to students’ learning” (leader, mid-ICSEA provincial high school)

Classroom observation was only reported by two respondents in the sample of 31. Responses emphasised the challenges in meeting tight timeframes in policy implementation, with complex initiatives often running concurrently and with substantial resourcing shifts. For example:

“...at the same time rolls out ... a whole new [range] of syllabuses. That’s not really conducive to change management. If we want to see the new curriculum
implemented then we need really quality people available to schools to help them deliver – design and deliver – that new curriculum and when those department units come down to an allocation of 5 or 6 people on the team, and then they have to become a jack of all trades it loses its integrity. So, those people who had amazing skill bases say for example in behaviour support or [other types of] support who then become these generic school support officers and have to deliver the new curriculum ... they have not expertise in it ... that's a bit of a joke.”(principal, high-ICSEA metropolitan primary school)

The notion of being time-poor in implementing various policy requirements is discussed further below, as this was a key theme throughout all interviews in the study.

Another problematic aspect of teachers’ and school leaders’ workloads related to data collection and reporting requirements. Participants reported being required to collect data that was “predominantly student related” (teacher, low-ICSEA metropolitan primary school), and specifically related to student assessment, including a key focus on literacy and numeracy, especially in low- and mid- ICSEA primary and central schools. Maintaining records of student behaviour and welfare issues also featured strongly – as one participant commented, “pretty much anything that happens with the students and of course with us needs to be recorded” (teacher, mid-ICSEA remote central school). For leaders, data was often described as being required in relation to the school plan or annual school report. Interestingly, however, across the interviews participants evinced some uncertainty about why such data were required, who they were really for and precisely what they were meant to be evidence of. A few respondents commented that they suspected this data was never looked at, but was rather something that “probably just goes in the garbage can” (leader, low-ICSEA remote central school) and was only there in case “your school gets audited” – “it’s all back-up, or arse-covering, or whatever you want to call it” (leader, low-ICSEA remote central school).
Across the interviews, requirements for data collection and reporting were also seen to have increased in recent years. Overwhelmingly, participants reported a negative effect of such requirements, as they were seen to take too much time, being just “one more thing that you have to do at the end of the day” (teacher, mid-ICSEA provincial central school), meaning some participants felt they were “too busy proving that I’m doing what I should be doing” (leader, high-ICSEA provincial primary school). In the words of one low-ICSEA metropolitan primary school teacher:

[In the past], I was never required to physically collect and upload so much information. I always assessed my kids’ learning and used that information for myself to determine what to do next. Now I have to pass on that information which requires me to either type it into a database or collect actual work samples and scan them and upload them and share them with someone

Increased ‘paperwork’ for teachers has been noted as a feature of neoliberal approaches to education (Ball & Youdell, 2007), and it seems to be quite clearly borne out in our data, with accountability requirements creating extra ‘box-ticking’ activities in teachers’ day to day work. Some respondents felt the data generated in this way was still useful, however, for instance as a form of “forced reflection” (teacher, low-ICSEA metropolitan primary school) that made them “more analytical” (teacher, low-ICSEA remote central school); Hardy (2015) has found that the ‘logic of enumeration’ that now characterises Australian schools can provide something of a “sense of security” for some teachers (Hardy, 2016, p. 108). An element of ‘doublethink’ has previously been identified in teachers’ views and use of data (Hardy & Lewis, 2017), which is supported in our research, given that the majority of participants were more ambivalent. Some even felt that the data being produced was inaccurate, because school staff felt pressured to “fudge it” (leader, low-ICSEA remote central school) – which echoes further arguments about the dangers of data-based accountability by Hardy and Lewis (2017).
Indeed all participants expressed frustration in their interviews with what they saw as substantial administrative, accountability and reporting requirements, and this was also the most common focus of responses to the question, “Reflecting on your answers to my questions so far, what do you think are the primary sources of your current workload?” Such findings support those of others regarding accountability requirements of teachers, which reflect a lack of trust in teachers and assume the need for teachers to be increasingly ‘controlled’ (Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Helsby, 1999) particularly through ‘remote control’ (Connell, 2013, p. 108) mechanisms. The reported high levels of administration, accountability and reporting are also consistent with additional questioning regarding red-tape, asked in relation to the NSW state policy ‘Local Schools, Local Decisions’ (though not flagged as such within the interviews). The majority of participants actually reported an increase in red tape rather than any reduction, while other aspects of the policy received far more uncertain, less committed responses.

