Reducing teachers' workload or deskilling 'core' work? Analysis of a policy response to teacher workload demands

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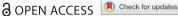Meghan Stacey [a], Mihajla Gavin [b], Scott Fitzgerald [c], Susan McGrath-Champ [d] and Rachel Wilson [b]

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ABSTRACT

Teacher workload is a growing problem internationally. In this article, we analyse an attempt by the state education bureaucracy of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, to address this through the 'Quality Time Program'. Drawing on labour process theory and Carol Bacchi's framework of 'What's the problem represented to be?', we analyse how the Quality Time policy documents conceptualise and aim to address a particular kind of teacher 'workload problem'. We argue the policy defines the 'problem' as one of efficiency. At the same time, through use of the category of 'administration' the policy proposes the reduction of 'core' work, such as lesson planning, representing a potential deskilling of teachers. We argue that policies such as the Quality Time Program reflect the way in which teachers' work is emerging as a site of contestation in the context of workload reduction efforts, requiring ongoing monitoring and analysis.

Introduction

Teacher workload is an international challenge (Boeskens & Nusche, 2021; OECD, 2020). In Australia, workload has been identified as a leading factor in poor attraction and retention in the profession (e.g. Heffernan, Bright, Kim, Longmuir, & Magyar, 2022). Concerns around teacher workload have focused particularly on administration and paperwork burdens (Fitzgerald, McGrath-Champ, Stacey, Wilson, & Gavin, 2019). Emerging policy responses have attempted to address a particular teacher 'workload problem' through 'solutions' focused on simplifying and reducing administrative work. Such policies, however, risk controlling or limiting the central pedagogical labour of teachers through mechanisms which chip away at the 'core' work of teachers. We argue such policies reflect a contemporary example of deskilling teachers' labour when viewed from a labour process theory (LPT) perspective. While LPT has a considerable and controversial history in research on teachers' work (e.g. Ozga & Lawn, 1988), with claims of

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de-professionalisation and deskilling critiqued as overblown (e.g. Smaller, 2015), we argue that moves to reduce teachers' workload provide a new warrant to explore potential des-killing for teachers.

This article analyses a recent policy reform from the NSW Department of Education, the Quality Time Program (QTP), a policy 'committed to freeing up [teacher] time by reducing low-value administrative tasks' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 2). We draw on Carol Bacchi's (2009) 'What is the problem represented to be?' (WPR) tool of policy analysis to work 'backwards' from a proposed solution and understand how the 'problem' is constructed as a particular kind of problem. We argue that the QTP positions concerns about rising teacher work-loads as a problem in part stemming from lesson planning and preparation. This is despite teacher reports of wanting *more time* for such activities, rather than to be less involved (McGrath-Champ, Wilson, Stacey, & Fitzgerald, 2018).

In what follows, we first outline the policy context in which the teacher workload 'problem' has arisen. We discuss the emerging concept of teachers' *core work*, which serves to frame the deskilling hypothesis. We then present contemporary debates on the deskilling of teachers' work through a LPT lens. Following this we explain the analysis approach taken in this article, drawing on Bacchi's WPR framework to analyse and critique the QTP, before concluding with a discussion and articulation of key contributions.

Policy context: teachers' workload and core work

Recent years have seen education reform across countries become imbued with corpora-tist notions of efficiency and effectiveness (Le Feuvre, Hogan, Thompson, & Mockler, 2021). In Australia, teachers have experienced heightened accountability and auditing, a loss of autonomy and erosion of trust, questions over the 'quality' of their practice, and increased workload demands and intensification of work (Fitzgerald et al., 2019). In recent national surveys, Australian teachers report working an average of 50 h per week (Gavin, McGrath-Champ, Wilson, Fitzgerald, & Stacey, 2021). This is framed by international data showing Australian teachers have a high number of face-to-face teaching hours when compared internationally (OECD, 2014), with recent research empirically linking heightened teacher workload to teacher attrition and workforce shortages (Heffernan et al., 2022).

