Contextual factors that affect secondary school teachers' agency in noncore subjects

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Abstract

Adapting to and implementing curriculum change has become the norm for teachers across Australia. Yet there has been limited research regarding the contextual factors that affect teacher agency during curriculum change for teachers working in non-core subject areas. This research addressed that gap by conducting a qualitative case study over three years exploring teacher perceptions of their agency. Results show that teachers’ perceptions of their classroom agency to develop and introduce new curriculum was high. Fewer teachers however, described having agency at a department level and school curriculum level. Teacher influence in school level curriculum further decreased over the course of the study as a result of the introduction of the Australian Curriculum (AC), the impact of NAPLAN as well as changes to school curriculum and focus by state directives. The contextual factors that influenced agency included career stage of the teacher and the initial support they were provided in schools; individual teachers’ perceptions of their power and position in schools; as well as teacher motivation and their belief in the importance of their subject for student learning. A supportive school culture and good collegial relationships both within the school and the professional teaching community were also considered significant for effective teacher agency. Negative influences identified included job intensification, inadequate professional development opportunities and the changing focus of subject priorities and assessment requirements in schools. Added pressures affecting teacher agency included the changed organisational structures within subject departments in many schools. It became apparent over the course of the study that school Administrations had increased their control in all aspects of school curriculum. Overall, Home Economics teachers believed they had reduced teacher agency at a national, state and school level. They did however retain a strong sense of agency at a department and classroom level if they were provided with a supportive and collegial environment.

Introduction

Current school environments across the country have been characterised by consistent and significant curriculum changes, which in many cases has marginalised teachers’ input. However, the active engagement of teachers in the process of curriculum change is essential if curriculum goals are to be attained (Hargreaves, 2005). This is the dilemma, teachers need to engage with curriculum but this engagement will not take place and become sustainable unless teachers are provided the supportive environment that enables them to believe that their voices will be heard and their contribution to change will be effective. This PhD study attempted to address this dilemma by exploring Queensland Home Economics teachers’ perceptions of their role in curriculum change and the contextual factors that influenced those perceptions. It used a social cognitive theoretical framework and Bandura’s concepts of human and teacher agency (Bandura, 1989; 2001). For the purpose of the study, human agency was described as the act of trying to control or influence an event or circumstance in a person’s life. Teacher agency occurred when teachers attempted to influence changes in their school, department and classroom in an effort to achieve desired student-learning outcomes. Teacher engagement with curriculum is essential as curriculum is not static, it is in a constant flux and the formal curriculum produced at Federal and State level needs to be interpreted and enacted at a school level.
The Australian school curriculum has become increasingly overcrowded (Australian Government, 2014). As a result of competing interests in school curriculum, many Home Economics teachers are struggling to maintain the subject in their schools. As control exerted by the current Australian and State Curricula tightens the school timetable and requires schools to make decisions about core content and time allocation, non-core subjects such as Home Economics are vulnerable to either less time and resource allocation or exclusion. Non-core subjects like Home Economics appear to be easy targets for budget and staff cutbacks and in some schools are less able to successfully compete for resources (Little & McLaughlin, 1993). This problem is compounded by lack of insight about practical based subjects, as identified by Little & McLaughlin (1993) who describe academic and vocational teachers occupying two separate worlds in most schools, a phenomenon that, ‘has remained nearly invisible in the mainstream research on secondary schooling’ (p. 138). Many Administrators and teachers of subjects without a vocational component have little understanding or appreciation of the value of practical based specialist subjects such as Home Economics in a school curriculum. Yet curriculum decisions are made in schools without these understandings. As a result, in many schools, non-core subjects such as Home Economics are under threat, teachers are stressed and the subject’s place and position in the schools are under threat. The affects this instability and uncertainty have on teacher agency have yet to be identified.

**Curriculum in Schools**

Historically, school curriculum design and implementation was the realm of professional educators (Marsh, 2004). Recently however, domestically, both state and federal governments are attempting to control school curricula by mandating design and outcomes and increasingly controlling what is taught in schools (Briant & Doherty, 2012). Curriculum, therefore, is not static. It is ever evolving as different governments define their priorities and as social needs for learning change. Governments and politically powerful interest groups consistently play an important role in generating formal curricula (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Helsby, 1999; McCulloch, 1998). This curricula comprises the written frameworks of educational policies that map politicians and government’s vision of valued knowledge and which skills are significant. Formal curriculum is translated and enacted at the school level after it has been interpreted. This enacted curriculum includes school, department and classroom programs, lesson plans and resources (Luke, Weir, & Woods, 2008; Marsh, 2004). The latest development of curriculum change is a culmination of an extended period of turbulent change. From the introduction of the Key Learning Areas (KLAs) in the 1990s (QSA, 2007), the key issues for many educators have centered on power: what constitutes valued knowledge and who has the power to decide (Pring, 2004). These decisions are often made without due consideration of the affects such changes will have on teachers and their teaching.