In a similar vein, participants were also asked more generally if they could identify any particular changes in policy or practice that had affected their workload over the past five years. Responses are listed in Table 3. Frequently, participants emphasised that reforms such as these were always additional to the work already being done in schools. As one participant put it, “it’s like we’re fighting to go up a mountain with a massive rock on our back and then they’re like ‘by the way, do you mind taking mine as well?’” (teacher, mid-ICSEA provincial secondary school) For some, this was seen as a process of “passing the buck down and we seem to be at the bottom of the line” (teacher, mid-ICSEA metropolitan primary school), cohering with arguments made elsewhere about the emphasis on teacher responsibility within the current political climate (Stacey, 2017).
Table 3: Particular Changes in Policy or Practice Affecting Workload over the Past Five Years in Rank Order

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particular Changes in Policy or Practice Affecting Workload Over the Past Five Years</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accreditation</td>
<td>Since 2004, all ‘new-scheme’ teachers have had to be accredited in NSW; this will apply to the entire teaching workforce from 2018 (Stacey, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New syllabus implementation and curriculum development (only raised by those in teaching roles)</td>
<td>A number of new state syllabuses have been implemented in recent years, with changes to Year 11 and 12 courses a current focus (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2017).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Schools, Local Decisions (LSLD)</td>
<td>A NSW reform which aims to &quot;shift more power, responsibility and decision-making authority to Schools&quot; (Gavin &amp; McGrath-Champ, 2017, p. 258).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Development Plans (PDPs)</td>
<td>The PDPs involve the setting, monitoring and reviewing of professional goals for teachers, executives and principals (NSW DEC, 2015).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bump It Up</td>
<td>‘Bump It Up’ is part of the Department of Education’s ‘Literacy and Numeracy Strategy’, introduced in 137 schools “to increase the number of students achieving in the top two NAPLAN performance bands.” (NSW DEC, 2017b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Action for Success</td>
<td>‘Early Action for Success’ is “the department’s strategy for implementing the NSW government’s State Literacy and Numeracy Plan.” (NSW DEC, 2017a) Instructional Leaders have been appointed to work with identified schools in assessing, developing, monitoring and reporting student progress (NSW DEC, 2012).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Disability Data Collection (NDDC)</td>
<td>A national, annual collection of data on school students with disability (NSW DEC, 2014).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)</td>
<td>A census test of Australian school students’ literacy and numeracy (Lingard et al., 2016).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning Literacy and Numeracy (PLAN) data</td>
<td>PLAN data is associated with Best Start, another aspect of the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, involving teachers’ assessment of kindergarten students’ literacy and numeracy (NSW DEC, 2017b).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The new AZT, or ‘A-Z tool’</td>
<td>The AZT “is designed to support high level accountability practices by enabling principals to document and monitor the implementation of policies in their school.” (NSW Department of Education, 2016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External validation</td>
<td>See above.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There were some workload source differences reported in relation to school advantage and geography. For instance, one participant commented that being in an advantaged school meant less preparation was required for NAPLAN, while more respondents from remote schools perceived any training they had received for new initiatives to be inadequate, and still other respondents from both rural and remote schools noted context-related impacts on their workload because it was harder to find substitute teachers. However, on the whole, participants’ views in response to these questions did not vary much across contexts.

