Subject teaching associations\(^1\) and the professional representation of teachers in New South Wales

Fiona Hilferty
University of Sydney

Abstract:

Subject teaching associations are a neglected area of educational research. Easily dismissed as neutral organisations that simply seek to pass on objective subject matter knowledge, they have been largely absent from the research literature. A study that is currently being conducted at the University of Sydney is challenging this simplistic conception by exposing subject teaching associations as influential organisations engaged in political power struggles over contested versions of curriculum and teacher professionalism. Defining subject teaching associations as subject specific organisations that represent both the professional and industrial needs of teachers, the study explores the strategies employed by these organisations in their attempts to ensure that the voices of teachers are heard.

In focusing on the role and purpose of these organisations, this paper explores the professional representation of teachers in New South Wales. The central argument is that professional representation can be viewed as either a site for competition or collaboration. A vision for collaborative professional representation is outlined.

Introduction

The stated aim of most subject teaching associations is to provide leadership and professional support for teachers within a subject specific domain. The provision of professional advocacy and representation is central to this mission, yet it is a role and purpose of subject teaching associations that has been under-scrutinised in the research literature. Just how do these organisations represent the professional voice of teachers in all relevant forums? To what extent are they effective in voicing the professional concerns and needs of teachers? And finally, how might the professional representation of teachers in New South Wales be reconceptualised. This last question is based on the belief that the fragmented form of professional representation in New South Wales, by diverse and disparate groups, weakens the collective power of teachers to influence decisions concerning their own work.

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\(^1\) This term is preferred to ‘subject teacher association’ or ‘subject association’. The former suggests incorrectly that membership is limited to teachers, whilst the latter does not indicate the pedagogical focus of the association.
These questions are being explored as part of a larger study that is currently being undertaken at the University of Sydney. The data and ideas contained in this paper are therefore part of a PhD in progress that is investigating the contribution of subject teaching associations to the teaching profession. Whilst more interviews will be conducted, a significant amount of data has already been collected from key informants at the New South Wales Board of Studies (hereafter BOS), the NSW Department of Education and Training (hereafter DET), the Professional Teachers’ Council of NSW (previously known as Joint Council of NSW and hereafter PTC), and two case-studied subject associations - the History Teachers’ Association of NSW (hereafter HTANSW) and the Science Teachers’ Association of NSW (hereafter STANSW). The intention of this paper is to use these data to address the questions posed above, and to suggest an alternative for teacher representation based on a collaborative reorientation of organisations. As evidenced in the list of data sources though, this study focuses solely on the current situation in New South Wales and so generalisations to the broader Australian context may be inapplicable.

Professional Representation in New South Wales

The professional representation of teachers in New South Wales is undertaken by a multitude of disparate organisations. These include teacher unions such as the NSW Teachers’ Federation, umbrella organisations such as the PTC, and many specialist organisations catering for distinct groups of teachers. These latter organisations include head teacher associations, associations for primary school teachers and subject teaching associations which cater mainly for secondary school teachers. Currently, each organisation operates independently, has a specific area of focus, and collaboration between them is almost non-existent. Whilst this situation perhaps reflects the diverse nature of the teaching profession it has been suggested by researchers that this form of representation keeps teachers divided (e.g. see Ozga & Lawn, 1981). Approximately 400 professional teachers’ associations exist throughout Australia (Dempster, 1996, pg. 11), yet there is no uniformly accepted peak body. Despite repeated attempts from within the profession itself and indeed by government invitation and startup funding to form such a national organisation no such body exists presently.

In New South Wales the PTC claims to be the peak body for professional teachers’ associations, with 47 member associations, largely comprising subject teaching associations. However despite this claim, interviews with subject teaching association executives have revealed that little connection exists between the PTC and its member associations. Both STANSW and HTANSW are affiliated with the PTC yet executives from these organisations expressed little knowledge of the function of the PTC and the benefits, apart from cheap printing, that affiliation with PTC offered. The PTC was generally regarded as a “fringe group” that was “too removed” (ex STANSW President) from its member associations. Furthermore, on more than one occasion the issue of withdrawing from the PTC was raised at the executive meetings of one case studied association. Association executives grudgingly decided, however, to remain affiliated to
ensure representation on BOS Curriculum Committees (hereafter BCC’s). As participation on BCC’s is restricted to PTC nominees, uncertainty about continued representation was enough to preserve affiliation.

