



Work Life Balance and Wellbeing, and the Un/changing Nature of Teachers' Work

Kay Whitehead[†]

Flinders University

I begin this article by exploring the relationship between teachers' work and a condition called "neurasthenia" or "strain" in the early twentieth century. In particular, I focus on debates about "strain" at a South Australian Royal Commission on Education in 1911-1912. Then I turn to two contemporary policy documents to do with teachers' work in South Australia. The current focus is on work life balance and teacher wellbeing, these being the flipside of strain. I argue that these modern foci do little to address the structural conditions of teachers' work which have barely changed over the past century.

Introduction

In recent years, much educational research has assumed that contemporary teachers' work is undergoing significant transformation. Studies nominate the rapid introduction of ICTs, curriculum and assessment practices, and various regulatory frameworks, for example, as new factors affecting teachers' work at all stages of their careers. Using the changing nature of teachers' work as the context, various researchers have investigated teachers' stress and burnout, these terms dating from the 1970s. For example, Sharplin, O'Neil and Chapman focus on beginning teachers' stress and coping strategies, while Pillay, Goddard and Wilss' study investigated relationships between burnout and competence in midcareer and veteran teachers. Other researchers have concentrated on the reverse of stress, namely teacher wellbeing, along with work life balance. Concerned about attrition rates among early career teachers, McCallum and Price have worked with pre-service teachers to develop strategies to enhance their wellbeing. For Bubb and Earley, the issues are wellbeing and work life balance among teachers and school leaders. They argue

[†] Address for correspondence: Professor Kay Whitehead, School of Education, Flinders University, GPO Box 2100, Adelaide 5001, South Australia. Email: Kay.Whitehead@flinders.edu.au.

that teachers and leaders wellbeing is crucial to constructing effective schools whereas Kelly and Colquhoun are more concerned with understanding why teacher wellbeing is being linked so closely to school effectiveness at this point in time.

Looking back, historian Kate Rousmaniere claims that there has always been “a steady pulse of concern about the ability and disability of teachers to do their work, a constant suspicion that there is something not completely normal about the person sitting at the teacher’s desk”. Teacher stress has long been an issue for individuals and school systems across Western countries. These included Canada, the United States, Russia and Mexico as well as Australia. However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the phenomenon was variously known as “neurasthenia”, “strain” and “brain fag”. The term “neurasthenia” was coined by American George Beard in the mid-nineteenth century and was soon known internationally. Although neurasthenia is no longer a universally recognised medical diagnosis, some of the prevalent myths about it have been perpetuated into contemporary times.

In the first section of this article, I locate Australia and teachers in a discussion of “neurasthenia”, its causes and distribution across populations, countries and occupations. The next sections focus on debates about “strain” at a South Australian Royal Commission on Education in 1911-1912. In this forum, witnesses from the education department and the teachers union struggled to define how much strain was “normal” in teachers’ work, and identify the prevalence and causes of “undue strain”. Some attributed undue strain to the individual characteristics of teachers while others upheld their conditions of labour as the main cause. In the latter sections of the article I turn to the contemporary world and explore two recent policy documents to do with teachers’ work in South Australia. They are *Time for Teaching Time for Leading*, which was jointly produced by the education department and teachers union in 2011, and the department’s enterprise bargaining “Offer” to the union in 2012. Neurasthenia, strain and brain fag are no longer part of the lexicon but understandings about the phenomenon continue into contemporary times and teachers continue to struggle with their work. The current focus, however, is on work life balance and teacher wellbeing, these being the flipside of strain. I argue that

these modern foci do little to address the structural conditions of teachers' work which have barely changed over the past century.

Neurasthenia: “more frequent at the desk”

According to George Beard, neurasthenia was defined as a “lack of nerve force”.¹ Its core features were “physical and mental fatigue and muscle weakness”.² Beard differentiated neurasthenia or nervousness from hysteria but stated that people could suffer from both conditions.

To compress all in one sentence; nervousness is a physical not a mental state and its phenomena do not come from emotional excess or excitability or from organic disease but from nervous debility and irritability.³

The diagnosis of neurasthenia was underpinned by the assumption that individuals had a fixed amount of “nerve force” or nervous energy, which became depleted when too many demands were placed upon it.⁴ As for the causes of neurasthenia, Beard identified the stresses and anxieties of modern life. These included the telephone, telegraph, railways, steam power, increased competition for business and the mass media.⁵ However, modern life and its afflictions were unevenly distributed across countries, populations and occupations.

Firstly, Beard propagated his view that the United States was the most modern, civilized society in the world and thus Americans were more prone to neurasthenia. He developed a mathematical formula to make his point.