Our findings are somewhat more complex in relation to role, and this area represents one of the only notable differences we have identified after disaggregating the data produced in this study. While in the majority of interviews, policy-related workload was seen as primarily deriving from departmental requirements or those of other government bodies, such as the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) or the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), in about a third of all interviews, the role of the principal and other executive was also framed as a factor. About half of teachers and some lower-level leaders (head teachers and one assistant principal) identified their principal or other executive as a source of policy-related workload. However, a narrower slice of these responses, constituting over a quarter of all teacher participants, not only saw their principal or executive as a source of their policy-related workload, but as directly responsible for it. Thus while departmental pressures were certainly felt by most, school executive, and particularly the principal were sometimes seen to be “trying to put even more on top of that.” (teacher, low-ICSEA provincial primary school) In addition, there was scepticism about the ways in which reforms and initiatives were interpreted and ‘sold’ at school level. In reference to the NDDC – the National Disability Data Collection, mentioned in Table 3 – one teacher commented that this was “a national thing”, but also queried, “how much national? I say that because I have colleagues in other schools. Some schools pass that pressure down, some schools don’t.” (teacher, low-ICSEA
Principals were not unaware of the issues of workload and delegation that had resulted from recent reforms – one explained how “staff get upset ‘cause they’re managing big workloads, and in some ways I’ve got to put some of my workload down onto them, and they resent that.” (principal, high-ICSEA provincial primary school) Principals themselves have been noted to have lower positive measures of wellbeing than the general population (Riley, 2015); other research has commented on principals’ difficulty with workload under recent devolutionary reform (Gavin & McGrath-Champ, 2017; Martin & Macpherson, 2015). Research has also documented the tensions that can arise between executive and teaching staff in neoliberal policy environments (Keddie, Mills & Pendergast, 2011); our research indicates that this situation, and its effect on within-school staffing dynamics, might be an important area for ongoing exploration.

Indeed, subsequent to being asked about the sources of their workload and any particular changes to policy and practice which contributed to it, participants were asked what, if anything, the effect of such changes had been on their – or their staff members’ – classroom teaching, and/or student learning. Here, one effect was in relation to poor communication between executive and teachers, something noted by all three principals included in the study, and seen to have follow-on effects for teaching and learning. The effect most frequently cited, however, was a general sense of low morale or stress, with references to “drained” energy levels (teacher, low-ICSEA provincial primary school) and a focus on “survival” (teacher, low-ICSEA provincial central school). For some, this meant decisions had to be made regarding “what to let go.” (leader, low-ICSEA provincial secondary school) As Easthope and Easthope (2000, p. 53) found years ago in their study of Tasmanian teachers in a context of economic rationalism, “[t]he result is teachers have to make choices. They have come to the realization that it is impossible to do all the work they would wish to do.” Indeed, because of these increased pressures, participants reported less time available to devote to teaching and learning, a finding also noted by Hardy and Lewis (2017) and which gives support to arguments by Thompson and Cook...
In our study, twelve participants explicitly expressed such views, with the following quotation representative of the bulk of these responses:

“There’s less time to effectively pay to students. The quality of teaching I think has in some ways depreciated because you physically don’t have the time to plan engaging, interesting, exciting high quality lessons as often as you used to be able to; still do, we’re still good teachers but as often as you used to. You're spending more time at the end of the day or in the morning catching up on the paperwork you have to do rather than spending that time researching new ways to teach or to engage students.” (teacher, high-ICSEA metropolitan primary school)

As Bascia and Rottman (2011, p. 789) have noted, there is “a symbiotic relationship between teaching conditions and students’ opportunities to learn”. However, while twelve participants said there had been a negative impact on teaching, four reported seeing a positive impact of recent reforms on student learning. Yet, of these four, three also qualified their statements by saying that it came with problematic workloads for staff: “it’s good for student learning ... [but] there’s been a huge workload on everyone in the faculty” (leader, high-ICSEA metropolitan secondary school). It is also important to note that, upon disaggregation of the responses to this question, there was again, as with responses to most questions, very little difference between participants’ roles, school ICSEA status, school type or geography. While the significance of context on teachers’ and leaders’ work cannot and should not be denied, this finding does indicate that current workload pressures are being felt in a similar way across the board.