**Curriculum change and its impact on Home Economics in Queensland**

Goodson (1983) describes curriculum change as contentious among teachers as they pursue or attempt to retain power over what they teach. Subjects have been amalgamated and reorganised according to government or school determined concepts of valued knowledge and skills. The process of amalgamation and reorganisation saw the initial exclusion of certain subjects as less worthy of serious study while other subjects were elevated. The discipline area of Home Economics and its related areas of studies such as Food Technology are one of the marginalized areas of study (Slater, 2013). This marginalization, combined with curriculum decision makers lack of understanding or appreciation of the disciplines value, has led to the making of ad hoc decisions about the place and presence of Home Economics in schools (Burke & Pendergast, 1994; Pendergast, 2001).

The school subject Home Economics has been part of every states curriculum for over 100 years in a number of different guises. Its current form at the Queensland Senior level of schooling embraces in-depth knowledge and understandings from a range of areas including Food and
Nutrition, Textiles and Family Studies, with some vocational knowledge and skills, although at the moment this current form is under review and likely to change significantly. In other states its name, form and content varies. Regardless of the variations, for many people Home Economics and its related study areas is still considered to be an applied or vocational subject and has less subject status and professional respect than other subjects such as English, Mathematics and Science (Goodson, 1983; Little, 1993; Williams, 1994). As a result Home Economics is considered by many in education today to be a peripheral subject, lacking clear distinction, direction, place, position and power. It has had numerous changes, and has not been the focus of very much educational research in the past. As discussed earlier, curriculum and curriculum priorities must change as society changes. The evolution of Home Economics should not be considered unusual or a cause for concern. What is the cause for concern is the possible disengagement of Home Economics teachers from the curriculum decision making processes in schools as a result of a range of contextual factors impacting their working life.

**Statement of the problem**

The research questions addressed in the research were:

1. What are secondary Home Economics teachers’ perceptions of their current teacher agency?
2. What are secondary Home Economics teachers’ understandings of how contextual factors have affected the reciprocal relationship between their teacher agency and their consequent teaching practice?

These questions explored teacher agency during the introduction and implementation of the Queensland school curriculum initiative - the Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework (QCAR) (QSA, 2007), and the Australian Curriculum implementation in Queensland schools.

**Theoretical framework for the study**

Social cognitive theory was used in this qualitative research based on an agentic perspective in which individuals are producers of experiences and shapers of events (Bandura, 2000). Social cognitive theory has its roots in the early works of Bandura (1977) and reflects a number of constructivist principles. Important to the current research is the notion that individuals are affected by the combined influences of the social (external) and cognitive (internal) processes. Environmental events, personal factors and behaviours are seen as interacting processes that Bandura called reciprocal determinism, rather than explaining human behaviour as unit-directional, however factors in reciprocal determinism influence and are influenced by each other. Environmental influences include such variables as feedback, resources, other people and physical settings; personal factors include goals, attributions, self-evaluation and self-regulations; and behavioural factors include motivation, choice and individual actions. This reciprocal model of human behaviour centers on the issue of self-influences. The influential role of the self-system in reciprocal determinism is documented through a reciprocal analysis of self-regulatory processes and of analysing actions at the level of intrapersonal development, interpersonal transactions, and interactive functioning of organizational and social systems. This method of self-evaluation was an important feature when considering teachers’ responses to curriculum change in the current research. For example, external factors in the current research include imposed curriculum, and interactions with other staff and students and teachers’ reactions to these. Internal influences include self-efficacy and agency. Campbell (2012) defines agency as enabling ‘individuals (and, to some, collectives) to make free or independent choices, to engage in autonomous actions, and to exercise judgment in the interests of others and oneself” (p. 9). A major construct of agency and central to the construct of motivation and actions of teachers is efficacy. Efficacy is the belief that control is possible and that one has the power to produce desired effects by their actions.