The philosophy of the causation of American nervousness may be expressed in Algebraic formula as follows: civilization in general + American civilization in particular (young and rapidly growing

¹ G. Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1881), 5.

² Taylor, “Death of Neurasthenia,” 550.

³ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 17.

⁴ N. Lesko, *Act Your Age! A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001), 29.

⁵ M. Gijswijt-Hofstra, “Introduction: Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War” in *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War*, ed. M. Gijswijt-Hofstra and R. Porter (Amsterdam –New York: Editions Rodopi B. V., 2001), 11.

nation, with civil, religious and social liberty) + exhausting climate ... + the nervous diathesis ... + overwork or over worry, or excessive indulgence of appetites or passions = an attack of neurasthenia or nervous exhaustion.⁶

In elaborating this equation, Beard had no qualms with comparing cities, countries, and continents including Europe as it “becomes Americanized” along a range of axes.⁷ However, British medical experts had diagnosed a similar “English malady” in the 1730s and thus there was some scepticism about Beard’s work. Neurasthenia was embraced in Germany, and in the Netherlands and France to a lesser extent.⁸ Of particular interest are Beard’s understandings of modern civilization in Australia.

On the other side of the world, in Australia and New Zealand, the new settlements are passing – more slowly, and in a minor degree though somewhat similar to the United States. There is less mental activity in those regions; there is less of fury and drive ... but yet, as travelers aver, there is a nervousness of manner and in the style of living and doing, that in many ways suggests America.⁹

Notwithstanding Beard’s assessment, in 1908 a medical writer claimed that neurasthenia “accounted for forty per cent of all nervous disorders treated in Australia’s major hospitals”.¹⁰

Secondly, Beard asserted that neurasthenia only affected some parts of the population, namely “the civilized, refined and educated, rather than the barbarous and low born and untrained – women rather than men”.¹¹ Neurasthenia rapidly came to be associated with middle and upper class white people, not the least because Beard’s patients “were exclusively drawn from higher social groups”.¹² This myth has been perpetuated into contemporary times. However, Taylor’s study of the annual reports of Queen Square Hospital in London, which only treated poor people, shows that the diagnosis of neurasthenia was used by doctors at this hospital between the

⁶ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 176.

⁷ *Ibid*, 57.

⁸ Gijswijt-Hofstra, “Introduction,” 1-30.

⁹ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 192.

¹⁰ D. Walker, “Modern Nerves, Nervous Moderns: Notes on Male Neurasthenia,” *Australian Cultural History* 6 (1987): 59.

¹¹ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 26.

¹² Taylor, “Death of Neurasthenia,” 550.

1890s and 1930s.¹³ As for the gender profile of neurasthenia, there was no consensus. An eminent Dutch advocate “claimed that neurasthenia was more common among men than women, because men, excepting labourers, were more exposed to the strains of modern life”.¹⁴ Showalter argues that neurasthenia was a predominantly upper middle class female malady, but Taylor points out that working class men constituted thirty-three per cent to fifty per cent of cases at Queen Square Hospital.¹⁵ Nevertheless, neurasthenia was constructed as “the fashionable disease”.¹⁶ Well-known women such as Virginia Woolf were diagnosed with neurasthenia, thereby contributing to its association with well-educated middle class women. Showalter argues that it was a reaction to their restricted lives: “the nervous women of the fin de siècle were ravenous for a fuller life than their society offered them, famished for the freedom to act and to make real choices”.¹⁷ If this be the case, then women teachers should never have suffered from neurasthenia as their working lives were full to the point of overflowing.

Entwined with neurasthenia’s associations with particular countries and populations, was the portrayal of the disease as the property of brain workers rather than manual labourers. Beard claimed that neurasthenia was “oftener met with in cities than in the country, is more marked and more frequent at the desk, the pulpit and in the counting room than in the shop or on the farm”.¹⁸ In Australia, the same medical writer who commented on the prevalence of neurasthenia also stated that “business and professional men, journalists and teachers were among the most vulnerable group; a classification that was echoed in the warnings against ‘brain fag’”.¹⁹ The introduction of mass compulsory elementary schooling and school systems in the late nineteenth century and then secondary schooling in the early twentieth century meant that teachers were

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gijswijt-Hofstra, “Introduction,” 15.

¹⁵ E. Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985); Taylor, “Death of Neurasthenia,” 550.

¹⁶ Taylor, “Death of Neurasthenia,” 550.

¹⁷ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 144.

¹⁸ Beard, *American Nervousness*, 26.