There are also some lessons to be learnt here in listening to teachers’ and school leaders’ accounts of what is important to them in their work and what it is they would like to focus on. Clearly the current extent and nature of workload is unsustainable; so what can – or should – be changed? What is evident is that teachers and school leaders want to be able to focus on matters that relate directly to teaching and learning. Butt and Lance (2005), in
their study of teacher workload in the UK, had similar findings, with moves to reduce teachers’ hours not actually commensurate with improvements in occupational satisfaction. Teachers, it seems, are happy enough to work long hours if they are doing work that they see the point of, and that they value. Completing extensive administrative tasks and responding to other apparently extraneous policy requirements that do not help them in preparing their classes are examples of activities that do not fit this category.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING WORKLOAD

This section presents and discusses positive strategies identified by teachers and school leaders that are seen to assist, or to have the potential to assist, with managing workload. As with the foregoing coverage, and where a pattern exists, we distinguish the responses of teachers from school leaders and identify contextual factors of school type, level of advantage and geography. It is pertinent to highlight here again, however, the overall lack of strong contextual or role-based configurations in these findings, as in the findings presented above.

Existing Strategies for Managing Workload

Existing strategies reported as assisting teachers and school leaders in managing their workload included, in particular, relief from face-to-face teaching time. This was considered vital to enable staff to complete perceived increases in requirements for reporting, documentation and ‘paperwork’, without impinging on important preparation time for teaching, reflecting similar findings by Butt and Lance (2005). Establishment by the school of a ‘timeline’ for Department of Education data requirements was also reported by staff to assist in managing their workload as it enabled rational planning around such submissions in a manner that could then be scheduled so as to smooth, rather than exacerbate, workload directly associated with school teaching and learning tasks. Other initiatives included: phases during the year where there are no
staff/committee meetings such as at student report-writing time, or simply meeting-free phases at other times during term; periods (a week or fortnight) when staff are encouraged by school executive to come to school (and work only) according to class start and finish times; arrangement by the executive for a psychologist to address the staff about work-related issues such as perfectionism; and nomination by staff of colleague/s who have done a ‘good job’ in some part of their work, followed by a random ‘draw’ and a reward. Other existing strategies of note include having, where they exist, significant support staff (teaching and library assistants) – another strategy noted in Butt and Lance’s (2005) study – as well as teacher well-being programs, and collaboration and collegiality between staff either of a targeted/intended kind or that had developed organically.

We would note within this list a propensity to, once again, put responsibility onto individual teachers, seen within strategies which address ‘wellbeing’, ‘perfectionism’ and which encourage teachers to spend less time on school grounds. These, to us, raise similar concerns as discourses of ‘resilience’ (Price et al., 2012) which require those who are negatively affected by workplace conditions to to provide the solutions to them. Furthermore, suggestions that teachers spend less time on school grounds are countered by our findings regarding hours – if hours at school are curtailed, they merely seem to go up at home. After all, as our findings show, teaching is not, and quite simply cannot be, a ‘9-3 job’. This leads us to question the efficacy of school- and especially teacher-level attempts to manage such issues, when work overload is seen across the board and therefore likely to emanate from an overall, more systemic source.
Additional Strategies

By schools

Perhaps reflecting our own hesitancy to embrace teacher-level solutions, the most common additional school-level strategies identified by respondents that could improve their workload situation did seem to have a more systemic flavour. This included: additional teaching staff; increased administrative support and office staff to do more administration that bears down on teachers; more in-school support when new Department policy or paperwork requirements are implemented; fewer committees and meetings; and better scheduling of meetings. In regard to the strategy of fewer, or rationalized meetings, one respondent commented: “I have to tell students ‘I’m sorry, I can't talk now, I’ve got to go to a meeting’, and that’s not fair to my students. I’m paid to teach, I’m not paid to run off to meetings” (teacher, high-ICSEA metropolitan secondary school). Further strategies identified (by teachers) include the development of greater restraint by school executive in embracing everything that’s new (as this increases workload), plus stronger guidelines for, and consistency of, in-school processes.