It is suggested in this paper that the ‘peak’ status of the PTC rests partly on this circumstance. As the opportunity for inclusion on BCC’s is offered through the PTC, and subject teaching association executives are unwilling to risk losing their one appointed representative, they are also unwilling to cancel their membership with an organisation that they view as providing very little else. The PTC, for instance, has no real power to influence BOS policy making. Unlike union bodies, Principal organisations, and organisations representing the government and non-government school systems, the PTC does not hold a legislated position on the Board of the BOS. This exclusion of classroom teacher representatives is viewed by the PTC as an attempt to silence “the professional voice of teachers” -

We’re 40,000 people, 40,000 teachers is our membership - we’re a significant body and in some instances we’re a greater number than other groups that are on that Board, so I’d have to question why so many business representatives need to be there above the teachers. And if you’re talking about enhancing the status of the profession, silencing is all about - well dumping on them basically and saying we don’t value you. (PTC Vice President, 2000)

Despite this exclusion the PTC is recognised by the BOS as the peak body for professional teachers’ associations in NSW, with one Inspector stating - “Joint Council [PTC] will always be used as the formal conduit” (BOS History Inspector, 2000) through which BCC representation will be sought. Both the History and the Science Inspectors acknowledged, however, that the PTC is “probably not yet at that stage where it’s playing the same role as peak bodies in other professions” (BOS History Inspector, 2000).

Whilst it could be argued that PTC’s membership figure quoted above is somewhat misleading as it has been determined by tallying the individual members of each member association, most of whom would be unaware of their reciprocal membership to PTC, the fact remains that the PTC is a large association, yet has little power to represent the professional voice of teachers. Omitted from BOS decision making committees, regarded by at least two member associations as not being “particularly relevant” (STANSW Vice President, 2000) to their needs, and viewed as somewhat lacking in its abilities to effectively represent the teaching profession by certain BOS executives, the question of who does represent the professional voice of teachers in New South Wales needs to be further explored.

Professional Representation in New South Wales: A Problematic Role for Unions?

The NSW Teachers Federation (hereafter NSWTF) does claim to represent the professional interests of all public school teachers, however, it is asserted here, as on their
Website, that the NSWTF is first and foremost an industrial organisation (www.nswtf.org.au/future_teachers/nswtf.html). It is bound by industrial relations regulations and, as a registered trade union, focuses on teachers’ working conditions and entitlements. These are the issues that are deemed to be central to the teaching profession:

Throughout its history, Federation has campaigned long and hard on issues affecting public education, teachers’ salaries and teachers’ working conditions, those issues which are at the heart of teaching as a profession in New South Wales. (www.nswtf.org.au/about/history2.html)

The Federation’s professional development program centres around these issues and is run, in fact, by the Trade Union Training section of the organisation. Course content includes topics such as teachers’ rights and service conditions, workplace disputes, current Federation campaigns, grievance procedures and union structures and operation.

Because of this emphasis on salaries and conditions the argument could be made that the NSWTF narrowly constructs its role in enhancing teacher professionalism. This is perhaps because teacher professionalism is viewed through the lens of a primarily industrial organisation. Not surprisingly then, issues related to pedagogy and subject matter, two areas considered by subject teaching associations, and indeed by certain key researchers (e.g. Helsby, 1996; McCulloch, Helsby & Knight, 2000), to be central to teacher professionalism, are absent from the professional development program. Furthermore, they are absent from any discussion of teacher professionalism that can be found on the Federation’s website (www.nswtf.org.au - keyword search: teacher professionalism).

