

Teachers' perspectives on factors which affect increasing classroom teacher workload in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Teachers in Scotland are employed to work a 35-hour week. However, research indicates that they have routinely worked above this. This research analysed how many extra hours Scottish teachers worked in one week in March 2024 to provide insights into the activities and drivers that contribute to workload. A sequential mixed methods research design was used for the collection of survey (n = 1, 834) and interview data (n = 40). This paper reports the findings for class-based teachers (n=1,511), who worked 14.82 hours above contracted hours in the focus week. A number of factors contributed to this increased workload and resulted in core duties of planning, preparing resources and marking work being relegated to non-contracted hours. Factors include: an increase in diversity and complexity of pupil need; increasing pupil attendance and behaviour issues; and the use of digital devices by teachers to engage in out of hours school-related tasks.

Keywords: classroom teachers, workload, Scotland, factors

Introduction

Contractually, teachers in Scotland are employed to work a 35-hour week, consisting of 22.5 hours of class contact time, 7.5 hours of preparation and correction and 5 hours of collegiate time (SNCT, 2007). In reality,

however, for nearly two decades research has found that Scottish teachers have routinely worked more than 35 hours (Menter et al., 2006; Ravalier and Walsh 2017, Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), 2023).

The largest teaching union in Scotland, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), commissioned independent research and invited all their members to take part. The research sought to understand the factors that influence the workload of teachers in Scotland, with a specific focus on how teachers use any time they work outside of contracted hours. This paper summarises key aspects of the full research report (Hulme et al., 2024), relating to:

- The number of extra hours (if any) teachers work beyond their contracted hours.
- The main activities that constitute teacher workload within and outside of contracted hours.
- The main reasons for failure to achieve a 35-hour working week.

Literature

Research into teachers' working hours has investigated the factors that influence how they use their time and the changing nature of teachers' work. Recent workload surveys have found that teachers work long hours, with teachers in Wales working over 50 hours on average in a typical week (EWC, 2021) and 41% of Scottish teachers reporting that they work more than 8 hours weekly above contracted hours (EIS, 2023). Furthermore, in English-speaking education systems there is often a considerable gap between the hours teachers work and the time that is 'recognised, regulated or recorded' by employers (Boeskens and Nusche, 2021, p. 10).

How working time is spent is also important. Non-teaching tasks that are perceived as having a less direct educational benefit for learners are more likely to be viewed as contributing to the workload burden (Lawrence et al., 2019). Such tasks take time that might otherwise be dedicated to core duties or invested in professional learning (Jerrim and Sims, 2021; MacGrath et al., 2018). When faced with decisions about how best to use their time, many teachers engage in a form of educational 'triage', having to decide between what constitutes high value core work and what might be considered 'unnecessary' workload (Stacey et al.,

2022, p. 778). Furthermore, such 'unnecessary' workload impinges on the time teachers can dedicate to core responsibilities, such as building relationships and pupil pastoral care (Beck, 2017).

Intensity of workload can also negatively impact teachers' experience of work and job quality. Workload intensification occurs when the responsibilities of teachers expand (Jerrim and Sims, 2021) such that they struggle to meet the multiple and competing demands of the job alongside creating effective 'educative environments with and for their students' (Beck, 2017). Green's (2021) review of UK Skills and Employment Survey (1992–2017) data found that teachers work more intensively than any other profession, with work intensity having risen to 'unprecedented levels' (Green, 2021, p. 298). Pressures that contribute to workload intensification also occur in the classroom – there is recognition of a growing need for teachers to further differentiate instruction to support pupils with increasingly diverse learning needs and behaviour problems. This, in turn, contributes to work-related stress (Elliott et al., 2024) and workload intensification outside of the classroom as teachers engage in compliance-related data collection and reporting and maintaining records related to student welfare and behaviour issues (Stacey, 2022).

Workload intensification is further exacerbated by the rise of the 'platformised' school (Pangrazio et al., 2023; Selwyn 2022). Increasing use of platforms, software and apps that digitise planning, communication, data management and record keeping have made the boundary between school and work life more permeable, and school staff are increasingly seen as available outside of school hours (Reid and Creed, 2021; Selwyn et al., 2017). In response to such expectations, teachers may find it difficult to place limits around working hours and may work into evenings and at weekends as a form of 'dispositional perfectionism' (Hoppe et al., 2023).

