

Professional teacher associations as a vehicle for collaborative professionalism and teacher agency

Cheryl Brennan, President -
Australian Professional Teachers' Association

Professional teacher associations play a significant role in the lives of teachers, providing leadership, advocacy, networking and professional learning on specific subjects or fields of interest. There is the potential for professional teacher associations to be leveraged to foster greater collaborative professionalism across subjects, states and sectors. There is also the potential for policy makers to accord greater weight to the teacher voice in educational decision making at the state and national levels. Collaborative professionalism and teacher voice are two strategies that can lead to improvements in student learning outcomes across the nation.

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS

There are a myriad of professional teacher associations across the country, and what they all have in common is that they are made up of passionate teachers and other educators who share a specific educational interest and are keen to improve their practice to benefit student learning outcomes. The common educational interest is usually a curriculum area, such as Mathematics, Science, Geography or Drama, or could focus on learning stages such as Primary English or middle schooling. It could also be based around a different focus, such as teachers of gifted and talented students, or early childhood educators.

Some teacher associations have very high membership numbers of thousands, others have many hundreds, whereas others with a narrower focus have very small membership numbers of less than fifty. Some have a very long history, such as the Mathematical Association of NSW which celebrated its centenary in 2010, whereas others have formed much more recently.

Teacher associations can be national associations with state and territory chapters, or they could be state or territory based. This reflects the fact that Australia is a federation and that authority for legislation on school-based education belongs with the states. Almost all teacher associations are cross sectoral, meaning that they include teachers from public schools, independent schools, catholic systemic schools and schools both with and without a religious affiliation, so there is a broad range of views and experiences represented amongst the membership. Members include those in the tertiary sector involved in the field of interest, as well as those in early childhood education, although the vast majority of association members are school-based teachers.

Professional teacher associations provide good “value for money” as a result of voluntary time and effort compared to “for-profit” professional development providers and, due to their small decision-making structure, professional teacher associations are able to respond relatively quickly to changed circumstances compared to universities and educational systems.

Teacher associations are legal entities that are registered organisations either through their state or registered through ASIC as companies limited by guarantee, with a formal Constitution and regular meeting structure, run by an elected Board of Directors. Teachers and educators who lead associations are usually not paid for their efforts; they are passionate about education surrounding their area of interest and give of their time free-of-charge to benefit their colleagues and the profession. Professional teacher associations need to prioritise among competing needs, of which there are many. Some associations receive funding for particular projects from governments, although they are keen to maintain their independence, and some of the largest associations have a paid executive officer and other clerical support staff who assist with day-to-day administration.

Teacher association membership is voluntary and a fee is charged, which provides five main benefits. The first benefit is access to subject-specific professional learning for teachers at all career stages, with a focus on innovative, research-inspired classroom practice. The second benefit is access to quality resources for teachers, which may include access to a refereed journal. The third benefit is networking and collaboration on pedagogical practices across schools and sectors, which could include working on funded projects. The fourth benefit is leadership opportunities for teachers to run professional learning activities and share best practice. The final benefit is to contribute to a representative voice for teachers of that particular subject or area of focus – for example, dealing with educational bodies

about implementing subject-focused curricula. The focus is clearly on teaching and learning in the particular field of interest of the association. Professional teacher associations thus perceive that they have different concerns to teacher unions, which are focused on industrial issues such as levels of pay and working conditions.

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN VARIOUS PROFESSIONAL TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS

Professional teacher associations formally join together in various ways to further achieve their goals. For example, many teacher associations are affiliated with state or territory joint councils. At the national level, the Australian Professional Teachers' Association (APTA) is a federation of state and territory joint councils, representing a network of up to 200,000 teachers. Its vision is to provide national leadership that supports and advances the teacher profession, and it evolved from the Australian Joint Council of Professional Teaching Associations (AJCPTA).

At either the state or national level, bodies of combined teacher associations provide member associations with four main benefits. Firstly, opportunities to share and collaborate on common areas of interest such as student wellbeing, senior secondary pathways or teacher standards. Secondly, collective advocacy for involvement in educational decision making such as the House of Representatives Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession or the Review of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. Thirdly, promoting effective leadership of member associations, for example, through governance courses or advice on strategic planning. Finally, through supporting the running of member associations, for example, with secretariat support, maintaining membership databases and payments, and providing assistance in organising conferences.