The extent to which teacher unions enhance or undermine teacher professionalism was a sharply contested topic during the recent Senate inquiry into the Status of Teaching (A Class Act, 1998). Many submissions, including those by union representatives, pointed to the fact that professional and industrial issues are indivisible in the work of teachers. Such a position has been repeatedly argued by Barbara Preston:

For teaching, perhaps more than many other professions, it is practically impossible to separate the ‘industrial’ from the ‘professional’. Teachers’ conditions of work - class sizes, relief from face-to-face teaching, the organisation of teachers’ time and opportunities for collaboration, the physical environment of schools, facilities and resources - and decisions about them are intrinsically both industrial and professional. So too are matters such as hours of work, access to professional development and study leave, deployment and promotion criteria and processes, and dealing with issues such as harassment, stress, victimisation and apparent incompetency or less than satisfactory work. Likewise, decision-making on curriculum and other educational matters from the school to the system and national levels, the wider social role of schooling and the teaching profession, all have industrial aspects intertwined with the professional (1995, p. 36).
Whilst it is not disputed here that there is an intersection between professional and industrial issues in the work of teachers, the quote cited above fails to acknowledge, however, that at the level of teacher organisation there is a perceived separation between these domains. The following comments were typical of association executives interviewed, most of whom are also practicing classroom teachers. They indicate that teachers make a clear distinction between the work of unions and the work of professional associations:

    in the classroom it’s the professional association, in the staffroom and the common room its the union, its that sort of separation that has occurred (HTANSW Executive/Head History Teacher, 2000).

    my view of it would be that the union is there to look after the interests of its members, you know, their working conditions and things like that, but I think the professional association like STANSW is working on a different level. It’s looking towards the actual craft that teachers provide, and I don’t think unions are really that heavily engaged in looking at that sort of thing (STANSW Executive/Head Science Teacher, 2000)

    I don’t see STANSW as getting involved in union issues, you know industrial stuff, and that’s the essential difference (STANSW President/Head Science Teacher, 2000).

    We’ve got to remain, I think, fairly narrow in our [subject specific] focus because we just can’t do anything else.... and with the Federation, I see the Federation as really looking after the much broader body on industrial issues (HTANSW Executive/University Lecturer, 2000)

    the intellectual nature of what you do I think is better looked after by a professional association than a union (STANSW Executive/Head Science Teacher, 2000).

These comments suggest that the professional representation of teachers by teacher unions is problematic in some respects, even if only because unions are perceived as being restricted to the domain of the ‘industrial’ such as campaigning for increased wages and improved working conditions. Also, it seems logical to propose that if teacher unions were seen as effectively representing the professional concerns of all teachers there would be less need for the multitude of teacher professional associations that currently exist.

It is beyond the scope and intention of this paper to review the complexities of the professional versus industrial debate and its implications for the representation of teachers. There is much contention within this field of study with opinions ranging from those such as Parry & Parry (1974) who have historically argued that teachers must choose between professionalism and unionism; to researchers such as Preston (1995) who maintain that there is no conflict between the two. It is suggested here, however, that
straightforward assertions that the professional and industrial are inseparable in the work of teachers fails to acknowledge the reality that teachers themselves, as indicated in the comments above, are able to separate these domains and tangibly do so at the level of representation. Moreover, structural factors regarding the representation of teachers such as the independent operation of both unions and professional associations reinforces the perception that professional and industrial issues are disconnected, and can be dealt with separately (see Ozga & Lawn, 1981).

Professional Representation in New South Wales: What role for subject teaching associations?

This inevitably leads back to the question of who represents the professional voice of teachers. This paper has shown that in New South Wales this task is not the sole domain of any one organisation. The professional concerns of teachers are voiced by numerous organisations with varying degrees of effectiveness and different areas of focus. This situation emphasises the complex reality of representing such a large and diverse occupational group. The teaching profession is not only hierarchical in nature it is also divided according to differing school systems, year levels and subjects taught. In part, the segmented nature of the profession has resulted in the establishment of specialist associations that represent teachers affiliated through subject boundaries. These organisations - subject teaching associations, are defined as representing both the professional and industrial needs of teachers. The remainder of this paper will focus on examining their role in providing professional representation for teachers.

