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THE PROFESSIONAL VOICE: TEACHER UNIONS AND THE PROFESSIONAL NEEDS OF TEACHERS

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BACKGROUND

Teacher unions are by far the biggest teacher organisations in Australia. The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents 175,000 teachers and associated professionals across the country. Commentators often see the AEU as akin to a blue collar union concerned only with wages and working conditions. The rules of the AEU however, make it clear that the organisation's purposes are to meet the professional as well as the industrial interests of members and to work towards improving the quality of education for all students. The key idea behind this paper is to describe how two state branches of the AEU have acted, each in their own way, to implement the professional component of these purposes.

Teacher unions occupy a unique space in the educational landscape. The place of the unions has been researched in recent times by Nina Bascia who wrote:

"No other organization or entity can identify, report, and respond to the work-related needs of the teaching profession the way unions can...No other entity can combine the strengths of playing both the insider and outsider roles within the larger educational infrastructure." (Nina Bascia, 103rd Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, University of Chicago Press, 2004)

The professional role of the AEU is perceived as complex and contestable both within the union and outside of it. Inside of the union the issue is not about the legitimacy of the role but implementation questions such as the level of resourcing to matters which are seen as more professional than industrial, the wisdom of developing detailed policies in many areas of pedagogy and curriculum and the possibilities of having to compromise professional principles to achieve improvements in salaries and working conditions. Outside of the union its professional role has been highly contested by right and centre-right governments. The notion, deriving originally from think-tanks in Thatcher's Britain, of reducing the role and power of teacher unions by 'professionalising' the teacher workforce and excluding teacher unions from any role in professional matters has had strong echoes in Australia.

Under the Kennett Government in Victoria in the 1990s representative structures which included the teacher unions, such as Teacher Registration Boards, were abolished; teacher unions were excluded from any consultation with the Education Department over curriculum and other professional areas; a new Standards Council to ‘represent the teaching profession’ was established with representatives from all organisations in the professional field – subject associations, principal groups etc - with the deliberate exclusion of the teacher unions; education bureaucrats were discouraged from making any contact with the union and a block was imposed on email traffic between the AEU and the Department. At the national level, the Howard Government similarly attempted to exclude and marginalise the AEU as an organisation which had a professional voice. It set up its own body to represent the teaching profession – Teaching Australia – and followed the Kennett precedent of including all the main players except the teacher unions.

Despite the millions of dollars lavished by the Kennett and Howard Governments on their own ‘professional’ bodies (buying support!), without the teacher unions the legitimacy of these bodies in the profession was always in question. Rather than representing the teaching profession, they existed in an antagonistic relationship with the organisations which, because of their level of membership and role, could be said to truly represent teachers. The normal work of the AEU is to represent and promote the interests of the profession, to speak for the profession and negotiate on behalf of the profession. For AEU members, industrial and professional interests merge into one. Attempts to artificially separate these elements fail to understand this fact. When Don Anderson analysed the role of the AEU in the teaching profession he compared it to the role of equivalent organisations in other professions.

“Advocates for teacher professionalism should understand that there is no inherent incompatibility between industrial advocacy and scholarly and development functions. In fact the two go together, as may be seen in medicine, law, engineering etc.”

(Don Anderson, *The Profession of Teaching*, ACE, 2005, p.36)

The reality for teachers is that industrial issues have professional implications and professional issues have industrial implications. Underpinning working conditions and salaries is the nature and complexity of the teacher’s professional role. Professional issues inevitably sit behind the agreed terms and conditions in Certified Agreements. Class size for example, is a crucial factor in the learning outcomes of students. Fewer students in each class enables teachers to more effectively carry out their professional role. Limits on class sizes are generally seen as an industrial claim by the negotiating representatives of the employer but are always a professional issue for teachers. Another example is the centrality of teacher-based assessment in the learning process. Teacher assessment not only identifies progress made by students but provides information about the most appropriate next steps in the learning program. The professional importance of this task requires dedicated time for teachers which, in turn, translates into reductions in face-to-face teaching time.