Logically, however, identification of additional strategies to assist with managing workload reflects what strategies exist or do not exist presently within a school. The other ‘additional’ strategies nominated by respondents were generally similar to those discussed above, that exist in some schools but are absent in others. These included: celebration of success/good work, (cross-school) collaboration, and appropriate support for and focus of professional learning. There was also some mention here again of staff welfare programs, and a broad strategy nomination was for school executive to ‘show[s] us that they care about our workload’ through cutting down on extra curricula roles/tasks, plus more even distribution of requirements throughout the year and closer consideration of how long teachers’ duties take. Taken together, these suggestions indicate
By the NSW Department of Education

Distinctively, not a single person was unable to respond to the question regarding what else the Department of Education could do to help manage the workload challenges they had identified and all felt able to nominate some action/s. Whilst school leaders seemed to articulate most abundantly on Departmental strategies, the intensity of engagement by all study participants on this item conveyed their widely-held consternation and, again, reflects an overall sense that these workload issues are systemic. Perhaps not surprisingly, there was widespread opinion regarding the seemingly excessive impost of unceasing change, new initiatives, new programs, new data reporting and lack of assessment by the Department about what changes/policies are working well and those that are not. Again, this recalls the strategies suggested by school staff in previous research (Butt & Lance, 2005). A proactive stance by the Department is considered vital: that it should conduct an assessment of the workload impact on teachers of new policies or initiatives before they are implemented. A number of strategies were posed regarding how to manage given the current reality of abundant Departmental changes including reduction in face-to-face teaching corresponding to the time that it takes to supply data or respond to changes/new initiatives:

"When there’s (sic) changes and new policies implemented and greater demands on teachers they’ve [the Department] got to recognise that that is increased workload. I think if they want quality teaching they’ve got to really look at the amount of periods the teacher teaches in a weekly or a fortnightly timetable so they’ve actually really got the time to...respond to everything properly. Maybe put more teachers in the system and reduce the face to face teaching of...all teachers”

(leader, high ICSEA metropolitan secondary school).
Other strategies included the streamlining of requirements by the Department, less frequent data collection, plus a reduction in form-filling and ‘tick-box’ activities. The last of these was elaborated: “it should be enough to have a conversation with someone, not also then tick a box and fill in a form” (teacher, high-ICSEA metropolitan secondary school). The lack of curriculum consultants and calls for reinstatement of plentiful curriculum support was also key. While acknowledging that accountability is important, a fundamental underpinning to these strategies was articulated through expressions by teaching and learning staff for greater trust from the Department and the (re)establishment of a positive attitude towards the teaching profession. (Here, a small difference between school contexts was noted, with this strategy expressed most commonly by provincial school respondents.) Issues of trust in and surrounding the teaching profession have long been associated with education reform (e.g. Ball, 1990). While neoliberal approaches to education policy in some senses seek to de-centralise and devolve responsibility, the corresponding forms of ‘remote control’ which are then established suggest that such moves have little to do with trust in and respect for teaching professionals. And importantly, what our participants were seeking was not the retreat of the Department from schooling, but rather that it aim to provide support for, rather than purely make demands on, its staff.