¹⁹ Walker, “Modern Nerves,” 60.

probably the largest group of brain workers in so-called modern civilized societies, and the majority of teachers were women. The potential risk of neurasthenia in this occupation was heightened by its gender profile. In 1922, J.S. Hart presented “An investigation of sickness data of public elementary school teachers in London, 1904-1919” to the Royal Statistical Society. He found that “pulmonary, bronchial and throat complaints” were the most common reasons for absence, followed by “nervous and mental complaints” which included neurasthenia.²⁰ Nervous and mental complaints accounted for sixteen per cent of total illnesses. Reflecting its longstanding tradition of married women teachers, London’s teaching workforce comprised thirty per cent men, fifty per cent single women and twenty per cent married women.²¹ Hart found that “men are absent least and married women most” but single women teachers’ illness “frequently takes the form of neurasthenia or psycho-neurosis”.²² However, just as there was no consensus regarding the distribution of neurasthenia across countries and populations, its relative impact on occupations was also unclear. In 1931 the *American Review of Educational Research* summarized several studies in “Chapter XI: “Health of the Teacher”. One set of “findings from all over the world” concluded that teachers were “remarkably healthy ... even neurasthenia and other nervous disturbances do not occur any more often among teachers than among those in other occupations, who deal with people”.²³ Other studies found that “disabling sickness” among teachers was greater than equivalent occupations. Nevertheless, the evidence was inconclusive in this report, and even more so when the same issues were canvassed at the 1911-1912 Royal Commission on Education in South Australia.

²⁰ J. Hart, “An Investigation of Sickness Data of Public Elementary Teachers in London, 1904-1919,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 85, no. 3 (1922): 351.

²¹ D. Copelman, *London’s Women Teachers: Gender, Class and Feminism 1870-1930* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²² Hart, “An Investigation of Sickness Data,” 385.

²³ Anon, “Chapter XI: “Health of the Teacher,” *Review of Educational Research* 1 (1931): 113.

“The strain of the work is unduly severe”

In South Australia, legislation for mass compulsory schooling had been enacted in 1875, and this also entailed the creation of a centralized, bureaucratic Education Department to manage both rural and urban schools. About 1,700 teachers were employed in government schools, seventy-four per cent of whom were women.²⁴ The Director, Alfred Williams, was a well-respected, progressive educator who had worked his way up the career ladder from pupil teacher to the pinnacle of the profession.²⁵ Over the previous five years he had attempted to improve teachers' working conditions, especially by reducing class sizes, but teacher shortages stymied this strategy. Beginning in 1911, the Royal Commission on Education investigated an extensive range of issues and the mostly male witnesses gave evidence to seven parliamentarians, all male.²⁶

Under the Presidency of Victor Pavia, the South Australian Public School Teachers Union (SAPTU) ascertained teachers' perspectives of their working conditions by means of a survey and prepared “A statement of sentiments and opinions of teachers in the service of the South Australian Education Department”. The opening paragraph claimed that the crux of the problem was that “the conditions under which they work and by which they are surrounded involve considerable strain”.²⁷ Furthermore, “ninety-eight per cent of the replies asserted that the strain of the work is unduly severe – severe even to breaking point”. These points were followed by a detailed account of the conditions that were causing undue strain. Firstly, there was the overloaded curriculum which took the form of too many subjects and too much material in each subject. Classes were too large and all too often no staff were employed to replace absent teachers. The “overpromotion of children” was an additional issue. In other words, class teachers were dealing with children who did not match the norms for their

²⁴ “Annual Report of the Director of Education 1910,” *South Australian Parliamentary Papers 1911*, no. 44, 37.

²⁵ C. Thiele, *Grains of Mustard Seed* (Adelaide: Education Department, South Australia, 1975), 94.

²⁶ “Third Progress Report, Royal Commission on Education,” *South Australian Parliamentary Papers 1912*, no. 27, 1-225.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

age in an age-graded system of schooling. Then there was the amount of after-hours preparation, which was “a great encroachment on that necessary leisure without which health and fitness for work must suffer”. The inconsistent standards of inspection and examination, and policy change, combined with a lack of trust in teachers’ judgments and blocked career paths, also contributed to undue strain.²⁸

SAPTU’s submission was tabled in January 1912 and Pavia was called to give evidence in April. When asked whether teachers were “satisfied with their present conditions of employment” he responded in the negative and continued:

I do not like to use the word dissatisfaction by itself. I prefer it to be coupled with “strain”. There are many teachers who, though not dissatisfied, suffer strain, and these we are trying to help as well as those who complain. So many love their work but are not able to carry it out happily or healthily under existing conditions.²⁹

Pavia outlined his sixty hour working week as a headmaster, beginning at 8.15 am each day and continuing to 5pm, “with practically no recess or dinner time. Then there is always the night work”. Teachers’ worked similar hours, “eating [their lunch] with one hand and correcting the homework or other work with the other”, undertaking yard duty, and dealing with

kept in children till quarter to 5 before going home mostly jaded and tired with practically no inclination for recreation save bed. The teacher, too, has to prepare for the work the next day. The hours are too long for this strenuous, nerve-racking, health-reducing life”.³⁰

Next, Pavia produced “facts” from the Education Department’s *Education Gazette* which showed a significant increase in the number of absences through illness in the previous three years.