Workload is clearly a problem. But what kind of 'problem' exactly? Research has explored the way in which a focus on 'workload' can encourage a conceptualisation of work that is about *quantum* of hours more than the *nature or constitution* of those hours. Apple's (2004) 'intensification thesis', for instance, argues that understanding the complexity of teachers' work is about more than workload, but also about intersecting accountability demands, and a lack of support and resourcing. More recently, Creagh, Thompson, Mockler, Stacey, and Hogan (2023) have argued that positioning workload within an overall environment of intensification sidelines its importance. As such, they call to disentangle workload from work intensity, and understand these as related but dis-tinct phenomena, indicating a need to better understand and respond to the particularity of teachers' work rather than just the volume of it.

This leads us to the question of what kinds of labour constitute teachers' core work: the work that should be the primary focus of teachers day-to-day. Use of the term 'core' work has become common in recent years, used by organisations ranging from unions (e.g. NSW Teachers' Federation, 2021), to Australian governments (Education Ministers

Meeting, 2022), to the OECD (2022). This is interesting to us for two reasons. First, we appreciate the utility of this concept as a mechanism through which the professional boundaries of teachers' work may be defended by organisations like unions, especially when faced with the kind of 'admin creep' that workload reduction policies are purportedly responding to. Yet, second, the emergence and wide-ranging use of this term is evidence that teachers' work is today a site of considerable contestation. This concept of 'core work' is important, because different definitions of what constitutes teachers' core work can have considerable implications, with different kinds of work variously emphasised or marginalised. In Queensland, for example, 'curriculum' has been positioned as the province of the state government with schools simply required to 'implement' this through the 'Curriculum into the Classroom' initiative (Queensland Government, 2022). Within this context, we explore how teachers' work is understood and defined in one teacher workload policy suite, the QTP in NSW public schools, identifying the 'problems' and 'solutions' constructed within these documents and their implications.

Labour process theory (LPT), deskilling, and teachers' work

LPT, concerned with the relationships and forms of organisation that are involved at the point of production, enables us to understand how teachers' work is organised, how power and control is exercised, and its effect (Pitts, 2022; Smyth, 2001). Braverman's (1974) foundational analysis of labour processes, drawing on Marx's insights about capitalist production, asserted that managerial control strategies arose from the competitive impetus to increase labour's productivity and reduce the 'indeterminacy of labour' (the difference between the value paid for the *capacity* to work compared to the actual work undertaken and the value produced). This could be achieved through a more detailed division of labour and the separation of conception (management) from execution (1974, p. 114). Such management control strategies were fully expounded in Taylorism, which proposed organising work such that 'low skill' elements of roles were stripped and allocated to less skilled (and cheaper) labour. By taking roles apart, Taylorism established a dynamic of deskilling and a challenge to professional autonomy.

Early critical contributions from a labour process perspective analysed deskilling of teachers' work and technical forms of control which separate conception from execution. Examples include enforcement of a prescriptive, standardised curriculum, the use of pre-packaged 'teacher proof' curriculum materials, standardised assessment, commercial textbooks, and scripted lesson plans (Connell, 2013; Hall, 2004; Reid, 2003; Smyth, 2001). However, we are mindful of competing views which critique deskilling (e.g. Connell, 2009) and de-professionalisation narratives (see Smaller, 2015). While some argue that adopting a literal interpretation of Braverman's deskilling hypothesis and applying this to teachers is flawed (Ozga & Lawn, 1988), and others claim that deskilling is not as widespread in teaching due to a parallel *re*-skilling taking place (Connell, 2013; Smaller, 2015), we emphasise a renewed importance in understanding deskilling today, as it assists in identifying shifting representations of teachers' core work.