The professional role of the AEU is multi-faceted and its emphasis varies from branch to branch within the union itself. This is a reflection of the structure of the union which is

largely state and territory-based with a small federal office. There is no national employer and each branch/associated body relates directly to its own department of education. Branches also have different professional histories and are of different sizes depending on the population of teachers they represent. The descriptions of the different approaches taken by the Victorian and Tasmanian Branches highlight this fact. However, in all cases the AEU is the largest single teacher organisation in each jurisdiction and its sheer numbers (42,000 in Victoria, 6,200 in Tasmania and a national membership of 175,000) provide it with one of its greatest professional strengths - an unrivalled source of professional information and expertise. The following list is not intended to be in any way exhaustive of the professional activities undertaken by the union through its branches, but serves to illustrate the breadth and depth of the AEU's professional role.

- Advocacy on behalf of the professional concerns of individual members, groups of members and the profession as a whole with government and education authorities.
- The development and successful implementation of policy in curriculum and professional areas which represents members' views and may be, on occasion, highly critical of existing policies of education departments and other authorities
- The provision of affordable, quality, needs-based professional development which is not designed just to implement the latest official policies.
- Democratic structures which allow individuals and groups to have their educational ideas discussed and debated by their peers and then turned into union policy.
- Professional networks and special interest groups which can be curriculum area-specific or cross-curriculum and may be across schools, early childhood, TAFE and adult provision.
- A focus on professional and curriculum issues specific to public education and the policies of departments of education.
- Frank and informed advice to members on professional and curriculum matters
- Publications designed to further debate and discussion about professional issues and concerns.
- Development of partnerships with other organisations which have interests in the professional areas of teaching.
- Advocacy for a safe learning environment for teachers and students

THE AEU VICTORIAN BRANCH: A PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The AEU Victorian Branch has had a long tradition of addressing the professional, as well as the industrial, needs of its members. The union's professional involvement has ranged from publications dedicated to professional matters, to policy-making and advocacy, professional development and campaigns for change in areas such as post-compulsory education and assessment and reporting. The reality for a union like the AEU, which draws its membership from a profession, is that most of the 'industrial' issues affecting its members have a professional base and rationale. The Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2008 – the enterprise bargaining Agreement for teachers, principals and paraprofessionals in Victorian government schools – prefaces its

clauses about careers, salaries and working conditions with a professional rationale which begins:

“Increasing the educational attainment of all Victorian children requires a commitment to support teachers to fulfil their responsibilities in the professional contexts in which they work.”

For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on the more purely professional activities of the union - the organisation of professional development, professional networks, professional publications and professional partnerships. Taken as a whole, the way the AEU in Victoria operates in these areas is unique in Australia.

Professional Development Organisation

While there is some overlap, the union makes a general distinction between what can be termed trade union training and professional development. Two people are employed as training officers by the union and coordinate and deliver (with other union staff) training of workplace-based union representatives and other industrial-related training. Professional development on the other hand, is provided by arms length bodies set up by the AEU specifically for that purpose. AEU Education Services Inc, the Victorian Educational Leadership Consortium and the Teacher Learning Network are bodies which have formal structures separate to the AEU and employ dedicated staff to coordinate and administer their programs. The programs are delivered by presenters from a range of backgrounds – the managers of the different bodies, AEU officers, teachers and principals, university academics and private consultants. Each of these bodies receives funding from the Department of Education (DEECD) to deliver PD programs on their behalf. The union also runs professional conferences for different groups within its membership.

Education Services Inc

AEU Education Services Inc was set up in 1994 by the Victorian Secondary Teachers Association (a predecessor union of the AEU) as a separate legally incorporated association with the purpose of providing professional development to teachers and principals in government schools. It initially received considerable funding from the Federal Government’s National Professional Development Program (NPDP). In the 1990s it worked with a range of partner organisations including the Victorian Independent Education Union (VIEU), subject associations, several universities and the Catholic Education Office. It employed a number of project officers and ran statewide PD programs in many areas such as vocational education, assessment, teacher appraisal, pedagogical improvement and innovative curriculum.