When asked “if the strain on the teaching staff is greater than the strain on everyone occupying a responsible position demanding brain work and physical endurance”, Pavia reflected the dominant

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, 64.

³⁰ Ibid.

mode of thinking about neurasthenia. He commenced by claiming that the curriculum

produces strain, and there is always more strain in dealing with animate objects, such as children, than in dealing with inanimate objects such as goods in a store. The successful teacher must be giving out all the time that nervous energy, which is weakening to the person, and if it is not given out and received by the children, the teaching is a failure. That goes on five hours a day for the teacher. I hardly know of any profession where there is such a giving out of nervous energy as in the teaching profession. It takes so much out of the teachers that specialists all over the world say the great strain – often a breaking strain is due to the teacher’s vocation, and is more common where there good teachers.³¹

Pavia showed that strain was integral to the constitution of the conscientious teacher, and that the conscientious teacher expended more nervous energy than in other occupations. But his argument was that teachers’ working conditions, not their individual characteristics were problematic. He proposed that the Education Department should “place comfort at the head of affairs” and address teachers’ conditions of labour, thereby “lightening the source of strain”.³²

A few days later Inspector Charlton was in the witness box and he agreed with Pavia that

strain is inseparable from every calling that involves responsibility ... There is a tendency to greater nervous strain in the vocation of a teacher than any other ... if a man has to do anything that is worthwhile he must feel some strain.³³

In fact, strain “made men”.³⁴ Whereas Pavia consistently used the generic nomenclature “teacher” to describe his colleagues, in Charlton’s evidence the teacher was explicitly male. When the commissioners asked Charlton if there was more strain than previously, he claimed that it was simply an aspect of modern life.

It is of course, the story of development. That is a world-wide movement, and it is present in everything. But although a man

³¹ Ibid, 79.

³² Ibid, 80.

³³ Ibid, 108.

³⁴ Ibid, 109.

may have to do his work more keenly and be more alert and more progressive ... there is less drudgery and less difficulty to meet.³⁵

Charlton absolutely refused to acknowledge that teachers' working conditions were responsible for undue strain. Rather, "a good deal of the strain is self-imposed and comes from over-conscientiousness and over-anxiety, and that is especially true of the ladies in the department".³⁶ Charlton persisted with this argument in the face of intense cross-examination, stating that "women by the very nature of their constitution are more liable to strain than men".³⁷ The increased number of teacher absences was explained as the product of more generous provisions for sick leave, not undue strain. Finally, when pressed to identify "something in the present advanced system of education which causes brain fag and breakdown", Charlton blamed the "feverish and fretful" headmaster who "goads his girl teachers on when they are doing their best, it breaks them down".³⁸ According to Charlton, strain was a normal modern condition and there was no undue strain that could be attributed to teachers' working conditions: Other witnesses would be far more circumspect than Charlton.

**"The symptoms are all subjective:
They are not tangible in any way"**

Pavia and Charlton's evidence provided commissioners with several lines of inquiry which they put to other male witnesses, including the Education Department's Medical Officer, Dr Lendon, and the Head of the Public Health Department, Dr Ramsay Smith. In an era when surveys, statistics and other documents were seen to underpin scientific expertise, Lendon's evidence was problematic for the commissioners.³⁹ He was asked whether working conditions were causing breakdowns, and whether the strain was "exceptionally severe on the women". He answered that he had "no figures" but "I have certainly the impression" that seventy per cent of the absences are from "neurasthenia".⁴⁰ He refused to compare

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 108.

³⁷ Ibid, 109.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Lesko, *Act Your Age*, 43.