The role of subject teaching associations in supporting, advocating and representing the professionalism of teachers has been a largely neglected research topic (Layton, 1988, pg. 15). Perhaps viewed as politically insignificant, and restricted to the role of delivering professional development, the activities of these organisations have, until recently, avoided much scrutiny. A study currently being conducted at the University of Sydney is challenging this simplistic conception by presenting an image of these organisations that is both complex and ambiguous. Preliminary analysis of interviews with HTANSW, STANSW, BOS and DET executives indicates that subject teaching associations play a significant role in enhancing teacher professionalism and representing the professional voice of teachers. They achieve this largely through three key areas - influencing curriculum development; delivery of professional development; and the advocacy of organisational strategies that assert the professionalism of teachers.

Curriculum Development

In the area of curriculum development subject teaching associations are able to exert considerable influence. As discussed earlier, a subject association representative is included on any BCC established during the development phase of a new syllabus. Whilst the discretionary power of curriculum committees to influence syllabus development was notably lessened during the 1998 BOS restructuring process, inclusion on these committees at least ensures that accurate, early information about proposed
syllabi changes reaches the associations. It is what subject teaching associations are able to do with this information that holds considerable power and enables them to influence the development of curriculum.

In 1998, immediately after the BOS restructuring, HTANSW embarked on a bitter and lengthy dispute with school governing bodies over proposed changes to the History syllabus and the new development process. HTANSW argued that the new development process diminished the contribution of subject associations and, by extension that of teachers, to curriculum development. They regarded the reformed process as a threat to teacher professionalism -

Teachers have perceived themselves as a group of professionals who do have a stake in having a say in what is taught and how it is taught, and all of that has been eroded with this last round of curriculum change (HTANSW Executive Member, 2000).

HTANSW responded by mobilising many History teachers into action.

Through a concerted media campaign, and the distribution of newsheets, journals and even special bulletins, HTANSW appealed to its members to join them in “calling for a halt” to the curriculum revision process. HTANSW even supplied members with the fax numbers of chief executives at the BOS and DET to ensure teacher dissatisfaction was registered. The President of STANSW used a similar strategy when changes were proposed to science syllabuses, however, she went one step further by outlining what teachers should say in their letters of complaint:

You need to write both as individuals, as faculties and as STA Branches to the Minister for Education requesting a delay of at least one year in order to get the syllabuses correct and to allow you to adequately implement the Stages 4-5 in the year 2000. Be wary of saying that students will not have learnt the mandatory content that underpins the new syllabuses. This makes us look unprofessional... Your argument is that you want time to ensure the documents are well developed... (Haire, 1999, p. 2).

Through such action STANSW was successful in ensuring revisions to the science syllabi. Similarly, HTANSW experienced marginal success in securing changes to syllabus documents. Through these campaigns the power to influence the development of curriculum was expressed through the organisation’s ability to enlist substantial teacher support, rather than through direct involvement with BOS curriculum committees.

These positive results suggest that subject teaching associations are able to affirm a continuing influence on curriculum despite being excluded from input at the curriculum committee level. Indeed, of the few studies undertaken overseas into the work of these organisations similar conclusions have been reached. British researcher Peter Knight (1996) for example, exploring the impact that the National Curriculum has had on two
subject teaching associations in England, concluded that despite government prescription of curricula they remain powerful organisations. This, he argues, is because associations still have much to offer in terms of the ‘delivered’ curriculum:

When policy comes to be implemented, power passes from the policy makers to the teachers. [Subject teaching] associations have exercised authority through their actions to help teachers to implement different versions of the national curriculum. It is suggested that this is a vital source of associations’ legitimacy... (p. 284)

According to Knight (1996), the provision of professional development by subject teaching associations is a vital role - one that enables the professional concerns of teachers to be heard and addressed.