Efficacy involves people’s judgments about their own capabilities (Bandura, 1997a, 1997b, 1989). Teacher agency focuses on teachers’ capacity to make choices, and take principled action
and self-judgments. Teacher agency is a self-perception of competence rather than a measure of actual competence. There are multiple ways that efficacy influences on teacher agency. When efficacy is high, teachers will feel more confident that they can execute the responses necessary to achieve their goals including efficiently using analytic strategies to discover the rules to manage their new social environments and curriculum. When efficacy is low, teachers can feel powerless and incompetent, which then affects their thoughts, behaviours and motivation to engage in change in positive ways. With high efficacy, teachers feel a sense of enablement that allows them to engage more positively with curriculum change. A key component of efficacy is agency. Agency occurs when teachers deliberately plan and implement action, visualise potential outcomes, act intentionally and make necessary adjustments (Lasky, 2005; Marsh, Craven, & McInerney, 2008). The Triadic Reciprocity Core Agency Concepts model is an important framework developed by Bandura that identifies the core concepts of agency.

Methodology

The qualitative research used case study to exploring the perceptions of twelve practicing teachers. Their evolving story was recorded over the course of three years. Semi structured interviews provided the raw data that was analysed using the Constant Comparative Method (CCM), which looked for themes and patterns in the data. From this data, patterns were identified and generalizations were made with the understanding that teacher experiences are context specific.

A case study approach was chosen because it provided a way to explore, understand and explain complex issues that occur in life in their natural context (Harrison, 2016). Case study research values subjective ways of knowing, particularly experiential, practical and presentational experiences and is sensitive to specific socio-cultural contexts (Simons, 2009). According to Simons (2009), a case study will document a situation or event in detail in a specific socio-political context. Merriam (1998) describes case studies as different from other types of research in that it provides intense descriptions and analysis of ‘a single unit or bounded system’ (p. 19).

The current research comprised a single case study exploring the perceptions of Home Economics teacher agency. The socio-cultural context of this research is curriculum change for Home Economics teachers within a range of Queensland secondary schools.

Participation was voluntary, with advertisements in a range of professional journals asking for participants to contact the researcher if they were interested in taking part in the study. Participants were selected based on their ability to provide the most relevant and usable information, an approach suggested by Yin (1994) to ensure reliability and validity. For this study the participants needed to be practicing Home Economics high school teachers in both state and private education.

A researcher-generated model, the Triadic Reciprocity Framework Core Agency Concepts (TRFCAC) Model was developed for the research. The model combined two broader models, namely Bandura’s (2001) Model of Core Concepts and Bandura’s (1999) Triadic Reciprocal Causation model to identify teacher agency and to describe the contextual factors affecting their agency. Combining the two models allowed identification and exploration of teachers’ self-perceptions of their engagement with curriculum change. Using this model, semi-structured interview questions with suggested researcher prompts were developed and used. The semi-structured interview technique allowed for the gathering of rich data. This approach was used to capture the language of the participants as they described their thoughts, perceptions and values, an approach supported by Suter (2010) and Whiting (2007). Because it was important in the research to include contextual aspects of participants’ voices it was deemed that semi-structured interviews would provide participants with the best way to present their views. All interviews were taped and later transcribed verbatim with the removal of any identifying information.

The data was analysed using the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) of analysis (Glaser &
This qualitative research approach seeks to understand the whole phenomenon being described rather than a word-by-word analysis. In a constant comparative procedure, raw data is formed into indicators or small segments of information from different people, over different times. These indicators are then grouped into several codes, which then form categories. The researcher must constantly compare indicators to indicators, codes to codes and categories to categories to eliminate redundancy in the data (Creswell, 2005). The researcher then placed these chunks of information into any predetermined categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), identified from the Triadic Reciprocity Framework Core Agency Concept Model (TRFCAC) or for categories that were not identified in the TRFCAC model, created new ones.

**Results of the study**

**Gender bias**

The current research has revealed that progress in acceptance in schools for Home Economics and its related areas of study has still not been achieved. The subject continues to suffer from a gender bias and has poor subject image based on traditional assumptions about the subject. The inclusion of male teachers in the subject area has begun to address the traditional gender bias associated with the subject; however, the proportion of male teachers to female teachers remains small. One teacher highlighted this with her comment:

“Teacher X is a great promoter of the subject being a male so it is not a 'women do', so that is great to have him as the Head of Department.”