When the NPDP funding was stopped by the Howard Government, the unions combined together to fund from their own resources one of the NPDP programs - the Teacher Learning Network (see below). In the 2000s the Victorian Educational Leadership Consortium (see below) was established as a standing committee of AEU Education

Services Inc and the Association received government funding to run a number of leadership programs through this body. The Association also partners Deakin University in a contract from the Department of Education to deliver 10 programs a year (for the past 5 years), known as 'Refresher Courses'. The courses are directed at qualified teachers on extended leave or from interstate or overseas or from other employment and are designed to bring them up-to-date with the current curriculum, pedagogy, culture and organisation and employment conditions in Victorian public schools.

Victorian Educational Leadership Consortium

The Victorian Educational Leadership Consortium (VELC) was set up in 2002 by AEU Education Services Inc to address the professional development needs of leaders and potential leaders within the Victorian government teaching service. It arose out of the AEU sponsoring a principal to spend a year working in the union on professional issues as part of the Victorian Government's Teacher Release to Industry Program (TRIP). Initially VELC was a joint venture with Deakin University and the Victorian Department of Education. Later Deakin withdrew and VELC continued as a cooperative project supported by the AEU and the Department.

VELC operates a number of educational leadership programs. It runs an annual conference for principals, an international speaker program, a support program for teachers applying for Leading Teacher and principal class appointments, support for individual school improvement and support for individuals in leadership positions. It was the successful tenderer for the Education Department's statewide Preparing for Leadership program (2007-09) and the Emerging Leaders program (2010-2012). It also oversees the Balanced Leadership program in Victoria under an agreement with the Mid-Continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) from Colorado in the United States. This program is offered to school leaders by several Departmental Regions under the management of VELC.

Teacher Learning Network (TLN)

Teacher Learning Network (TLN) was set up in 1994 in response to the National Professional Development Program (NPDP). Originally it was a partnership between the AEU, the Victorian Independent Education Union (VIEU), Monash University, the Catholic Education Office and the Joint Council of Subject Associations. When the Howard Government eliminated the NPDP, the AEU and the VIEU decided to fund TLN themselves and in 1999 set up a separate incorporated association to do this.

TLN offers professional development to teachers and principals in both government and non-government schools and in other educational institutions. Schools and early childhood centres pay an annual membership fee to belong to the network. This entitles them to access the wide range of professional development programs and activities at discounted rates, consultancy services and copies of the TLN Journal (see below). The TLN PD programs include both short term and extended courses in classroom management, assessment, literacy and numeracy, brain development and learning,

inquiry learning, special needs, professional learning teams, leadership and management, health and well-being, early childhood teaching and programs for school support staff. The courses are delivered by a variety of providers from schools, universities and private consultancy services. TLN also has several contracts with the Education Department. The web address is <http://www.tln.org.au/>

AEU Conferences

The AEU runs specific professional conferences for different groups of its members. These include beginning teachers (separate primary and secondary), student teachers, early childhood teachers, TAFE teachers, principals and education support staff. The content of these conferences is a combination of current issues of concern (generally keynote addresses) and perennial areas of professional need (generally workshops). They emphasise a practical school-based and classroom-based approach to issues. For example, the Beginning Teachers Conferences in 2009 had workshops on matters such as classroom management, student engagement in learning, pedagogy and relating to parents. The 2009 principal class conference featured the new national curriculum, school performance reporting and the debate on teacher quality and performance pay.

Professional Networks

The AEU has established professional support networks for specific groups within its membership. The best example of purely professional networks is those created for Curriculum Coordinators and Professional Development Coordinators. They provide support and feedback for teachers in these roles. They are largely email-based and include representatives from most Victorian government schools. Another network, which is partly professional, has been set up for new educators – teachers in their first years of teaching and teacher education student members. We are also developing an environmental education network.