**Professional Development**

During the 1990’s the state education department of New South Wales dismantled much of its curriculum support unit. The DET discontinued the contracts of subject inspectors who had been relied on as providers and organisers of subject specific support throughout all districts of New South Wales. Whilst some support is still provided through the curriculum directorate of the DET, executives from HTANSW, in particular, are critical of the type of assistance offered. As evident in the quote below, HTANSW believe there has been a shift in professional development focus at the DET - away from subject specific opportunities, to those which advocate generic skills and departmental priorities:

The discourse has changed because what we grew up with as professional development is enhancing your own personal knowledge and skills, but what its seen as now is implementing sector priorities and system priorities. So professional development is no longer for you as an individual Historian or Scientist or whatever to brush up on your knowledge - that’s considered an extravagance, and something you must pay for yourself. What the Department is putting all its money into is systems implementation, and if you look at the priorities they’re literacy, they’re numeracy, they’re computer education - they’re not History... its certainly not a subject orientation (HTANSW Vice President, 2000).

Viewing subject specific professional development as that which is most valuable to teachers, many subject teaching associations have filled the void and are now the largest providers of this type of training in New South Wales - as asserted by an association executive - “we’ve become defacto providers of any real professional development” (HTANSW Vice President, 2000). These organisations play an essential role in assisting the professional needs of teachers, thereby improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools throughout the state.

Both HTANSW and STANSW’s commitment to professional development is demonstrated in a number of ways. Through seminars, workshops and conferences each
organisation offers regular, formal opportunities for members and others to increase their subject matter knowledge, learn ways to tackle new syllabus documents, and integrate new content into teaching programs. A criticism of what is offered, however, is that it is firmly rooted in a traditional paradigm. Adopting a ‘top-up’ approach to professional development, it is lecture style presentations with minimal interactivity that dominate PD programs. Whilst this may reflect organisational realities such as volunteer labour and a shoe-string budget, it also makes problematic association claims to promote excellence in education. It is argued here that the focus on subject matter sometimes overshadows the pedagogical dimension of the organisation and thus little emphasis is given in PD programs to introducing new conceptions of pedagogy, experimenting with innovative teaching techniques or the evaluation of teachers’ classroom experience with subject matter. However, despite the limitations to these formal PD programs, discussions with attending teachers indicate that most were happy with what was offered. This suggests perhaps that in an environment of rapid syllabus change, teachers are grateful for the kind of support offered by subject teaching associations. Teachers leave PD Days with material that is immediately applicable to their classrooms, able to be incorporated into their unit plans and compatible with syllabus requirements.

Teacher subject associations also offer informal opportunities for professional development as they provide a forum through which teachers can form collegial relationships, share ideas and discuss problems. The significance of this function is asserted by Canadian researchers Talbert and McLaughlin (1996, p. 132) who maintain that teacher networks outside the immediate school context sometimes provide the only strong professional community for teachers. For executives of the associations too, opportunities for informal professional growth abound as they are introduced to the politics of subject gatekeeping and curriculum construction, thereby expanding their vision of education beyond their own school -

We keep people informed by giving them the opportunity to network, share resources and so on... On the other side, I think being a member of the executive of the HTA is a really valuable professional experience and I think it does much to raise the professionalism of the people who are involved, because it gives you a whole new set of contexts in which to operate (HTANSW Vice President, 2000).

Continuous learning is an essential feature of teacher professionalism, and it is upheld by subject teaching associations. Whilst it is suggested in this paper that these organisations do not promote a sophisticated conception of professional development, they do nevertheless offer programs that meet the immediate occupational needs of teachers, expand subject matter knowledge, and reinforce the professional identity of teachers as subject matter experts. In addressing the professional learning needs of teachers these organisations provide a form of representation that both the NSWTF and the PTC are unable to do. They promote professionalism through the development of subject specific professional knowledge - a service that is highly valued by teachers.
Organisational Strategies

Subject teaching associations operate to provide for and represent the professional needs of their members, largely in the realm of subject matter knowledge. The advocacy and adoption of organisational strategies that promote the professionalism of teachers is central to this mission. Preliminary analysis of data from both HTANSW and STANSW indicates that these organisations have been effective in promoting a version of teacher professionalism that upholds the specialist knowledge of the teacher as central (Hilferty, 2000). This goal has been achieved through the adoption of considered, explicit initiatives - such as STANSW’s involvement in the development of professional teaching standards. Alternatively, teacher professionalism is enhanced indirectly by the very existence of these organisations that give teachers access to the processes of educational decision making and by enabling their voices to be heard in an educational environment that, at times, seems unsympathetic to the concerns of individual teachers.