Home Economics continues to be considered a peripheral subject, it elicits less respect than its more ‘academic’ or male dominated counter parts, has low status and as a subject it has minimal power to influence school decisions. Efforts made by individual teachers to improve Home Economics profile and status in their schools may have improved status slightly but, as far as could be determined within the limitations of this study, such improvement is not widespread.

**Teacher identity**

There was a spectrum of responses about factors that affected Home Economics teachers’ identity in the current research. Some teachers spoke of dissatisfaction, frustration, low morale and motivation, as well as concern for the future of Home Economics in schools. Other teachers described contentment, engagement and enthusiasm for the future, and there were variations in between. One aspect that became apparent as this research progressed was that many teachers see themselves as subject discipline teachers, as well as teachers of Home Economics curriculum in school. A subject discipline and a school subject are not the same things. As Hargreaves (1994) points out, if teachers confuse teaching a school subject with teaching a subject discipline, there can be role identity confusion because changes to school subject curriculum that do not reflect the subject discipline will challenge a teacher’s identity. Any challenge to teacher identity, such as curriculum change, can then become a challenge to teacher agency (Lasky, 2005). School curriculum changes that split Home Economics in different subject departments may affect Home Economics teachers more if they see their role as teachers of a subject discipline rather than a school subject. For some teachers in this study, the difficulty of accepting a change of roles from teaching a discipline to teaching a subject was evident. They had not dealt very well with the separation of Home Economics and different components placed into different subject areas such as Health & Physical Education (HPE) and Hospitality.

**Stage in teacher life cycle**

The current research revealed that there was little difference between middle and late career teachers perceptions of their teacher agency and the factors that affected it. These results are in contrast to Hargreaves (2005), who identified middle career teachers as the most responsive
group of teachers to curriculum change engagement, as they were able to balance their enthusiasm and energy level with experience and knowledge of teaching. This research found that early career teachers struggled with agency as they developed their teacher identity. However, teacher agency improved significantly for early career teachers as they became increasingly more confident with classroom pedagogy, behaviour management, school procedures and processes, and consequently their job satisfaction improved. Hargreaves (2005) suggested that teacher’s professional-self evolves over the early stages of their teaching career as they developed stronger teacher identities. Immediate issues such as classroom management, behaviour management and school procedures were far more significant in their lives, largely due to inexperience, lack of knowledge of school procedures and processes and learning student behaviour management strategies. Curriculum concerns outside of their own classrooms were often relegated as minor concerns; their focus was survival in the classroom. As they become more experienced over the three years of the study, focus on curriculum issues external to their personal classrooms occurred. For these teachers, experience in teaching improved their personal job satisfaction and improved their agency. However, the researcher acknowledges that the small sample size restricted accuracy in making generalisations about the effects of early career stages on agency; therefore, further research into early career teacher agency is needed.

Moral purpose and motivation

The current study found moral purpose in early career teachers was tested. They were at most risk of experiencing disillusionment and disengagement. Mentoring relationships and positive collegial relationships supported early career teachers thorough this difficult stage. When teachers were provided with a supportive, collegial environment, their moral purpose improved and their motivation to engage with curriculum change also improved. For example one early career teacher toward the end of the study stated:

“I have had more input because more stuff had to be rewritten. So the others tended to throw that my way because I am happy to do it so I have more input...I enjoy that part of it, I am getting more involved...My contribution is increasing. The more I write, the more they [administration] kind of respond. Not my status, but my credibility is getting a bit better...When I use to voice my views I use to get pushed back into my box, whereas now it is a little bit more open...It is a lot better than it was.”

A finding of the current research supports Bandura (1991) and Fullan’s (1993) findings, which established that motivation on its own is not enough to maintain teacher involvement in curriculum. A number of participants describing wanting to make change to improve student learning, but they were prevented from being able to by Administration or Department Heads. Likewise with Moral purpose, a number of participants believed strongly they bettered the lives of their students. For example, later career teacher stated: “We love what we do, we love the kids. I know I make a difference in the children’s lives, that’s what keeps me going.” Yet this same teacher described herself as having no agency outside of her own class. Teachers required an encouraging and supportive environment throughout the teacher lifecycle if motivation is to be maintained. Improving motivation strengthens self-efficacy, which in turn increases engagement in curriculum.