Indeed, in assessing the process of change in skills and discretion, it needs to be emphasised that teaching work, as with other forms of work, is subject to complex divisions of labour (Fitzgerald, Rainnie, & Burgess, 2013). For example, this includes a division of labour between those engaged in 'teaching work' and non-teaching (support) work. As

an instance of this, in the 1990s, Australian 'educationist' Dean Ashenden recommended bringing in more teaching assistants to undertake 'low skill' work so as to reduce work time pressures and allow teachers to 'concentrate on high-level educational work' (cited in Robertson, 1996). This situation is also evident in the UK where 'workforce remodelling' created a small pool of highly paid and trained teachers, supported by an 'army' of non-teaching labour (Stevenson, 2007). Policy responses which delineate what is 'in' and 'out' of teaching work can thus be high-stakes, with repercussions for how the workforce may be shaped and re-shaped in the future.

Policy analysis approach

We apply Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach to analysing the QTP policy documents. According to Bacchi, policy documents serve to create or give shape to policy problems. Drawing on Foucault, this approach requires one to identify 'the different kinds of thinking associated with particular approaches to government' (Bacchi, 2009, p. 26). Policies thus contain particular 'problematisations' and require analysis of the conditions and assumptions under which a certain 'problem' is constructed. Furthermore, the 'solutions' proposed in a policy are based on an active construction of a particular kind of 'problem' to be addressed.

The task of WPR analysis is therefore to read policy with an eye to discerning how a 'problem' is represented, examining the underlying assumptions and conceptual framings, and to thereby scrutinise the problem representation. This task is facilitated through the following questions:

1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this 'problem' representation?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted, and replaced? (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2)

In analysing the QTP, we combine the 'Quality Time Action Plan' (QTAP) (NSW DOE, 2021) and 'Mid-Year Update' (MYU) (McGrath-Champ, Gavin, Stacey, & Wilson, 2022) documents. With a change of state government in March 2023, the new administration has proposed an augmented version of the initiative, which will seek to –

> … identify new areas that can be eradicated, simplified or streamlined to reduce workload, save time for our school staff and contribute to the efficient and effective running of schools across the state. (NSW DOE, 2023, p. 64)

This suggests that the QTAP and MYU documents, introduced under the previous administration, make an appropriate initial set for analysis. In what follows, we use the acronym 'QTP' to refer to the program overall, and the 'QTAP' and 'MYU' acronyms when commenting on a specific document. Each of Bacchi's questions were attended to via repeated

readings of the documents and relevant media, and subsequent discussion among the research team to refine findings. Below, we address each question in three sections. First, exploring the problem representation (Question 1); second, exploring assumptions, silences and effects (Questions 2, 4 and 5); and third, exploring emergence, dissemination and disruption (Questions 3 and 6).

Problem representation

The 'problem' that the QTAP presents is that there is currently too much 'low-value administrative work that is overly burdensome' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 2) being done in schools. In response, the QTP sets a target of a 20% reduction in 'low-value' administrative tasks. The problem is therefore presented as not administration *in and of itself*; indeed, the QTAP begins with a defence of administrative work, stating explicitly that 'effective teaching and learning cannot occur without the support of administrative processes' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 2). Instead, the problem is with duplication and inefficiency of systems, citing a need for streamlining, centralisation, attention to revising 'business as usual' practices, and in some instances, a reduction in new initiatives. This action is needed so that teachers may focus on 'essential work'.

Six 'opportunity areas' for protecting teachers' 'quality time' are outlined. The opportunity areas and problem representations are:

- *Curriculum resources and support*: there is a need to move 'from duplicating effort to accessible, high-quality resources' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 8). The MYU purports to address this through creating a centralised 'Universal Resources Hub', stating that 'teachers told us that curriculum resources and support was their most important priority area' (NSW DOE, 2022, p. 5). The QTAP purports that '[s]earching for, verifying and adapting quality resources … can take teachers significant time' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 11), implying that this time is not well spent, and also that to date teachers may not have been using 'quality' resources.
- *Assessment and reporting*: assessment is presented as needing to move from 'inefficiency and double-handling to efficient and effective assessment and reporting processes', by using 'a range of marking techniques and different types of assessment' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 9). This suggests it is current forms of school-level assessment that are the issue, rather than volume of assessment. Meanwhile, 'reporting' processes will be 'streamlined', again emphasising efficiency.
- *Accreditation*: 'multiple processes' will similarly become 'streamlined processes', removing 'duplication' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 10), but not removing or reducing accreditation requirements themselves.
- *Processes and support services*: 'confusing, uncoordinated changes' are defined as a problem, with the 'solution' being 'clear communication and change management' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 11). Again, change itself is not the issue but the way in which it is managed. More specialist and support staff are, however, needed to perform duties that do not require teaching expertise (NSW DOE, 2021).
- *Extracurricular activities:* 'lengthy processes' for organising extracurricular activities for students will be replaced with 'meaningful risk management and better guidance'

(NSW DOE, 2021, p. 12). The 'problem' with teachers' time on extra-curricular work is thus positioned as an administrative one.

- *Data collection and analysis*: 'disjointed and inefficient collection' of data will move to 'automation and single-source data' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 13). While 'collection and analysis of data is important to ensure our students receive the appropriate and tailored levels of support', schools have found this process 'time-consuming' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 13). The problem therefore is not the volume of data being collected, or the type of data, but the digital infrastructure surrounding it.

In analysing these documents, the 'problem' of the QTP can therefore be understood as primarily a need to improve efficiency of processes, often those of the Department itself, which are implied as being inefficient and cumbersome (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 17). While there is some discussion of removal of administrative requirements especially in the later MYU, this is secondary to the overall intention to simplify and streamline existing requirements. In addition, the Department will 'carefully consider the impacts of any new initiatives that schools may be asked to engage with or implement' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 9) and ensure 'that sufficient support for implementation is provided' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 9). Implicit within this problem representation is that it is not departmental requirements or expectations of teachers that are of concern, but rather, how these expectations are managed and communicated. A further problematisation also arises here: that teachers have not been spending their time in ways that are most beneficial for students. Changes directed at improving the efficiency of particular processes will enable this – including those related to core teaching work, based on particular assumptions around the nature of this work, and with particular effects, which we explore further below.

Assumptions, silences and effects

As noted above, there is a clearly stated conceptual logic in the QTP that administrative work is essential for 'effective' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 2) teaching and learning. However, while administrative work is seen as necessary – reflecting the nature of the policy as part of institutionalised education – 'not all administrative tasks and practices are made equal' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 2), with the QTP establishing a binary between 'high-value' and 'low-value' administrative work. This reflects a further assumption that demarcating which administrative work is 'high' or 'low' 'value' is straightforward, and silences questions around who such work is valuable *to* and *for*. For example, assessment is assumed to be valuable, but the efficiency with which assessment is undertaken, rather than, for instance, the overall amount of such assessment, is deemed the 'problem'. It is argued that 'using a range of marking techniques and different types of assessments … [will] reduce the time teachers spend on marking' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 9), suggesting that written responses might be swapped for responses that can be more quickly graded. Relevant here is Hall's (2004) observation that standardised assessment or technicist processes can be manifestations of deskilling in the teaching labour process. We also note that similar discursive constructions around 'low-value' work are evident in federal policy documents, such as the report of the Review of the National School Reform Agreement (Productivity Commission, 2022), suggesting that such binaries are

not limited to the QTP but may be part of a broader policy narrative around redefining teachers' work.