⁴⁰ "Third Progress Report," 160.

teaching with other occupations and “to say what causes breakdown” because “the symptoms are all subjective: they are not tangible in any way. It is the applicant’s story that you have to deal with”.⁴¹ He explained

if they come to me for examination and if I find nothing wrong with their hearts, livers, kidneys – nothing wrong physically – I am forced to conclude that it is what we call neurasthenia, or it might be called “brain fag”.⁴²

According to Lendon, the point at which strain overwhelmed a teacher was a matter of judgment, not science. It depended on the subjectivities of the teacher and the doctor. Furthermore, Lendon argued that strain was a condition that could be experienced by all educators at any stage of their careers. He rejected the suggestion that women were more susceptible to neurasthenia, saying that it “pervades the whole department, from the top to the girl teacher who is on duty in the bush”.⁴³ And “it is not only girls who suffer: it is the men who get the tired feeling”.⁴⁴ The problem was that Lendon could not produce statistics to support his position. When pressured about “compiling records” he responded, “no, life is too short for that”.⁴⁵

Dr Ramsay Smith was deemed a far more expert witness even though he did not have access to records of teacher absences. He submitted “a row of textbooks which would require a shelf four feet long” and provided a “flood of information” to the commissioners.⁴⁶ They considered him to be an educational and medical expert because he had been a teacher in Scotland prior to training as a doctor.⁴⁷ Ramsay Smith supported SAPTU and Pavia’s stance fully. He argued that “strain is never off the teacher”, especially the “conscientious teacher”.⁴⁸ He claimed that teachers’ worked ten to twelve hours a day and that their working conditions caused undue strain. He ignored women teachers’ constitutions. He

⁴¹ Ibid, 160.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 169.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 161.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 163.

⁴⁶ *Register*, 7 December 1912, 6.

⁴⁷ “Third Progress Report,” 183.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 168.

proposed that modern teachers' strain was less than in his teaching career as he was subject to "payment by results", but he maintained that teachers suffered more strain than other occupations.⁴⁹ For example, "when a nurse's work is done, it is done and she is off so many hours a day. The two cases are not to be compared".⁵⁰ He proposed that "the teachers have a very good case for asking the taxpayers to make their general conditions much better".⁵¹

As for Director Williams' evidence, he responded extensively to all points pertaining to working conditions in SAPTU's submission but he did not address "strain" directly until called before the Commission in January 1913. He stated briefly that "there is always strain where there is good work done" and that there was more strain in teaching than other vocations. He was concerned about the continuance of large classes in spite of his previous efforts.⁵² However, the commissioners did not interrogate Williams closely about strain, probably because they knew about his personal circumstances. Williams was not only a diabetic, but he was also suffering from undue "strain" and had taken several periods of extended leave.⁵³ Lendon's earlier reference to strain at the top of the Education Department was a tacit acknowledgment of this situation. Shortly after giving this evidence, Williams' health deteriorated and he died in February 1913, aged forty-nine.⁵⁴

In sum, the evidence at the Royal Commission demonstrated that strain was a fluid condition which had no boundaries. It contributed significantly to the construction of the conscientious teacher. Witnesses from other Australian states agreed with South Australian educators that strain was inseparable from the teacher's vocation, and that teachers suffered more strain than other brain workers. Nevertheless, there were divergent views on the matter of undue strain. SAPTU advanced a strong case for the disabling impact of teachers' working conditions, but the Director of the Education Department in New South Wales asserted that there were "no complaints of unnecessary strain" among teachers in his

⁴⁹ Ibid, 184.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 168.

⁵¹ Ibid, 169.

⁵² Ibid, 137.

⁵³ Thiele, *Grains of Mustard Seed*, 94.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 106.

jurisdiction.⁵⁵ Like Lendon, the President of the Public School Teachers Association in New South Wales claimed that much of teachers' work was "intangible and immeasurable, and there is a large amount of strain attached to that".⁵⁶ Charlton's claim that women teachers' inferior constitutions were the problem was supported by the President of the Victorian School Teachers Union. The President of the New South Wales Public School Teachers Union noted the disabling impact of strain on all teachers, especially women: "You will notice that there is a trade mark on every teacher. I think I could pick out from a crowd every lady and gentleman teacher, especially the lady".⁵⁷ In the final analysis, the distinction between the conscientious teacher and one who was overwhelmed by strain was a "political or moral judgment, based not on anything about the individual in question so much as the viewer's own perception and attitudes about the way society [and the teacher] should function".⁵⁸

Among the recommendations from the 1911-1912 Royal Commission was one to increase the salaries of the lowest paid teachers to induce young people to enter the profession. Another recommendation was the reduction of class sizes to forty for women teachers and fifty for men. Addressing the workforce shortages in the Education Department would lead to smaller classes and reduce the problem of strain. However, the government did not act decisively on either recommendation and SAPTU continued to lobby for better working conditions, including salaries, which were the lowest in Australia. One hundred years later, the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) are continuing to negotiate matters of teachers' work, sometimes directly but also in the Industrial Relations Commission of South Australia (IRC) as part of ongoing enterprise bargaining.