Collegial relationships

This study revealed that good collegial relationships enabled the development of collaborative relationships where teachers worked together to achieve common curriculum goals. However, two types of poor collegial relationships also emerged. The first was where a classroom teacher described poor collegial relationships with fellow teachers in the same department or, less often, in different departments. This type of poor collegial relationships adversely affected teacher perceptions of their capacity to work collectively toward common department and school
curriculum goals. For many teachers, the need to work collaboratively was essential to share the workload and support each other. Teacher engagement with curriculum at department and school level had ramifications for department colleagues and the Head Of Department (HOD). For example, positive engagement with department and school curriculum by all staff in a department spread the workload for each, which resulted in dynamic and modern dialogue, enabling curriculum development and changes to be a natural and normal part of department functioning. Positive engagement reduced teacher and HOD workload and helped prevent burn-out for particular teachers. One teacher described the benefits of collegiality in the following way:

“I think the fact that Teacher X and I stand as a united front in where we are hoping to go, I think that also helps. We don’t have differing views of where we want to take the subject.”

In contrast, negative attitudes toward curriculum change or low efficacy resulted in teachers focusing on their own classroom curriculum and not contributing to the department or school curriculum. It also resulted in teachers resisting change to their classroom curriculum. Either behaviour placed increased pressure on those teachers and HODs that were required to or wanted to make changes to curriculum because of school, state and national curriculum change. These results concur with those suggested by Somech (2010), who found that providing teachers with opportunities to participate in the decision-making process enabled teachers to gain a sense of empowerment. An interesting finding from Somech’s research was that, while teachers may have felt empowered, this sense did not lead necessarily to a greater commitment to the school. It did, however, provide a motivational mechanism for commitment to teaching. This behaviour was found in the current research where it was observed that passive resistance to curriculum change did not reduce teacher commitment to their students.

The second type of poor collegial relationship occurred when there was conflict between teachers and their HOD or administration. Conflict was particularly evident in a number of cases. However, the effects of both poor collegial and administrative relationships on classroom teacher agency appeared to be minimal. Teachers continued to describe themselves as in control in their classroom. At a department and school level, however, the effects of both types of poor relationships were notable.

**Resourcing and time constraints**

Lack of collegial relationships with other Home Economics teachers was found to be adverse to teacher agency. This lack of Home Economics collegial relationships was felt the most by teachers in schools that had only one Home Economics teacher. These teachers described themselves as isolated and over worked because they had no one with whom to share the task of preparing new resources and curriculum, or to engage in with Home Economics specific dialogue. As a result, they felt they had little opportunity to be agentic or to extend what they did. These teachers would benefit from increased support from Home Economics teachers in nearby schools, greater engagement with the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) and with the Home Economics Institute Australia Queensland (HEIAQ).

Resource development such as the writing of lessons, preparation of teaching materials, and assessment items were identified as a desired outcome of collegiality. Shared resources improved teacher agency, while withholding or restricting resources contributed to isolating teachers, challenged collegiality, and decreased agency. Sharing resources reduced the time pressures on teachers by reducing the time spent to develop resources for new curriculum. In some circumstances where resources were not available through sharing or through Professional Development (PD), teachers’ plans for change did not proceed. This response was evident when teachers described wanting to make changes but not having the time to resources the desired changes. There were also descriptions, however, of teachers who were reluctant to share their
resources to assist others.

**Changing Administration model**

The increase in Administration control over curriculum had negated teacher input into school curriculum decisions. The method of implementation at school level curriculum had moved closer to a top-down approach, where teachers and HODs were told the parameters for their subject and they were then required to make it fit. Teachers also described many of the administrative decisions as uninformed and had unintended consequences on Home Economics in their schools, as well as on teacher agency.

Teachers identified the most immediate and often the least negotiated change to school curriculum was the placement of Home Economics into the school program. An example of this was the placement and timing of scheduled classes and the removal of Home Economics as a subject offering to certain Year levels. An increased number of schools had reduced the length of Home Economics class time, some by up to half. These changes resulted in teachers having to rewrite the year level curriculum. Although it was described as frustrating and annoying by teachers, in most cases the changes were accepted, with adjustments made to accommodate the shortened lesson and minimise the impact on department and classroom curriculum. What became apparent from the research was that all teachers continued to attempt to deliver the same or similar curriculum with modifications made to accommodate the administrative timetable changes. This finding agree with Fullan’s (1993) observation that changes to formal structures in school such as time-tables and time allocation will not change the ways teachers work. Teachers will always teach what they have taught, unless they themselves embrace the change.