PROFESSIONAL TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS AND COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONALISM

Members of professional teacher associations in Australia have long recognised the importance of networking with like-minded colleagues to sound out ideas, see what works in similar situations, and to be challenged with new ideas and opportunities previously not considered. In Australia, professional teacher associations provide a sense of identity to members, facilitating connections between people who understand each other's thought processes and motivations. Professional teacher associations are particularly valuable to those who are the only teacher of their subject in a school, which is commonly the case for those in regional and remote locations.

As the Education Council is currently finalising the new iteration of the Educational Goals for Young Australians, it is worth considering opportunities for professional teacher associations to foster greater innovation and effectiveness into the future. Emerging research is confirming the importance of “collaborative professionalism” (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018) to improve student learning outcomes. Collaborative professionalism is about “how

to collaborate more deeply, in ways that achieve greater impact”, recognising that we can no longer drive change from the top through stronger assessments, more specific standards or the establishment of teams and clusters to implement the relatively simple wishes of others. No profession, nor the people served by it, can progress without the ability and willingness of professionals to share their knowledge and expertise to figure out complex problems of practice together (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018, p.16).

The key to improving the social capital (Fullan, 2016, p.121) of teachers is to use the group to change the group; that is, to use relationship and networks of teachers, formal and informal, to improve teacher practice. Through refining the focus of their operations so that collaborative professionalism is central, professional teacher associations are ideally positioned to facilitate personal and collective responsibility for continuous improvement across schools, across subject areas, across sectors, and across the profession.

PROFESSIONAL TEACHER ASSOCIATIONS AS CONSTRUCTORS OF EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Teacher associations in Australia are inherently democratic and empowering for teachers – they allow teachers to be in control, give teachers a “voice” and allow them to contribute to their own professional standing (Moroney, 1999, p.1). An example of associations taking a key role to support the development of teachers has been in the teaching standards area. National associations have been instrumental in undertaking research projects with universities and jurisdictions from 2000 that have led to the development of the Australian Professional Teaching Standards (Hayes, 2006).

Teacher agency and professional influence are increasingly recognised as crucial elements for school and system improvement, and through teacher associations there is the potential for teachers to play a more central role in decision making and policy formation. The concept is to “flip the system” (Evers and Kneyber, 2015) “so that teachers become the instigators, creators and implementers of educational change” rather than change coming from policymakers relying on international organisations and think tanks, factoring out the teacher's voice (Harris and Jones, 2019, p.124).

Professional teacher associations and the national body, APTA, have a deep and nuanced understanding about the contexts where teaching and learning take place, across a range of subjects, sectors and states. It is essential that policies are developed with an appreciation of these contexts in order for the most effective ones to be adopted. APTA represents the collective voice of teacher associations and, as such, should be a part of any national decision making and policy making process in education.

Biographies

Cheryl Brennan, Australian Professional Teachers' Association President, Professional Teachers' Council NSW Board Member, Economics and Business Educators NSW Vice President, and Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) teacher at Oran Park Anglican College, NSW.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Professional teacher associations in Australia have a long history of facilitating the professional growth of Australian educators through providing courses and networking, and by providing a collective voice for teachers, often in a specific subject or field of interest. Professional teacher associations can take advantage of new opportunities to facilitate collaborative professionalism across subjects, schools and sectors. State and federal governments can facilitate more effective policy design and delivery by promoting teacher agency through listening to the collective voice of professional teacher associations.

References

- Evers, J. and Kneyber, R., eds. (2015). *Flip the system: changing education from the ground up*. Abington: Routledge.
- Fullan, M. (2016). *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Hargreaves, A. and O'Connor, M.T. (2018). *Leading collaborative professionalism*. Centre for Strategic Education Seminar Series Paper 274. Melbourne: Centre for Strategic Education.
- Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2019). *Teacher leadership and educational change*. *School Leadership & Management*, 39(2), 123-126.
- Hayes, T. (2006). *Professional teaching associations and professional teaching standards: Embedding standards in the 'discourse of the profession'*. Acton, ACT: Teaching Australia – Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership Ltd.
- Maroney, W. (1999). *Teacher professional associations as key contributors to the effectiveness of teachers' work*. Paper presented to the Fifth UNESCO-ACEID International Conference, Reforming learning, curriculum and pedagogy: Innovative visions for the new century, December 13-16, Bangkok, Thailand.