Indeed, we argue that the way in which administrative work is discursively positioned is central to this redefinition. While 'administrative processes and practices' are not explicitly defined in these policy documents (an important silence), they seem to be implicitly understood as ranging across most areas of teaching beyond classroom settings. For instance, administrative work is positioned as a considerable component of assessment, as noted above; as well as work like differentiation, and lesson planning. The release of the QTAP was supported by a departmental media release with the education minister quoted as saying that processes of lesson planning, marking and reporting, while 'core' to teachers' work, could nevertheless be made 'smarter, more intuitive and high-value rather than cumbersome, repetitive and wasteful' (NSW Liberal, 2021). The use of the word 'core' in this media release is interesting; it is not used in the QTAP and MYU documents themselves, but its use in the media release indicates its discursive power within the contested terrain of teachers' work, providing a recognition of the importance of such work, on the one hand, whilst simultaneously positioning it as an area for reduction, on the other. That is to say, given that the 'problem' of the policy (broadly construed) is 'admin', and all of these areas are linked to 'admin', a discursive effect is that all of these areas are therefore up for reduction, thus opening up the potential for a subjectification effect of deskilling. This is crucial to monitor because the work of assessment, differentiation and planning involves far more than 'administering', that is, organising and delivering; it is also intellectual work requiring interpretation and creation (Tomlinson, 2014), and in which conception and execution are not easily separable.

Positioning work like assessment, differentiation and planning as 'administration', we argue – even 'high-value' administration (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 2) – thereby downplays its intellectual complexity. This conceptual logic within the policy also engenders a potential lived effect for teachers. Despite the centralised resources repository ('Universal Resources Hub') being intended to save teachers' time, it is possible that having *more* resources may increase demands on teachers' time in terms of customising and differentiating materials for specific student cohorts (Wilson, Sears, Gavin, & McGrath-Champ, 2022). While the policy states that providing resources that are 'easily accessible, searchable and adaptable' will 'mak[e] it easier to personalise and differentiate learning to the specific needs of students' because of resources that are 'designed to be easily adaptable' (NSW DOE, 2021, p. 11), it arguably overlooks the time required of teachers in customisation and differentiation and undervalues the complexity of this task. This is made discursively possible through the positioning of differentiation and planning as largely administrative, rather than complex intellectual work.

Relatedly, there is a general assumption in the policy around the nature of time in teaching, as measurable and experienced consistently throughout the day, by all teachers across all schools. While the policy purports to save teachers a certain quantum of hours (further confirmed in the Annual Report which states a saving of 50 h for teachers and over 200 h for principals, across areas including curriculum, accreditation and budgeting (NSW DOE, 2023)), it is arguably reductive in suggesting that teachers' 'time' can be easily quantified and measured. This echoes Connell's (2009) and Thompson et al.'s (2023) arguments that it is difficult to divide teaching work into discrete, identifiable parts, a prerequisite for such calculations. While the policy acknowledges that 'minutes saved' is only

one measure and a more 'comprehensive approach' will be used in the future (NSW DOE, 2022, p. 4), it is silent on such approach. A further silence that follows from this conceptualisation of all time as equal is the question of whether saving time is always a 'good thing'. We would argue that this depends on *where* time is being saved. If the intent of time-saving is to enhance 'efficiency', this may not address the root cause of shifts in workload and demands, especially if teachers are losing time on work they see as core to their sense of professional identity.

This leads us to what we see as the most important potential effect of the policy: a subjectification effect on what it means to teach and be a teacher. The overriding message from the QTP is that performative accountability requirements will be maintained, but simply made more efficient. At the same time, much of the creative, intellectual work of teaching – for example, long-form assessment and lesson planning, and the creative elements of differentiation that go beyond 'adapting' resources – are being set up as areas for reduction in the day-to-day work of teachers. This is despite teachers' desires for *more time* to do work they value; McGrath-Champ et al.'s survey of over 18,000 NSW teachers in 2018 resulted in respondents ranking 'reducing face-to-face teaching time for teachers, executives and teaching principals to increase collaboration on planning, programming, assessing and reporting' as the number one workload strategy they would like to see introduced, with 'planning and preparation of lessons' identified as the work teachers value most highly. Furthermore, when asked which activities they would like 'more time and resources' for, 'developing new units of work and/or teaching programs' and 'differentiating the curriculum to meet the needs of students' were both ranked highly (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018). We therefore argue that the provision of the centralised 'Universal Resources Hub' has a potential subjectification effect, reshaping what it means to be a teacher by placing lesson planning in the category of administration, and thereby a candidate for outsourcing.