Shifting the focus from strain to "work life balance"

Acting on a finding that "the hours of work described by the AEU's witnesses are unreasonable, excessive and unsustainable" the IRC

⁵⁵ "Third Progress Report," 192.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 204.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 206.

⁵⁸ Kudlick, "Disability History," 767.

directed the AEU, DECD and the Public Service Association to convene a joint committee to investigate teachers and leaders work early in 2011.⁵⁹ From the outset, the committee was required to operate on the understanding that “change is not resource neutral. Resources to support most changes can only be found by redirecting existing effort”.⁶⁰ It almost goes without saying that the committee of five men and three women did not access their colleagues’ deliberations from the 1911-12 Royal Commission but they used similar information-gathering techniques, namely a survey, submissions and meetings all over South Australia. The results were reported in *Time for Teaching Time for Leading* in December 2011.

Echoing Beard’s claims about modern life, *Time for Teaching* “noted that the tempo of change has increased significantly over the past ten years with a wide range of influences on the structure of state schooling”.⁶¹ Given this context, the introduction claimed to be “reinforc[ing] research conclusions made in national, international, UK and OECD literature that teachers and leaders are overloaded”.⁶² Drawing on British research, the claim was also made that contemporary teachers are caught in the “trap of conscientiousness”.⁶³ And there was a concession that “workload may be having an impact on staff health and wellbeing”.⁶⁴ Thus the introductory pages of the report acknowledged individual subjectivities and structural factors to do with teachers’ work. Nevertheless, the structural dynamics of contemporary teachers’ work were downplayed throughout the body of the report.

Time for Teaching decided not to consider the contemporary problem of teachers “unreasonable and unsustainable workloads” in terms of “stress and stressors”.⁶⁵ Instead it stated that “**the** problem

⁵⁹ *Time for Teaching Time for Leading. Volume 1: Final Report for the Review of Teachers’ and Leaders’ Work*, December 2011, 6, accessed 3 March 2013, www.aeusa.asn.au/time_teaching_time_for_leading.pdf

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

[is] how best to achieve a more reasonable work life balance”.⁶⁶ Just as Dr Lendon experienced enormous difficulties with the intangible and subjective nature of strain, this report stated that “it is equally important to understand that ‘work + life balance’ is best defined in the eye of the beholder”.⁶⁷ The report also stated that educators “were among the most vulnerable to work life imbalance” along with “medical practitioners and the legal professions”.⁶⁸ In essence, the contemporary problem of work life balance as well as the historical problem of strain or neurasthenia is being constructed in relation to middle class brain workers.

As was the case with the SAPTU report, *Time for Teaching* included a comprehensive account of teachers’ working conditions that were deemed to be “problem areas”. They comprised the overloaded curriculum, the complexities of “students with disabilities” (being those who do not fit the norms for their age), the unavailability of temporary relieving teachers, yard duties, non-teaching clerical functions and after hours meetings, and “the number and complexity of DECS Policies, which proliferate in response to new initiatives and the ever present pressure to change which comes from many sources”. Although teachers’ work is no longer monitored via the inspectorial system, “accountability and reviews” and high stakes examinations such as NAPLAN function similarly to intensify and regulate their work.⁶⁹ Indeed, *Time for Teaching* displays an uncanny resemblance to the SAPTU report. This should not be surprising as many of the problem areas stem from the unchanging structural aspects of teachers’ work such as age-grading, along with a lack of resources, human and financial.

Time for Teaching included a discussion of “hours worked” along with several graphs and pie charts.⁷⁰ At sixty-two hours per week, it seems that principals are working equally long hours as Victor Pavia. Contemporary teachers are also working fifty-four hours per week which is much the same as their counterparts a century ago. Then, as now, “the hours worked by teachers and leaders are

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 10.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 11-12.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 18-28.

physically and psychologically unsafe”.⁷¹ However, there is a significant difference between the two reports. The contemporary report focuses on differences in hours worked between school sectors (primary, secondary and area), between large and small schools, and between teachers and leaders, but ignores the gender profile of the workforce entirely. The teaching workforce has changed little over the past century, with women currently constituting seventy-three per cent rather than seventy-four per cent of South Australia’s teachers. While there are relatively more women in leadership positions, it is still the case that men manage, especially in DECD executive positions, while women teach.⁷² Many of the aforementioned problem areas to do with working conditions apply to classroom teachers first and foremost, and thus to women. Although there was no consensus among the witnesses in 1911, they tried to grapple as best they could with the gender profile of the workforce. In *Time for Teaching* the focus on school sector and size serves to divert attention away from the structural inequalities between men and women. It is still the case that women do the bulk of domestic and childcare work, whether or not they are in paid work. As Pocock states,

The combination of unpaid and paid work means that Australian women are shouldering a greater total labour share than men. There has been no compensating rush of men into unpaid domestic work as women have joined them in paid jobs. The double day for women has become more entrenched and burdensome, not less.⁷³

Achieving work life balance, however that might be defined, is not going to be the same for men and women teachers and leaders if paid employment is the sole focus.