Methods

Ethics

It was made clear to participants that, although funded by the EIS, the research was independently conducted by the research team. Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University Ethics Committee

(approval number 2024-22252-17355). The study was guided by the BERA ethical guidelines (BERA, 2024), with information regarding the purpose of the research, right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity and data storage being shared with participants prior to completion of the online diary and interview. Participants were required to actively indicate consent to participate and completed the time use diary anonymously.

With respect to the interviews, participants were notified that no individuals or schools would be named in any outputs from the research. Furthermore, in order to minimise the risk of deductive disclosure (Kaiser, 2009), quotations used in the final report referred only to teacher position and geographical region (rather than local authority). Interview participants were asked to consent to an audio/video recording (according to their preference) and were debriefed on completion of the interview, signposting sources of support.

Sampling Procedure and Description

The study adopted purposive sampling. From the whole population of EIS members, 1,834 teachers, employed within the 32 Scottish local authorities, completed the time use diary. Of these teachers, 971 were employed in primary schools, 791 in secondary schools, 58 in special schools and 14 in early years settings. The participant sample was broadly consistent with the general teaching population of Scotland in terms of gender, ethnicity and mean age (Scottish Government, 2023, p. 17). The number of teachers at each career stage who completed the online time use diary was as follows:

Mainly classroom based:

- main grade 1440
- probationer (newly qualified) teacher 37
- chartered teacher 34

Teachers with dedicated leadership time/roles:

- lead teacher 5
- principal teacher 273
- deputy headteacher 35
- headteacher 10

This sample gave participant representation to contract type (full-time/part-time), career stage, gender, age range taught, local authority, and (where appropriate) subject(s) taught. 40 teachers from 25 local authorities were interviewed in March and April of 2024.

Data Generation & Analysis

A sequential mixed methods research design was used for the collection of data. The first stage of data collection required teachers to complete a pre-coded online time use diary to record work-related activities undertaken in the week beginning 4 March 2024 for the full calendar week. The categories of tasks for the diary were generated with the support of two teacher panels. Their involvement helped the research team to ensure that activities included in the diary reflected as accurately as possible teachers' day-to-day work, thus reducing the risk of partial diary completion by respondents.

An invitation to participate in the research was emailed directly from the EIS, with advance notice on 21 February. In the week beginning 11 March 2024, teacher respondents were asked to indicate in the online diary the percentage of hours they had dedicated in the previous week to a range of activities:

- during face-to-face teaching time.
- outside of lessons (within contracted hours).
- before and after school (outside of contracted hours).
- at the weekend.

The survey generated a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data. Teachers who completed the diary were asked to indicate their willingness to take part in a follow-up video or telephone call semi-structured interview. 550 of the teachers who responded to the online diary indicated a willingness to take part in a follow-up interview. A representative sample of 55 teachers were contacted, and 40 teachers were interviewed. Qualitative analysis involved a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Bingham, 2023). Initial codes were generated in response to the research questions and literature reviewed. Then a small sample of transcripts were independently coded by two researchers who met to discuss and agree any additional codes to be used and to clarify

inconsistencies before agreeing themes and completing analysis of whole data set. This paper uses descriptive and headline summary quantitative data and illustrative examples from the interview transcripts.

Results and discussion

The findings below explore how time was used (both within and outside of contracted hours), by the 1, 511 teachers who were mainly classroom-based (main grade, probationer and chartered teachers). Data are presented as percentages, rather than hours, so as to accurately represent the experiences of full-time and part-time teachers.

How many extra hours (if any) do teachers work beyond their contracted hours?

Classroom-based teachers reported spending 10.99 hours on average, on work-related activity outside of their contracted hours during weekdays, with an additional 3.83 hours spent working at the weekend – a total of 14.82 hours.

What are the main activities that constitute teacher workload within contracted hours?

Within the workload diary, time spent within contracted hours was divided between face-to-face teaching and activities outside of class contact time, but within contracted hours. Within this, classroom-based teachers spent two thirds (67%) of *face-to-face teaching time* on teaching and learning interactions, 22% of time managing minor learning interruptions and significant behavioural disruptions and the remaining time managing resources.

Teachers reported using time *outside of class contact time, but within contracted hours* as follows:

- 58% of time was spent on: *preparation and admin*, with most of this dedicated to planning and preparing lessons; data recording and analysis, writing reports and preparing additional support plans; and marking and giving feedback to pupils.

- 16% of time was spent on *student wellbeing*, which included: communicating with parents, carers, colleagues and external agencies; out of class learning conversations with pupils; and behaviour incident follow-up.
- 26% was spent on *other responsibilities and activities outside of lessons*; the 3 (of 10) activities that teachers reported spending the most time on were emails and social media, meetings (other than with parents) and professional development.