Emergence, dissemination and disruption

In the preceding analysis, we have argued that the QTP constructs the teacher workload 'problem', and 'admin' problem more specifically, as one of efficiency, with a consequent deskilling of teachers' work outside of the classroom. In this section, we explore the context in which the QTP was established and map how the category of 'administration' has shifted over time so as to redefine what is considered core in teachers' work. We also discuss possibilities for how this problematisation of teachers' work and workload might be disrupted, and alternative ways forward.

Attention to teachers' administrative workload in Australia has grown in the last decade primarily via union-affiliated workload surveys (see Gavin et al., 2021). In NSW, the 2018 workload study of over 18,000 teachers commissioned by the NSW Teachers' Federation, mentioned above, reported teachers working 'very long working hours' and engaging in high levels of administrative work which they felt was distracting from a focus on teaching and learning (McGrath-Champ et al., 2018). These findings sparked immediate action from the Department of Education. Reducing teachers' administrative workload became one of the education minister's 'highest priorities' (McGrath-Champ et al., 2022). A series of highly-coordinated teacher strikes on the issue of pay and workload were then held to drive deeper government action, alongside a flagship inquiry

report commissioned by the union (Gallop, Kavanagh, & Lee, 2020), which leaned heavily on the study findings. A further factor was the removal of the *Local Schools, Local Decisions (LSLD)* policy, in place from 2012 to 2020, following a government audit which found duplication and inefficiencies in accountability requirements, despite the policy's stated intention to reduce 'red tape' for schools (Gavin & Stacey, 2022).

These factors, alongside emerging concerns of a national teacher shortage in Australia and its association with issues of workload (Heffernan et al., 2022), have likely contributed to the advent and shape of the QTP, which seeks to address teacher administrative workload, but from the perspective of the education bureaucracy, whose values and needs may not align directly with the workload concerns of teachers. This tension, between the Department's own initiatives and calls for reduction in departmental requirements of teachers, may to a degree explain the uneasy position of the QTP in trying to 'streamline', but not considerably reduce, administrative work. The backtracking on *LSLD* may also, to an extent, explain the emphasis in the QTP on centralisation, such as via the Universal Resources Hub.

Indeed, the Universal Resources Hub appears to have been a particularly key element, emphasised in the media surrounding the QTP. For instance, a NSW Government (2022) media release entitled 'Number one tax on teachers' time solved', further positioned centralised lesson plans as the 'solution' to the 'admin problem'. This media release also, intriguingly, drew on a Grattan Institute report (Australian public policy think-tank), which was released around the same time and which similarly recommended the provision of centralised lesson planning resources for teachers as a solution to the 'lesson lottery' in schools (Hunter, Haywood, & Parkinson, 2022a). While the Grattan study noted that 98% of surveyed teachers reported they did not have enough time to prepare for effective teaching (Hunter, Sonnemann, & Joiner, 2022b, p. 13), we note that 'too few blocks of uninterrupted thinking time for planning' (Hunter et al., 2022b, p. 15) was the top-rated 'issue' for respondents in this study (73%), with a lack of 'common, high-quality lesson plans' being rated an 'issue' for less than half (44%) (Hunter et al., 2022b). This makes it curious that the provision of lesson plan resources was positioned as the primary 'solution' to the teacher 'workload problem'. Potentially underlying this shift in problematisation – from a concern with mandated box-ticking to a concern with teachers' lesson preparation – we note that the analysis we have presented in this article reflects enduring questioning of teachers' professionalism, political mistrust of teachers and a perceived imperative to control teachers' labour. With public discourse describing the provision of centralised lesson plans as saving students from a 'lesson lottery' (Hunter et al., 2022a), there is an apparent assumption that teachers are the 'problem' in education, thus 'teacher-proofing' of resources and materials is needed to create a standardised, quality learning experience for students (Connell, 2009; Smyth, 2001).