Time for Teaching concluded with ten “Actions for consideration”, the first of which was to “establish a Workforce Monitoring Group” to negotiate a range of issues such as “work design, priority setting

⁷¹ Ibid, 14.

⁷² *Department for Education and Child Development Annual Report 2011* (Adelaide: Department for Education and Child Development, 2012), 103-107.

⁷³ B. Pocock, “Work/Care Regimes: Institutions, Culture and Behaviour and the Australian Case,” *Gender, Work and Organization* 12, no. 1 (2005), 36.

and time management to achieve a better balance in work life demands”.⁷⁴ Many of the recommendations revolved around the deployment of available resources rather than lobbying for more staff, funds and resources to improve working conditions. A key area was induction and professional development for teachers and leaders, especially novice teachers.

Induction programs might be strengthened by the inclusion of additional information to cover ways to maintain a healthy work life balance, to tap into systems support to minimise work, share services and curriculum development, and solve problems such as poor legacies.⁷⁵

Basically, these recommendations devolved the responsibility for achieving work life balance to individual schools, leaders and teachers, thereby reflecting “an increasing emphasis on the moral and social responsibility that individuals hold for managing their personal well being at home and at work”.⁷⁶ This trend is also apparent in DECD’s recent “Offer” to the AEU as part on ongoing enterprise bargaining negotiations.

Constructing “a commitment to ... personal health and wellbeing”

DECD’s Offer of November 2012 included modest salary increases for teachers, principals and school support staff, a range of “country incentives” to attract more teachers to rural schools, improved paid maternity and adoption leave, and a “Commitment” to continuing current funding and resourcing of various sections and initiatives.⁷⁷ The Commitment also covered some aspects of teachers’ workloads. These included an agreement to establish a “Workload Monitoring Group to discuss matters that impact on the workload of

⁷⁴ *Time for Teaching Time for Leading*, 33-35.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 38.

⁷⁶ J. Wyn, *Youth Health and Welfare: The Cultural Politics of Education and Wellbeing* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

⁷⁷ M. Sjoberg to C. Haythorpe, 14 November 2012, Department of Education and Child Development School and Preschool Education Staff Enterprise Agreement – Offer, 1-2,

www.decd.sa.gov.au/hrstaff/files/links/0

Accessed 3 March 2013.

teachers and leaders”. This initiative was buried in Attachment 6 rather than foregrounded in the document.⁷⁸

A significant element of the Offer was a revised leadership structure in school and Attachment 3 of the documentation was devoted to “Position Descriptions” for principals and other leaders. The preamble states that the principal is required “to operate within departmental policies and available resources” to “deliver the department’s goals – the child being at the centre of everything we do”.⁷⁹ The preamble also states that

The principal is required to maintain a safe and healthy environment for staff, children and young people and comply with all provisions of the relevant workplace health and safety legislation and related departmental health, safety and wellbeing responsibilities and procedures.⁸⁰

Banfield argues that wellbeing “has become one of those organising ideas around which broader policy is made and upon which careers are being erected”.⁸¹ Elsewhere, DECD states that “the concept of wellbeing [for staff] relates to health in all its aspects and strategies to produce a happy and fulfilling lifestyle”.⁸² Wellbeing is thus individualised and akin to work life balance.

Rather than encouraging a broad and deep consideration of wellbeing, DECD “locks thinking and action into solutions for individuals while denying the structural impediments to wellbeing for all”.⁸³ This is evident in the thirteen “key responsibilities” of the principal which focus mostly on personal and interpersonal concerns within the school. The “welfare” of students is a key responsibility along with an emphasis on their behaviour rather than their learning. The principal’s responsibilities include “developing within students self-control, self-discipline and a respect for other

⁷⁸ Ibid, 27-29.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ G. Banfield, “Taking Wellbeing Seriously,” *Curriculum Perspectives* 29, no. 3 (2009), 70.

⁸² See “Staff Wellbeing”

http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/hrhealthsafety/a8_publish/modules/publish/content.asp?nav

Accessed 3 April 2013.