Teachers identified that a bigger problem for Home Economics occurred in schools where Administration had chosen to remove or replace Home Economics at a particular year level, yet retained it at other year levels. This action reduced student numbers taking Home Economics in that year and in following years, particularly at senior levels. It also resulted in other disciplines taking content that had previously been taught in Home Economics and some teachers had found the subject disappeared from the school curriculum. When, Home Economics, was removed from the senior subject offering, not only did the subject lose senior student numbers and status in the school, fewer students selected the subject in middle school, as there was no longer any senior pathway for them to follow. In some schools, other school subjects such as Technology and HPE had subsumed areas of knowledge, skills and understandings that were traditionally taught in Home Economics. For example, HPE taught healthy food choices that incorporated the skills of cooking. Other schools have retained the name, Home Economics, and moved the subject into the control of another department, often, as observed by Brooker (2001), to the HPE department. Further threats to Home Economics have come for the increasing focus on education for employment, particularly in Vocational Education & Training (VET) subjects; an influence identified a number of years ago by Williams (1994). The current study found there was a trend in Queensland schools toward removing Home Economics as a subject offering in senior years and replacing it with Hospitality Studies or Hospitality Practices.

**Staffing**

This study revealed that school Administrations were increasingly staffing Home Economics classes with non-Home Economics trained teachers, a trend that was first identified in a 2000 HEIA study (HEIA, 2000). The effects of this trend have been increases to Home Economics trained teachers’ work- load and resulted in the simplification of junior curriculum to enable non-trained teachers to take the subject. It appears that the consequences of these changes for student learning have not been considered yet one of the recommendations from the HEIA (2000) report was to lobby employing authorities to stop the ‘practice of employing non-specialist Home Economics teachers to teach Home Economics; unless appropriate levels of professional development are provided’ (HEIA, 2000, p. 38). The findings from this study
indicate that HEIA’s lobbying on this issue was unsuccessful as these practices were widespread across all school sectors.

In their 2000 report, HEIA identified a shortage of Home Economics teachers and predicted this would become progressively worse. The problems of staffing Home Economics classes with specialist Home Economics teachers will continue. The number of university trained Home Economics teachers has decreased as a result of fewer student teachers choosing to specialise in Home Economics (HEIA, 2000). The current trend of requiring non-Home Economics teachers to teach this specialist subject creates problems for the Home Economics department, the teachers and the students. Non-specialist teachers do not have appropriate expertise to ensure that the course is addressing current thinking in Home Economics pedagogy and they could not contribute to developing Home Economics curriculum without specialist knowledge. It is difficult for teachers teaching outside their subject area of expertise to develop the understanding and skills that promote individual and family wellbeing without appropriate Professional Development. Further, the shortage of specialist Home Economics teachers may contribute to schools choosing not to include Home Economics courses in their schools (HEIA, 2000).

Department reorganisation and the role of the Head Of Department

This research revealed that some Home Economics subject departments have undergone significant change as a result of school and departmental restructuring. Mega-departments have replaced the traditional department organisational model for some subjects in many schools. These large departments are amalgamations of subjects, comprised of teachers from loosely related subject areas. Teachers in the current research, who experienced working in melded mega-departments, described feelings of dislocation and unease within the new department structure. These are similar effects to what Ritchie, Mackay, and Rigano (2006) found in their study of teachers in large mega-departments, where changes to existing subject departments in a school can be difficult. Many teachers and administrators are committed to the maintenance of traditional department structure, function and existing subject boundaries, regardless of the changing structures forced on them by Administrations or school systems. Teachers in the current research described similar experiences where the melding of subjects resulted in the dominant subject, generally HPE, taking control. One teacher described a consequence of the fragmentation of the Home Economics department and the subsequent melding of its different areas within another departments as “the end of Home Economics in this school.” Rosenfeld (2008) reported similar findings. According to Datnow (2011), resistance to such change can occur regardless of Administration’s intent to improve subject department function and role. However, subject boundary resistance will impact on the effectiveness of the department, as well as teacher satisfaction in the department, as illustrated by teacher responses in this study. Forcing subjects together into a single department can also result in contrived collegiality.