It is unequivocal that teachers are experiencing workload pressure (Gavin et al., 2021; Heffernan et al., 2022). However, there are a range of ways in which this 'problem' can be conceptualised. In the QTP, it is conceptualised as primarily one of efficiency, which has led to proposed solutions which seek to 'streamline' requirements and which may have the effect of deskilling teachers' work. But it is possible to disrupt this problematisation and propose alternative ways forward. The 'problem' of teacher workload could, for example, be reframed as one in which the subjective experience of teaching work and

the expertise this involves has been insufficiently recognised and supported. 'Solutions' to this version of the problem may include policies that provide additional, ongoing funded release time for planning and preparation, and a greater openness to the removal of administrative requirements rather than just their 'streamlining'. Indeed, this is something that the state teacher's union has already demonstrated a desire to pursue (e.g. Flohm, 2022). In disrupting how teacher workload is problematised by policymakers and how this might be replaced, unions will likely continue to have a central role to play; as Jacoby and Nitta (2012) have shown, industrial responses remain key to the preservation of teachers' professional authority. However, we would argue that teachers' work and working conditions cannot only be seen as an industrial issue that needs to be 'responded to'; rather, the exercise of professional voice by teachers should be considered crucial to defining the terms of the profession from the outset (Stevenson, 2007).

Concluding discussion

Teachers, internationally, are under heightened work pressures at least partly incurred through rising administrative and paperwork burdens over the last decade (Gavin et al., 2021; Heffernan et al., 2022). That workload is identified as a key 'problem' needing a policy 'solution', as reflected in the QTP, is an important step forward to addressing widespread concerns about workload and work intensification. However, defining the issue of workload is difficult (e.g. Creagh et al., 2023), and simplistic conceptualisations can not only fail to address it effectively, but may also have perverse effects in substantively redefining what it is to be a teacher. The 'solutions' presented in the QTP are an example of this, focusing on efficiency and streamlining, through which a potential deskilling of teachers is ushered in by categorising all work outside of face-to-face teaching as at least partly 'administrative'. In particular, proposals for a more centralised approach to lesson planning arguably undermine and overlook the complexity of lesson preparation activities, further dividing the conception of work from its execution (Braverman, 1974). This is instead of focusing on providing teachers with *more time* to engage in valued lesson preparation and planning, as desired by teachers (e.g. McGrath-Champ et al., 2018).

Whether the potential deskilling indicated by the policy is an intentional new iteration of managerialism and corporatism in public services, or a by-product of workload problem representation and genuine effort to reduce workload, is not clear. Either way, our analysis in this article suggests implications for policy. In particular, the need for a more nuanced approach to workload and work intensification based on robust consultation processes which include teachers' professional voices in both the design of work, as well as solutions to problems which arise in this work. With forms of the teacher 'workload problem' evident around the globe, these implications are not limited to NSW or Australia. Indeed, responding effectively to workload has proven to be an ongoing concern in, for example, the UK (Churches & Fitzpatrick, 2023; Stevenson, 2007), and is also becoming a key focus of the OECD (2020; Boeskens & Nusche, 2021).

Analyses such as the one we have presented in this article are therefore needed, as policy responses to teacher workload become vehicles for the (re)definition of teachers' 'core work'. This is an important contribution because workload reduction policy, at first glance appearing to support teachers' working conditions, is perhaps an unexpected site in which to identify deskilling effects. Yet as we have shown, careful attention to how

terms are used and defined (or not) in workload response policies can reveal subtle differences in problematisation which may have significant impacts for the experience and outcomes of work. Analysis tools, such as WPR, thus provide crucial insight for diagnosing contemporary problems facing teachers, assessing effects, and considering alternatives. Additionally, our analysis reveals considerable conceptual benefits in combining such framing with a labour process lens. How 'work' is experienced and managed is an ongoing critical conversation, and LPT may therefore prove a productive companion to studies employing WPR across a range of industries today.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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