⁸³ Banfield, “Taking Wellbeing Seriously,” 71.

persons and their property”.⁸⁴ Parents and the local community barely rate a mention, and there is no key responsibility pertaining to staff welfare. Instead, the focus is on “encouraging staff” to participate in “continuing professional development” and various administrative activities.⁸⁵ Although wellbeing is prioritised in the preamble, no key responsibilities attend to the social and structural conditions that influence teachers’ working conditions and wellbeing.

DECD’s position description adopts the same five Selection Criteria as the “National Professional Standards for Principals”. They are leading teaching and learning; developing self and others; leading improvement, innovation and change; leading the management of the school; and engaging and working with the community.⁸⁶ In the elaborations of these criteria, references to the structural dynamics of Australian society are restricted to ‘engaging and working with the community’. For example,

The multicultural nature of Australian people is recognised, understanding and reconciliation with Indigenous cultures is fostered, and the rich and diverse linguistic and cultural resources in the school community recognised and used.⁸⁷

Neither the school and its operations, nor teaching and learning are embedded in the community. Rather, the community is an external entity and full of “complex challenges” which have the potential (if not recognised and used) to disrupt the individualised approach which underpins the other selection criteria, especially “developing self and others”. This criterion focuses exclusively on adults, namely the principal and staff, self and others. Staff are to be monitored and managed, and the principal is exhorted to develop self and others “through a commitment to personal ongoing professional development and personal health and wellbeing”.⁸⁸ Here, Lendon’s statement about strain might also be applied to the contemporary notion of wellbeing: “The symptoms are all subjective. They are not tangible in any way”. Nevertheless, in this highly individualised and psychologised approach “a positive

⁸⁴ M. Sjoberg to C. Haythorpe, 7.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 9.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

attitude, taking ownership and responsibility along with identifying as a lifelong learner are [deemed to be] qualities that sustain teacher [and principal] wellbeing and identity”.⁸⁹ Although a positive attitude could ameliorate Inspector Charlton’s issue of the feverish and fretful headmaster who goads his girl teachers, the aforementioned problem areas of teachers’ working conditions remain in place. Indeed, none are addressed in the selection criteria, and the discussion of workload and the Workload Monitoring Group is contained in another attachment.

Kelly and Colquhoun argue that teachers are currently being positioned as “ethically responsible for their professional health and wellbeing so that they have the capacity to deliver on the promise of effective schools”.⁹⁰ According to the position description in DECD’s Offer, this is equally so for principals who are being required to regulate their own, student and staff behaviour in order to comply with departmental policies. Ultimately, the position description places a profound burden of responsibility on the principal as an individual, and then on the staff to do more with less rather than addressing the nature of their work in a large institutionalised school system.

Conclusion

As we move further into the twenty-first century we might ask what has changed in the past one hundred years. Teachers continue to be positioned as middle class brain workers who are more vulnerable to strain or work life imbalance than manual occupations. We are no closer than Dr Lendon to specifying the point at which the conscientious teacher will become overwhelmed by the demands of the workplace and the structural dynamics of teachers’ work have not altered markedly. Men manage and women teach, and age grading constructs the normal and disabled child: Compared with 1911, there is less than fifteen minutes difference in the instructional day; and teachers continue to be burdened with after-hours work, and regulated and monitored externally. At the 1911-1912 Royal Commission, however, teachers’ working conditions were central to the debates about strain, and there was sufficient

⁸⁹ McCallum and Price, “Well Teachers, Well Students,” 20.

⁹⁰ Kelly and Colquhoun, “Governing the Stressed Self,” 199.

social and political space for Dr Ramsay Smith to propose that teachers had a very good case for asking the taxpayers to make their general conditions much better. This is not so in current policy documents. Achieving work life balance and wellbeing are individual responsibilities and “developing a sense of agency in one’s own wellbeing” is central to the principal’s and teacher’s productivity.⁹¹ Working within current constraints and available resources at the local level (rather than system level) is the constant refrain in both policy documents. *Time for Teaching* states that “it is unlikely the system will ever be regulated and resourced to the extent that is necessary to maintain, for example, a 38 hour week”.⁹² There is no political space, let alone encouragement, to take up Ramsay Smith’s suggestion or debate the structural dynamics of contemporary teachers’ work. Adapting Beard’s algebraic formula, it now seems that contemporary civilisation + Australian civilisation + individual agency + personal responsibility = wellbeing and work life balance, unless you happen to be the average Australian woman undertaking “almost twice as much domestic and caring work as men: on average, 33 hours a week of housework, childcare and shopping”.⁹³

⁹¹ McCallum and Price, “Well Teachers, Well Students,” 20.

⁹² *Time for Teaching Time for Leading*, 16.

⁹³ Pocock, “Work/Care Regimes,” 36.