The current research also indicated that Principals’ had modified the role of the HODs. Heads of Department were no longer expected to be curriculum experts in their department, but instead were required to be subject and resource managers. As a result of this change, teachers’ roles in specific subject areas had expanded and specialist teachers were required to become curriculum developers for their specialty area, where in the past the HOD would have taken on this role. This had resulted in changes to roles for some teachers and HODs, a finding that is in accord with Rosenfeld’s (2008) study, which highlighted the changed organisational models in Queensland schools.

The formation of mega-departments has left Home Economics vulnerable, if the HOD is not sympathetic to Home Economics. In this study, some teachers were concerned that Home Economics was at risk of being ignored or subsumed, and losing the subject’s recognised name and intent within other subject areas in the mega-departments. The subsuming of Home Economics by other departments included descriptions of other subject areas pilfering traditional Home Economics content, a finding that concurs with that of Williams (1994). Head of
Departments played a pivotal role in whether subsuming happened or not. The position of a designated or nominated leader such as HOD, gave that teacher greater power. Designated leaders such as HODs have privileges not afforded other teachers. Ritchie et al. (2006) identified the HOD position enabled these teachers to have increased access to information, network opportunities, and influence with higher leadership, and allowed leaders to filter information to teachers. The increased privileges accorded to HODs enabled them to shape and direct department structure and functions. Head of Department effectiveness or ineffectiveness impacted department dynamics. For example, HODs who had little understanding of, lack of interest in, or respect for Home Economics affected the subject in negative ways. This research found that some HODs had created barriers that teachers often found too difficult to overcome.

Home Economics teachers in schools that allowed Home Economics to remain as an identity either in its own department or as part of a larger department expressed strong proactive agency. In schools where this did not happen, Home Economics teachers described themselves as being less able to make school and department curriculum, and therefore reduced agency.

Job Intensification

All teachers in this study had experienced a number of significant, whole school curriculum and assessment changes, which resulted in job intensification similar to changes described by Apple and Jungck (1990) and Datnow (1995). Job intensification was a result of increased workloads for teachers because of changed HOD roles, as well as changed staffing in the department. Much of the work such as curriculum development and the day-to-day management and organising of Home Economics, which was traditionally completed by the HOD, had, in mega-departments, been placed back onto the classroom teacher. This research found that HODs of some mega-departments had become less involved with subject specific management and curriculum through lack of interest, lack of knowledge or at the direction of the Principal. As a result, classroom teachers had been required to take on the curriculum roles previously filled by HODs. These latter finding accords with Rosenfeld’s (2008) study, which found some Principals require HODs to take on increasingly managerial roles, focused on whole school curriculum rather than specific school subjects. For some HODs, this new role has resulted in conflicting role expectations between the HOD, Administration and teachers, as well as increased job pressures for HODs and teachers.

There was significant curriculum variation between schools, which contributed to significant differences in teachers’ workloads. Some Home Economics teachers experienced major curriculum changes whilst others experienced minimal curriculum change. In schools that experienced significant and continuous curriculum change, teachers saw a risk that long-term curriculum planning would be forsaken in favor of immediate curriculum planning, to the detriment of the students, school and teachers. This finding was in concert with Apple and Jungck (1990), Apple (2000) and Datnow (1995) that also identified job intensification as a major influence on teachers deciding not to engage with curriculum change. Increased time constraints were identified by Apple and Jungck (1990) as a major cause of job intensification, with teachers describing having too much to do and too little time to do it in. As a result, teachers dealt with the immediate issues or concerns and prioritised, doing what had to done for the immediate, leaving little time or energy for future planning. Over half the teachers in the current research considered that job intensification was caused by changes to working life conditions such as altered subject department organisation, increased paper-work requirements, staffing changes and school-wide curriculum changes. Their observations supported the extensive literature in the area of teacher workload and job intensification (Apple & Jungck, 1990; Datnow, 1995; Easthope & Easthope, 2000; Hargreaves, 1994, 2002, 2005). These writers found that increased work demands including longer working hours, increased student numbers, increased professional, pastoral and administrative duties, as well as increased rates of curriculum change, resulted in increased teacher workloads. Teachers experienced changes to school curriculum in too short a time, which has resulted in overwork and the risk of ‘burn-out’
Not all job intensification was negative; some teachers reacted in creative and proactive ways to intensification with beneficial results, both for the school and the teachers. Ballet and Kelchtermans’s (2008) study of how a school and its teachers coped with external pressures caused by curriculum change also highlighted this as a possible result of job intensification. In the current research some teachers indicated that the mandated curriculum changes at state and school level had enabled them to engage with curriculum creation, something they would not have done if the department had not been forced to change curriculum. Their involvement was voluntary and for one participant, because no one else in the department wanted to write new curriculum, they had a degree of freedom, which they relished. For example, a middle career teacher described this in the following way:

I did all the writing for that one because I enjoy it and it gives me control and I am able to make change and no one else wanted to do it so I did.