What are the main activities that constitute teacher workload outside of contracted hours?

There were 17 categories for time spent outside of contracted hours in the online diary:

- Preparing resources
- Planning and preparing lessons
- Data recording, input and analysis
- Marking and feedback to pupils
- Writing reports
- Preparing Additional Support Plans
- Preparing for inspection
- Communicating with parents/carers/colleagues/external agencies
- Behaviour incident follow-up
- Mentoring other teachers/supervising student teachers
- Additional/specialist roles
- Professional development
- Formal/informal parents' meetings
- All other meetings
- Email/ School-related social media/ sharing work with parents / carers on VLE platforms
- Other administrative duties
- Other tasks

Teacher responses indicate that the three activities that consume by far the largest time outside of contracted hours are:

- planning and preparing lessons (24%)

- preparing resources (19%)
- marking and feedback for pupils (15%)

What are the main reasons for failure to achieve a 35-hour working week?

The reasons for not achieving the 35-hour working week are complex and context dependant. Whilst classroom-based teachers dedicated on average 58% of their contracted non-teaching time to core duties, 42% of this time was consumed by all other activities, such as report writing, communicating with colleagues/parents, professional development and engaging in activities related to pupil support/behaviour.

Digital availability was seen by the teachers as a contributing factor to increased workload. One secondary teacher reflected on checking emails in the evening and still arriving in school the next morning to 20 or more emails requiring action, whilst another referred to emails 'pinging up in the middle of lessons' and use of a WhatsApp group for evening school-related communication. This presumed out of hours availability of school staff is also recognised by Reid and Creed (2022) and, for the teachers in this study, was further exacerbated by the permeability of the boundary between home and school (Selwyn, 2017) afforded by 'all hours' digital accessibility (Pangrazio et.al., 2023).

Whilst many of the teachers in this study acknowledged that digitisation could support them to meet the increasingly diverse needs of their pupils, it is clear that much of this work is done in teachers' own time. One Primary teacher explained that 50% of his pupils had ASNs, resulting in his planning/resourcing eight differentiated tasks in the evening so as to address the requirements of pupils' Education Support Plan targets. Another Secondary home economics teacher reflected on planning for pupils who were school refusers or internally excluded (pupils in 25–30% of her classes):

We're having to almost double our work ... for pupils that aren't making it into school. I've had to transfer a lot of my resources and spend time putting them into an online format, Google Classroom or Microsoft Teams, to make sure that pupils can complete work at home.

Many of the teachers in this study expressed a commitment to differentiating teaching to meet the needs of their increasingly diverse pupil population. This, however, resulted in an intensification of workload that was further exacerbated by the availability of digital platforms.

Diversity of pupil need also resulted in an increased record keeping burden for the teachers in the study. Teachers reported spending 22% of teaching time managing minor learning interruptions and significant behavioural disruptions, and such incidents often added to the workload outside of the classroom. As one Primary teacher reflected:

I had to deal with a violent incident last week. I telephoned parents, wrote it all down, uploaded the notes. It took an hour and a half. I had no time left to plan for and resource the rest of the week's lessons, so I just had to take that all home and do it at home.

The above echoes the challenges identified by MacGrath et al, (2018) and Lawrence et al. (2019), namely that teachers do not have time to value tasks that are perceived as having less direct educational benefit for learners, such as recording of pupil behaviour. In such cases, their high value core work (Stacey et al., 2022) is, instead, undertaken in their own time.

Because of these multiple competing pressures on contracted non-teaching time, the core duties outlined above were crowded out of teachers' contracted hours to be undertaken in teachers' own time. Teachers reported, both in the interviews and online diary responses, that the competing time pressures outlined above were exacerbated by the need for additional activities/tasks within contracted hours related to:

- An increase in diversity and complexity of pupil need, requiring more personalised support.
- An increase in pupil attendance and behaviour issues.
- An increase in out of hours availability related to the platformisation of schools.

Conclusion

The findings from this study contribute to a long-standing body of research recognising that Scottish teachers routinely work beyond contracted hours, for these classroom-based teachers more than 40% above contracted hours in the focus week. Changes in the diversity of pupil need and the platformisation of schools are contributing to this increased workload. Our findings suggest a need for dialogue within, and beyond, schools to explore systemic and procedural changes that can be implemented to enable teachers to focus on their core responsibilities within contracted hours. The findings may also support teachers to

acknowledge when workload is unreasonable so as to prioritise their own wellbeing, alongside that of their pupils.

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