By the NSW government

In a similar vein, providing more funding was key amongst staff proposals regarding what else the NSW Government could do, specifically that the government follow the Gonski model fully and pressure the Federal government for more funds. High ICSEA and secondary school respondents gave emphasis to funding as a strategic remedy, whereas primary school respondents’ comments were around government policy. In both cases, such comments echo the desire for greater value and respect expressed above, with respondents seeking from government, initiatives that can raise community perceptions
of teachers and their work. There was concern that governments at all levels continue to expect teachers to resolve society’s broader social issues and do the job of parents and ‘everybody else’. For these participants, a ‘back off’ strategy arising from fatigue by unending new policies was sought, with a desire that education be less of a political and electoral issue. Summarily, NSW public school teachers seek that the government discard neoliberal policies that ‘try to privatize everything’, requiring teachers to behave in a more performative, business-like manner that focuses on student achievement and teachers’ work as articulated in numbers and other forms of data, controlled remotely with managerialist techniques. This aversion to the management of public sector schools in the manner of a private sector business was encapsulated thus, “[we] would like the government to say: sorry everyone, ‘we got it wrong; privatization only works in business’” (teacher, low-ICSEA metropolitan primary school).
Summary and Implications

This report has presented a detailed analysis of qualitative data from 31 classroom teachers and school leaders. Whilst we examined this data in a disaggregated way, looking for variation across school type, geography and socio-educational status, what has been distinctive is the consensus evident: there has been an increase in workload, and it is frequently perceived to be related to the imposition of new administrative tasks, as the ‘fetishization’ of data contributes to what is now “an extensive infrastructure of accountability” (Hardy & Lewis, 2017, p. 672). This ‘infrastructure’ is imbued with performative logics that teachers and school leaders are compelled to respond to (Ball, 2003), in some cases at the expense of already scarce reserves of time (Thompson & Cook, 2017) that might otherwise be devoted to concerns more centrally related to teaching and learning.

Our findings are given greater significance by the absence of strong patterns or influence of contextual factors, which we actively collected and scrutinized the data for, but did not find. Neither geographical considerations, socio-educational advantage, nor type of school seem to have much influenced the workload issues reported by respondents or the strategies they identify for addressing these, indicating that it is system-wide approaches to schooling, articulated through a range of policies and initiatives, that are the primary contributors to excessive workloads of school teachers and leaders.

Furthermore, while teachers and school leaders reported a range of school level strategies for managing workload, it is clear that few have been implemented in a manner that is either common across schools or necessarily successful, as gauged by responses from study participants. This, again, is consistent with the argument that the source of the issue is not at school level. Though some teachers did seem to feel that principals and their executive were at least partly responsible for workload increases, such school leaders also
have a necessarily more direct and, in a sense, unavoidable knowledge of system-level policies and their associated demands. Teaching staff, on the other hand, are understandably concerned primarily with the students and teaching tasks set daily before them, plus the increased administrative and accountability requirements documented throughout this report. This workload reality makes the attribution of responsibility for workload issues to the principal and school executive, that was identified in a number of discussions of workload ‘source’, logical but perhaps not entirely accurate. From our perspective, what emerges overall is a system-level issue, and one that requires further research. The fact that participants were most vociferous in relation to ameliorative strategies the Department might adopt suggests there is a demand within the workforce for a considered, careful, and most importantly, longitudinal plan from government in relation to education policy and the support of school teaching and learning staff. Such a Department plan needs to adopt, as a central goal, an aim to reduce the kinds of pressure and panic at school level, observed and documented within the pages of this report.
References


Fitzgerald, S., McGrath-Champ, S., Wilson, R., & Stacey, M. (manuscript in preparation). A ‘tsunami of paperwork’: Professionally engaged teachers’ reports on changes to conditions of work and employment conditions under devolution.


Contact Information

Susan McGrath-Champ

Associate Professor, University of Sydney Business School

susan.mcgrath-champ@sydney.edu.au

Rachel Wilson

Senior Lecturer, Sydney School of Education & Social Work

rachel.wilson@sydney.edu.au

Meghan Stacey

Doctoral Candidate, Sydney School of Education & Social Work

meghan.stacey@sydney.edu.au