

Theorising Changes in Teachers' Work

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Abstract

This article discusses recurrent themes in the literature about teaching in developed countries: the intensification of work, increased central control, diminished professional autonomy, and fears about the deskilling of teachers. Labour Process theory is used to consider how we might understand the ways in which teachers' work and professionalism are changing.

Introduction

When teachers in England talk about their work, their concerns are predictable. They talk about the fact that there doesn't seem to be enough time to cover what is expected, let alone time to follow up interesting lines of thought or explore new ideas with their classes. They feel that their freedom to make decisions about their work has been constricted. They worry about dealing with increasingly difficult behaviour from pupils. They are concerned about the image of teachers in the media and an apparently generalised lack of respect for their work. They talk about increased managerialism, paperwork and bureaucracy in schools. They talk about the amount of testing and number of examinations they have to prepare pupils for. They talk about rising levels of stress, reduced leisure time and, often, express a sense that much of the fun or enjoyment has gone from their work.

These themes – somewhat differently expressed – recur throughout the literature on teachers' work. Kevin Harris, for example, argues that

The present history of teachers in much of the Western world has become one of decreased status and control with relation to educational issues, loss of autonomy, worsening of conditions, loss of purpose and direction, destruction of health, increased anxiety and depression, lowering of morale, and, despite a continued proliferation of policy rhetoric to the contrary, subjugation to increasing government and other external controls of schooling and curricula. The initiatives currently being imposed on teachers are serving, at one and the same time, to reduce the professional knowledge and critical scholarship which teachers bring to their work, and to decrease the political impact that teachers might bring to bear through their instructional activities. (Harris, 1994:5)

There is widespread agreement amongst educational commentators about current trends in teachers' work in developed countries (for example Apple, 1982, 1986, 1988, 1996; Gee and Lankshear, 1995; Goodson and Hargreaves, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994, 1995; Harris, 1994; Larson, 1980; Lawn, 1996; Robertson, 1994, 1996; Seddon, 1996, 1997; Smyth et al, 2000; Troman, 2000). These trends include:

- teachers' diminishing power to determine the curriculum they teach and how they teach it;
- a new emphasis on teachers' managerial and administrative role with pupils and with other adults working in school;
- changing pay structures, and a dismantling of union-won agreements;
- changing conditions of service and new regulatory controls over competence and behaviour.

These trends are easily illustrated by the legislative and cultural changes to teachers' work in England and Wales. Since the introduction, in 1988, of a national curriculum which identified broad areas of curriculum content, there have been national projects – most notably, the Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in primary schools and the Key Stage 3 Strategy in secondary schools - which have specified subject content in considerable detail, recommended teaching strategies and strongly advocated particular lesson structures and divisions of time. Although not mandatory in school, it is a requirement that teachers in training should demonstrate competence in implementing these national strategies. Within schools, a hierarchy of curriculum subjects (with English, mathematics and science at the pinnacle) has been established, whilst certain subjects, such as modern languages and design technology have seen their star both wax and wane within the last decade. National testing for children aged 7,11,14 and 16 has been established. As the youth labour market has declined, vocational courses and imposed changes to the post-16 curriculum have encouraged pupils to stay on beyond the statutory school leaving age.

In the face of opposition from teacher unions, performance management and performance-related pay have been introduced. Monitoring of both teachers' and pupils' performance has increased, and target-setting and discussion of outcome measures are now a routine part of school culture. Classrooms, so long the private domain of the teacher with the class, have been opened up to the scrutiny of other adults from both inside and outside the school. A framework of professional standards sets out the competences expected of teachers at different points on the career ladder (to qualify at the end of the first year of teaching, at subject leader and at head teacher level). New categories of 'advanced skills' and 'fast track' teachers have been created. Legislation has been introduced to make it more difficult for teachers to retire early or retire on the grounds of ill

health, and to speed up the process of dismissing teachers. The introduction of increasingly bureaucratic procedures, reinforced by a discourse about inclusion, has made it increasingly difficult to exclude unruly or violent children from school. The system of regular school inspection, which has the power to categorise schools as ‘failing’ and in need of ‘special measures’ has been established since 1993.