This behaviour is an example of what Ballet and Kelchtermans (2008) called ‘self-imposed job intensification’ (p. 53), where teachers’ own enthusiasm and motivation added workload to their teaching lives; however, personal gratification at being able to create workable curriculum outweighed the increased workload requirements. In self-imposed job intensification, teachers looked for new challenges and innovation to improve teaching. The most common reason given by teachers who described self-imposed curriculum changes was currency; they were attempting to make the curriculum increasingly relevant to students’ lives. All teachers, including HODs, described changes they had chosen to make to Home Economics curriculum at classroom, department and school levels to meet current student interests, skill levels and learning needs. A few teachers identified personal reasons for making changes such as personal interest or expertise in a particular topic or to prevent students or teacher boredom.

In contrast, contract teachers in general described being unable to plan for and implement significant changes to curriculum and indicated they had to be very careful in what they said and whom they said it to. For example, an early career teacher stated:

I didn’t want to rock the boat, I was afraid I might insult someone and at the time I was still contract so I wanted a position so I was being careful not to offend anyone too much.

The lack of permanency affected what they were prepared to do. This same teacher after she obtained permanency became quite active in curriculum development in her school and no longer described being restricted in what she could work toward. This aspect is important for new teachers who were seeking permanent employment or require mentoring, as mentoring was not available to contract teachers.

**School culture and school priorities**

School culture includes the culture of the school, what was valued by the school and school community, including the positions of power found in schools. It also includes the embedded practices, which in the research was sometimes found to have been school specific. School culture was found to be advantageous if the school held Home Economics in high regard; teacher described that their input into curriculum change in this kind of circumstance was easier for them to achieve. In general, in schools where Home Economics was recognised as a high profile subject, teachers described themselves as effective in classroom, department and school curriculum decision making.

Teachers who had learnt culturally approved ways of achieving curriculum change in their school had enhanced capacity to influence school curriculum. In contrast, teachers who had little
knowledge of school culture, whether overt or hidden culture, or had little knowledge or experience of administration decision-making processes had reduced capacity and experienced reduced agency. Some teachers identified the embedded school operational practices in their school had inhibited their capacity to exercise teacher agency to make curriculum change. The disempowering practices they discussed included curriculum decision-making teams that excluded Home Economics teachers.

A recent school practice that became evident in the data was a change in priority teaching areas for schools. Many schools were no longer focused on identified local school interests and needs; rather they focused on the AC and improved school performance in NAPLAN. This change of focus had prioritised the development of literacy and numeracy skills in students and elevated the position of core subjects such as English, Mathematics, Science and Studies of Society (SOSE), to the detriment of practical subjects such as Home Economics. For example, one teacher stated:

_The school changes now are rolling on the back of National Curriculum...because of these changes we felt we were going to be squeezed out...so we felt like there was no place for us and we didn’t feel supported from the admin._

A final school practice related to the effect of school culture on agency was where Administration and at times colleagues encouraged or forced teachers to maintain the school status quo rather that change practices. Bullying and intimidation were identified as tactics used to achieve school status quo.

**Conclusion**

Home Economics teachers experienced decreasing agency at the department and school level over the course of the study. They were influenced and affected differently according to individual teacher interpretations. These contextual factors included their gender, chronological age, and teacher life cycle stage, past experiences, feelings and emotions as well as teacher identity and teacher motivation. Also identified was teachers’ conditioning through school and hidden culture. Supportive collegial and administrative relationships were identified as essential for high agency. By far the most commonly identified factors that affected teacher agency involved the school processes, school and subject organisation in which teachers worked, the curriculum and syllabus documents they had available to them and school and parent perceptions of the subject. In addition, school Administration, school culture, job intensification, and lacks of professional development opportunities were also identified to have affected their teacher agency. Decreased teacher agency for Home Economics teachers at this point in time is not a desired characteristic, particularly in a school environment that is constantly changing curriculum. Teachers need to believe their input will make a difference. Without Home Economics teachers’ input into curriculum and curriculum decisions in schools, the future of the subject in schools will be challenging.

**References**