Both organisations genuinely support the principle of providing professional representation for all teachers. Significantly, representation is not restricted to members and in this way the focus for each organisation is broadened beyond its mediocre membership (approximately 1,110 for both HTANSW and STANSW) to the greater teacher population:

The things that I do and write about is with all teachers in mind (STANSW President, 2000).

Subject teaching associations are the defacto mouth piece for all teachers - not just members. I think its important that we make sure that what we represent is the best practice and we try to make sure this is the case (HTANSW President, 2000).

Executives were quick to point out however, that whilst the organisations acted with the concerns of all teachers in mind they were aware that many teachers opposed their views:

We do have detractors and we do have critics, and I’m sure that there are many teachers who would say the HTA doesn’t speak for me (HTANSW President, 2000).

Such an acknowledgment helps to ensure that an artificially unified view of teachers’ needs and concerns is not created and acted on. For it is, afterall, the recognition and appreciation of the diversity of the teaching profession that enables genuine community representation.

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2 In providing professional development and asserting the right of teachers to influence curriculum development, subject teaching associations are enacting organisational strategies that promote the professionalism of teachers. This sub-section is therefore slightly misleading as it suggests that the two previously discussed sections do not fall into this category and are distinct topics. Whilst this is obviously not the case the decision was made to discuss curriculum and professional development separately because they are such large topics that demand separate attention.
It is the recognition of this diversity that has partially prompted the involvement of subject teaching associations in the establishment of professional teaching standards. STANSW, through its National body, ASTA, is currently helping to develop standards for highly accomplished science teaching. Similar projects are also underway with the Mathematics and English teacher associations. As well as endorsing the subject specific expertise of these organisations, these initiatives affirm the centrality of subject to the lives of secondary school teachers, a point that has been noted by various researchers (e.g. Siskin, 1994). Moreover, unlike earlier attempts to develop generic criteria for Advanced Skills Teachers, which were dominated by school governing bodies and unions, the STANSW project is asserting the right of teachers to take control of the professional standards agenda.

The proactive involvement of STANSW and other subject teaching associations in such projects proclaims the professionalism of teachers. It locates the responsibility for the development of standards of practice within the profession itself. It also ensures that the professional voice of teachers is heard loudly. Finally, with the standards planned to be used to improve both the teaching and learning of specific subjects, and the career paths of teachers, the project has important implications for raising the status of the profession.

**Conclusion**

Canadian researcher, Nina Bascia (1997), asserts that teachers’ needs for representation and the form in which that should take is bound up “in the complexity and diversity of who they are, their work, and the context in which they work” (p. 445). This paper has shown that for many teachers, subject teaching associations provide effective representation. This representation helps to construct a concept of teacher professionalism that is rooted in a particular subject. Such a conception is powerful as it is compatible with the beliefs of many secondary school teachers whose professional identity is similarly grounded as teachers of a particular subject (Siskin, 1994). For others though, such as primary school teachers who are multi-disciplinary in focus, this specific form of representation is inappropriate to their needs, hence a multiplicity of organisations have evolved.

Viewed from this perspective, professional representation can be described as a site of contestation and competition, with numerous organisations vying for members. Furthermore this conception, which reinforces occupational difference rather than similarity, weakens the collective power of teachers to influence education policy and practice. It is suggested in this paper that a reconsideration of professional representation as a site for collaboration, rather than competition is needed. The challenge facing teacher organisations is to find ways of representing a diversity of orientations within a culture of collaboration. To incorporate new structures, for example, where the professional interests and needs of teachers as subject matter specialists can be supported by generalist organisations. This alternative vision of representational and professional unity may enable teachers to play a more central role in educational decision making, and realise the potential for greater power that lies in collaboration.
References:


