

Track 4: Institutions, processes & outcomes

Who dunnit?

How and why female classroom assistants in Scotland are under-valued

Chris Warhurst, Kay Gilbert, Johanna Commander, Dennis Nickson and Scott Hurrell
Scottish Centre for Employment Research
University of Strathclyde

Contact: Prof. Chris Warhurst
Department of HRM,
University of Strathclyde
Glasgow
G1 1XU
UK
chris.warhurst@strath.ac.uk

The work of Scottish classroom assistants is undervalued according to the Equal Opportunities Commission (Scotland) (2007). This finding, after a lengthy General Formal Investigation (GFI), is hardly surprising given that these classroom assistants are typically female, part-time and a 'caring' occupation (see Lloyd et al. 2008; Grimshaw and Rubery 2007). What is interesting and novel, and enabled by this GFI, is analysis of how and why this outcome has occurred to a new public sector occupation at a time when ensuring 'equal pay for work of equal value' is a widely accepted criterion of job evaluation and employment. Drawing on unique methodology, conducted over nearly three years by the authors for the GFI, this paper examines a fundamental question: why and how does a female dominated occupation become undervalued?

The Scottish Executive (the name of the devolved Scottish Government) introduced classroom assistants to Scottish schools in 1998. The initiative was then expanded to 5000 classroom assistants in 2002, with 15,000 by 2007. The purpose of these classroom assistants was to raise educational attainment by reducing the pupil-adult ratio in the classroom and allow teachers to be relieved of some routine, non-teaching elements of their work (Wilson et al. 2002). However, as policy shifted to practice, the EOC (Scotland) became concerned about a possible gendered undervaluing of the job and, under the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, launched the GFI.

The research found that classroom assistants' work had evolved and expanded to encompass a wide range of tasks, some of which were of a higher level than might be expected – indeed overlapping with the work of teachers. Some classroom assistants were involved in the curriculum and some responsible for the welfare of pupils, sometimes administering powerful drugs. Some were also employed to fill specialist skills gaps, such as music and ICT. Local authority directors of education, head-teachers and teachers alike recognised the increasing, indispensable contribution that classroom assistants make to a pupils learning. Classroom assistants however, are paid at one of the lowest public sector grades. Moreover compared to comparable grades of workers in the public sector, the nature of their work goes largely unattributed and so is undervalued. The outcome is a 'sticky floor'

with classroom assistants' work evolving and expanding but which is not reflected in pay. Importantly, besides being able to discern this outcome, the research for the GFI also enables examination of the process by which it occurred.

Following a pilot, it was agreed with EOC ((Scotland) to adopt a mixed method, multi-stakeholder involvement research methodology. The research was conducted in three phases using both quantitative and qualitative methods, with interviews, focus groups and surveys. Phase one involved national surveys of classroom assistants, head-teachers and teachers. Interviews were also conducted with the employers - local authority Directors of Education. A representative from the Scottish Executive's Education Department and government minutes from the Executive's Working Group responsible for advising implementation were obtained. Two representatives of the Working Group were also interviewed. In phase two, eight focus groups were conducted with 64 classroom assistants drawn from local authorities selected for representative size, location and rural/urban mix. In addition, a short questionnaire collecting demographic details, job information and school characteristics was collected from participants. Public sector trade union officials were also interviewed. Phase three involved a national survey of overtime working by classroom assistants across a stratified sample of schools. It is this unique and extensive dataset drawn from the key institutional actors across central government, local authorities, schools and trade unions, and focused on inception, implementation and operational issues that enables examination of how and why differences emerged between the intended, stated and actual work of classroom assistants, and which resulted in their undervaluing.

Analysis of this dataset reveals a systemic planning failure in which the focus on meeting educational policy marginalised consideration of the workforce intended to deliver on this policy. Whilst it was recognised at the inception stage that the task-set of classroom assistants might evolve and expand and under-payment occur, and that the workforce was likely to be predominantly female, no attempt was made to gender-proof the implementation and operation of the job. Ambiguities in government-proposed jobs descriptions, the absence of trade union involvement in deliberations, local authority resource limitations and failure to monitor the job, school budget constraints faced by head teachers and the commitment of classroom assistants to work 'for the love of the job' then opened up space for the job to evolve and expand both ad hoc and unmonitored.

These findings suggest that theories explaining the undervaluation of women's work centred on public sector economics (Rubery and Humphries 1992), trade union ineffectiveness (Thornley 2006), women's preferences (Hakim 1995); and labour market supply and demand (Bygren and Kumlin 2005) and processes of recruitment and selection (Kmec 2005) are not wrong, merely analytically myopic. Instead our research highlights how political and cultural processes combine to create the undervaluing of women's work despite the mainstreaming of equal pay for work of equal value. Thus, with its unique methodological approach, the novelty – and value – of our research is that it lends empirical weight to the recent conceptual claim of Grimshaw and Rubery (2007: 28) that there is no 'universal theory of wages' (p.28) creating undervaluation but instead an interplay of different logics and compromises amongst the key institutional actors. As a consequence, despite claims for new

worlds of work, familiar processes remain – and with old outcomes for women, even for those in a new occupation.

References

Bygren,M. and Kumlin,J.(2005) 'Mechanisms of organizational sex segregation organizational characteristics and the sex of newly recruited employees', *Work and Occupations*, 32/1, 39-65

Grimshaw,D. and Rubery,J.(2007) *Undervaluing Women's Work*, EOC Working Paper Series No. 53, Manchester: EOC.

Humphries,J. and Rubery,J. (eds.)(1995) *The Economic of Equal Opportunities*, Manchester: EOC.

Lloyd,C. et al.(2008) *Low wage work in the UK*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Hakim,C.(1995) 'Five Feminist Myths about Women's Employment', *British Journal of Sociology*, 46/3, 429-455

Kmec,J.(2005) 'Setting occupational sex segregation in motion demand-side explanations of sex traditional employment', *Work and Occupations*, 32/3, 322-354

Thornley,C.(2006) 'Unequal and low pay in the public sector', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37/4, 344-358

Wilson,V., Schlapp,U. and Davidson,J.(2003) 'An "extra pair of hands"? Managing classroom assistants in Scottish primary schools', *Educational Management and Administration*, 31/2, 189-205.