Although the specifics of policy and legislation relate to particular national contexts, research reports and the professional literature about teachers’ work from a range of different countries (see above) testify to the fact that these same trends are observable across developed societies. If we take an even broader frame of reference, it is clear that, in developed societies, the nature of work itself is changing in response to what might be generally termed the processes of globalization – that is, the availability of information technologies and instant communication networks which facilitate the movement of capital around the world to take advantage of local conditions. The processes of globalization have a profound impact on where work is located, the skills required in the workforce and how the workplace is organised. Amongst the changes in work patterns identified by Smyth et al (2000:3) are:

- *the harnessing of peer pressure and team work*
- *a greater emphasis on customer needs*
- *the promotion of a culture of continuous improvement*
- *reliance on market forces as a form of regulation, rather than rules and centralised bureaucratic forms of organisation*
- *more emphasis on image management*
- *a greater reliance on technology to solve problems*
- *a resort to increasingly technicist ways of responding to uncertainty.*

The roles and responsibilities of the middle will pass to the ‘front line workers’ themselves (formerly, the bottom line of the hierarchy). Workers will be transformed into committed ‘partners’ who will engage in meaningful work, fully understand and control their jobs, supervise themselves, and actively seek to improve their performance through communicating their knowledge and needs clearly. Such ‘motivated’ workers (partners) can no longer be

*'ordered' around by 'bosses', they can only be 'developed', 'coached' and 'supported'.
Hierarchy is gone, egalitarianism 'in'.*

It is clear – from the punctuation alone - that Gee and Lankshear do not view this new work order as inherently democratising. But in school, as in other workplaces, the changes mean that teachers' work has been redesigned, and that the skills teachers need today are different from the skills teachers needed in the past. Lawn (1996:18) offers the example of what counts as a 'good primary teacher,' commenting that this 'has shifted from being an isolated classroom worker with generalist skills to a classroom and school-based team worker with specialist skills.' Coaching, supporting, mentoring and developing other staff have become increasingly important in teachers' work. These processes, viewed from different perspectives, in different contexts and at different historical moments, can be interpreted as participatory and enlightened or part of an apparatus of surveillance and control.

Waters (1995:3) defines globalization as "a social process in which constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding." On the macro level, the possibilities of immediate communication and transfer of information and ideas, the ease of travel and the sense of a global community can seem exciting, if dangerous, and redolent with potential. But these same possibilities can also seem overwhelming and potentially disempowering, and part of people's response to the removal of geographical and cultural constraints has been an increased focus upon the local. This has resulted in national fragmentation in many parts of the world, and a focus on ethnicity, hybridity and difference which might be seen as staking a claim for individual and group identities in the face of globalising forces. In teachers' work these same tensions can be traced. New technologies, common improvement policies and teaching resources and shared recipes for pedagogic 'best practice' seem, on one level, to efface differences between schools. Yet on another level, differences between schools are becoming more marked; school is signally failing to meet the educational needs of some groups of children, and for some teachers the work environment is proving personally and professionally damaging.

This is the broad landscape in which, in this special issue, we are locating our discussion of the work teachers do and how they learn to do it. Whether or not one characterises the current

situation in teaching as a ‘crisis’ will depend upon where one stands, but there seems little room for arguing anything other than that teachers’ work is undergoing a process of radical change. One of the aims of taking a cross-national, comparative focus, is to find ways of thinking about teaching and teacher education that emphasise the agency of the individual teacher and the importance of that individual teacher’s work in the lives of pupils. Teaching is complex moral and cultural, as well as intellectual, work. The work is about identity formation, cultural transmission, communication, moral responsibility and caring for children. A reduced view of the teacher’s role, which over-emphasises teaching as a technical activity, disempowers teachers and diminishes their effectiveness in working with pupils and colleagues. Kevin Harris calls this reduced effectiveness and confidence ‘subdued agency’:

...discourse surrounding the role of the teacher has tended recently to promote a particular form of disempowerment of teachers, which I would characterize as ‘subdued agency’. In starting from a pessimistic view about the potential ineffectiveness of teachers to promote social change (a view ironically spawned by both correspondence and resistance theories of schooling), or from a moral concern over whether teachers have the right to manipulate other people and impose their goals on them, or from a political concern that those targeted for change might have no desire (or need) to be meddled with, or even from simply eschewing conflict theories of the state, this discourse has moved generally towards embracing the language of ‘consensus’. It has cast the teacher not as the deliberate promoter of particular ends, but rather as one who lays out options without favour, and who facilitates the process of choice among available options within a context seeking, if not total consensus, then at least a form of social harmony. (1994:4)

To be effective, schools rely upon the energy, confidence and commitment of individual teachers. Teaching should be optimistic, active work; teachers should consider themselves as ‘deliberate promoters of particular ends’ rather than neutral channels for providing a range of options. When teachers feel discouraged and disempowered as a group, the problem often becomes individualised and reframed to make individual teachers feel personally guilty or incompetent. The ‘solutions’ that follow are then also framed in individual terms – rectifying

skills deficits, appraisal, putting more accountability measures in place. I am interested here in looking at teachers' work from the other angle – understanding more about the broader context of teaching as work, exploring what societies seem to be demanding of teachers at this particular historical moment – in the belief that teachers can regain some sense of power, and claim back some of the 'subdued' agency, by having an analysis of their current work situation that focuses on the macro level changes currently engulfing the profession.

The development of Labour Process Theory (particularly in the work of Smyth et al, 2000) is useful in thinking through recent changes in teachers' work. Braverman's original formulation of the theory in 1974 related to capitalist production processes, so the theory does not immediately seem to be applicable to teachers as public sector workers. But teachers' work can be seen as part of the total production process in that they have their own part to play in educating future labour power, and developing skills and knowledge which increase labour productivity. In this view, schools are seen as producers of human capital needed by the economy, with teachers as a specialised workforce producing the larger workforce (Connell, 1985). Like private sector workers, teachers sell their labour power. The problem for the state as teachers' employer is how to convert their labour power into actual labour. Therefore control is essential, as with private sector workers. Control is therefore a core concept in labour process theory (Smyth et al, 2000:21).

The need for control also relates to the intensely political nature of the work teachers are engaged in. Different stakeholders expect differing 'products' from the education system – for example, parents and employers might have different hopes and expectations of schooling. At any historical point there will be divergent opinions about what should be taught and why. The curriculum – that is, both the formal specification of knowledge to be taught and the informal curriculum, which includes decisions about how knowledge is segmented, how teaching is organised, what are considered to be the right ways of behaving - is the key element that defines teachers' work. The curriculum glues teachers' disparate activities together. The curriculum is therefore the main specification of the labour process of teaching. And this specification is likely to be struggled over by the different groups with an interest in what schooling sets out to achieve. One of the state's roles, then, will be to broker agreements between different groups. To ensure that agreed decisions are implemented, the state will need to be able to control teachers.

Smyth et al enumerate six types of control over teachers (2000:39-46), which are summarised, with examples added, below:

1. Regulated market control: metaphors of the market and consumer demand are imposed upon schools; success and profits go to those who best meet consumer demand. Teachers' work is evaluated in terms of measured outputs set against cost. Competition is the key element in relations between schools. (Ball, 1994)
2. Technical control: this is embodied in structures rather than people – in, for example, notionally 'teacher proof' teaching materials and text books, and in specified competences (Apple, 1988, 1996)
3. Bureaucratic control: hierarchical power is embedded in the social and organisational structure of institutions – jobs are differently divided and defined, have different salaries, and supervision, evaluation and promotion arrangements. The potential for establishing a career operates as a control mechanism.
4. Corporate control: the focus of the institution is on economic rather than social good. A competitive ethos prevails. Managers focus on economic goals. The head teacher is perceived more as a line manager than as a first among professional equals.
5. Ideological control: hegemonic beliefs – for example, that a good teacher has certain characteristics – become part of the dominant ideology within schools. These ideas and beliefs are reinforced in pre-service and inservice training. Certain conceptions of teachers' work become naturalised – for example, a move away from child-centred discourse to market based discourse.
6. Disciplinary power: Foucault (1977) shows how, by means of the technologies of power – hierarchical observation, normalising judgement and examination – individuals are 'disciplined' into ways of understanding their work. Minor procedures and routines are specified (times, dress, expected responses) in ways that become anonymous and functional within a school; teachers and others within the school regulate their own behaviours to meet these expectations. Smyth describes this as a 'triumph of technique over questions of purpose' (Smyth, 2000:46).

The degree of control exerted over teachers' work, and the mechanisms of imposing that control vary at different times and in different political and economic circumstances. Sometimes control is overt, sometimes consensual. In labour process theory, the effects of this control over teachers' work are discussed particularly in terms of notions of intensification, deskilling and proletarianization. The intensification of their work – expressed most commonly in the lament that 'there's no time for this anymore' - leaves teachers feeling harassed, stressed and demoralised. Work eats into leisure time, undermines opportunities for sociability and contributes to a sense of isolation. Teachers lack time for keeping up with developments in their field of knowledge; this can lead to a form of intellectual deskilling, lower morale and confidence about work and a greater reliance on pre-packaged curriculum materials. For example, in Robertson and Soucek's study of the work of Western Australian teachers after restructuring initiatives had devolved powers to the school level, teachers reported the need to attend large numbers of meetings as a result of new managerial demands, the escalation of accountability initiatives and pressure to be more entrepreneurial (Robertson, 1996). To meet these commitments, the teachers worked longer hours each day and more days each week. Easthope and Easthope (2000) reported similar findings in a study which considered teachers' work over a ten year period. Robertson comments on the effects:

The intensification of teachers' work inevitably leads to the prioritising of those activities which are rewarded over those that are not. This is only human. Given that the reward structures for teachers are now based upon being able to generate market competitiveness, it is obvious where the sacrifices will be made. However the more distant teachers become from their students, the more depersonalised their teaching. This leads inexorably to an even further alienated relationship between themselves and their students. (Robertson, 1996:45)

A range of macro and micro level factors contribute to the intensification of teachers' work. New communication technologies increase the pressure for immediate response to parents and outside agencies. New information technologies have hugely increased schools' capacities for monitoring individual and group performances. These technologies are best served by particular forms of assessment data, regularly produced, which depend upon particular types of teaching. Larger class sizes, policies that require schools to include a wider range of pupils, new curricula,

increased paperwork to demonstrate that accountability procedures have been met. The contributory factors and personal consequences for teachers are familiar to anyone who has close contact with schools. What is more contentious, perhaps, is the extent to which this process of intensification can be seen as part of a trend towards the deskilling and proletarianization of teachers' work.

In labour process theory, deskilling is a deliberate strategy to divide work to increase profit. Braverman (1974) argued that within capitalist industrial labour processes there is a tendency for labour to become fragmented and deskilled – specifically, that there is a tendency for the work of conception (mental labour) to be separated from the execution (manual labour). Within teaching, some theorists have seen the loss of teachers' control over curriculum decisions as an example of deskilling. Michael Apple, particularly, has argued that the pre-packaged curriculum materials used increasingly in schools both control and deskill teachers by divorcing conception from execution, and by contributing to a reduction in teachers' capacities to devise curriculum materials suited to the local contexts and needs of learners (Apple, 1982). Another way of looking at this issue is to see the current changes to teachers' work as part of an agenda to reskill, rather than deskill teachers – though it is acknowledged that deskilling might be an unintended outcome of the reskilling process (Smyth et al, 2000: 47). This line of argument acknowledges that some teachers – or most teachers in some aspects of their work - will increase their skills and expertise. This reskilling will be managerially determined and will require compliance from the workforce. In this respect, it can be argued that teachers are being ideologically deskilled, in that they lose a degree of personal engagement with determining the goals and purposes of their work, and a sense of their own agency. This diminishing sense of autonomy at work is closely related to questions of professionalism and theses about the proletarianization of teaching. Harris, for example, contends that

which is now Teacher professionalism in the Western world reached its heights around the mid-1980s. Since then there have been varied but interconnected moves to change the role and nature of teaching. Almost all of these...have to do with eroding teachers' autonomy and control and can be seen as part of a larger process of deprofessionalization, which is itself part of a larger process that

recent analyses of the job of schoolteaching have pointed overwhelmingly to, and commonly referred to as proletarianization. (1994:1)

The arguments for seeing teaching as proletarianized relate to salaries (the differential advantages in teachers' pay over the average wage), conditions of service, autonomy within the job, the social status of the work and a perceived sense of teachers' growing alienation from their work. All of these aspects of teachers' work have a bearing on the issue of professionalism, a notoriously slippery concept, which can be used to argue both conservative and progressive positions in relation to teachers' work. As Lawn points out (1996:11), professionalism is 'a double-edged sword': it can be used both to control teachers and to 'protect the space and the labour process in the arena of policy and politics.' As such it can be used to demand change or to defend the status quo – or, indeed, on an individual level, to accommodate to changes such as work intensification, amongst those who believe that to resist would be unprofessional.

Historical analyses of the concept of professionalism (Ozga and Lawn, 1981; Gitlin and Labaree, 1996; Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996; Lawn, 1996) reveal the extent to which definitions of teacher professionalism are situational, relational and, often, contradictory. The struggle to define professionalism is closely related to the political struggle to define what teachers' work should be and how it should be specified in the curriculum. This is well illustrated in Martin Lawn's analysis of teacher professionalism in the immediate post Second World War period, compared with notions of professionalism at the end of the twentieth century (Lawn, 1996). In the post war reconstruction period, he argues, teacher professionalism hinged on active citizenship: the teacher's professional responsibility was to educate 'other active citizens-to-be' to rebuild the economy and establish the welfare state. By the end of the century, the teacher's professional responsibility was 'nearer to that of competent employee trying to meet production or efficiency targets, decided nationally and rewarded locally.' (1996:17) Lawn's broader premise is that the period between the 1920s and the 1990s constituted a distinct, modern period in education during which school systems were developed, a trained teaching force was established and foundations were laid for local and national public services of education linked to the expansion of state welfare. Particular concepts of professionalism, public service and progress buttressed this modernist vision, defining teachers' professional identities and controlling their work through a variety of instrumental means. Many of today's teachers were

educated, as pupils and as teachers, within this ideological frame. In the 1990s however, according to Lawn's argument, this project collapsed: the macro, grand narrative of modernising mass education gave way to forces of globalization to be replaced by

...the micro, the local and the institutional report, the minor geographies of space and locality. The school is now the franchised agency, looking entirely into itself, no longer concerned with its place in a system, it is now the system. There is only the micro. The absence of regional or national representations has been replaced by the globalization of vision in a language of improvement and quality shared by education in many countries and with other forms of work. (1996:151)

Teacher professionalism was at this point redefined as a form of competent, multi-skilled, flexible labour practices operating within a regulated curriculum and internal assessment system (1996:112) Andy Hargreaves characterises this movement from modernity - with its emphasis on mass production, expansion, central decision making - to postmodernity - with its emphasis on flexibility, responsiveness, decentralised decision making and compression of time and space - as 'more of a struggle than a transition.' (1995:159) These notions of change and struggle can usefully inform our understanding of the nature of teachers' work in the first decade of a new century.

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