Curriculum and PD Coordinator Networks

The AEU has separate Curriculum Coordinator and PD Coordinator Networks. They were set up in 2005. The networks have a combined total of over 1,300 members and cover most of the 1,600 government schools in Victoria. The members of these networks occupy key leadership positions in schools. Coordinators opt into the networks and are eligible to join so long as they are AEU members. The AEU sends out a Coordinator E-News to each group once per term. The E-News contains updates on developments in education at a state, national and international level; professional development opportunities from the various AEU-linked organisations (VELC, TLN, AEU Educations Services Inc) as well as other organisations which request support from the union (universities etc); new research findings; relevant resources; information about reports and inquiries; requests for assistance; and details of our latest professional publications. The networks also provide feedback to the union on various professional matters.

New Educators Network

The New Educators Network is made up of teachers in their first few years of teaching and teacher education students who are student members of the AEU. While the basic aim of the network is to encourage members to be active in the union, it offers new teachers and student teachers PD in areas such as classroom management and job application processes and runs an online discussion forum which includes professional issues.

Professional Publications

The AEU publishes two dedicated professional journals, two professional e-newsletters and includes considerable professional content in other publications which have a more industrial focus.

Professional Voice

Professional Voice is the AEU's professional journal, presently published three times a year. We make it available in hard copy as well as online at http://aeu-vic.labor.net.au/professional/professional_voice.html. The aim of *Professional Voice* is to provide a critical discourse on educational issues of interest and concern to teachers. The journal is a collection of articles based around a theme and contains an interview with a leading international or Australian educationist. Over the past 8 years the themes have included: pedagogy, teacher quality, assessment and reporting, education and social action, ICT, educational leadership, post-compulsory education, the middle years, the early years, the national agenda, the organization of learning and social inclusion.

The writers are local (Victorian), national and international. They come from academia, teachers and principals, the AEU, government and independent experts. Our most recent edition – 'Beyond Edu-Babble' – includes articles from Guy Claxton, Howard Gardner, Robin Alexander, Neil Hooley, Lee Teitel and Patrick Griffin. The regular interview series has included Richard Elmore, Ken Leithwood, Ben Levin, Peter Mortimore, Roger Goddard and Alan Reid.

TLN Journal

The Teacher Learning Network Journal is produced three times per year and sent to TLN member schools (multiple copies) and to individual journal subscribers. The TLN Journal is, like *Professional Voice*, theme-based but has a more practical orientation to the classroom. The journal also has more teachers writing for it than *Professional Voice*. Recent themes have included: special needs teaching, student management/engagement, learning communities, thinking skills/thinking schools, teachers as researchers, leadership and school cultures.

AEU News

The AEU News is published eight times a year and is mailed to all AEU members. It is a compendium journal which combines industrial campaigns, membership information for different sectors of the membership such as early childhood, women, beginning teachers etc, general stories about current issues such as bushfires and their effects on schools and teachers, indigenous education etc and professional issues. Our most recent edition included articles on the major review of primary education in the UK (Cambridge Review) and literacy and numeracy testing at P-2.

Other

- Coordinator E-News (see above),
- Professional components in newsletters for different sectors of the membership e.g. primary, secondary, TAFE etc
- Principal class bulletins and
- The professional issues section of the AEU website
<http://www.aeuvic.asn.au/professional/> .

Professional Partnerships

The AEU has formed professional partnerships of common interest with a number of different organisations over the last two decades. The partnerships have been with universities, parent groups, welfare and community groups, subject associations, the independent education union and the Victorian Department of Education. The purposes of the partnerships have included joint campaigns on professional issues, the provision of professional development, discussion and exchange of information and the development of mutual understanding between organisations with interests in the same areas. Two longstanding partnerships of a more formal nature are the Victorian Teacher Education Forum based around pre-service teacher education and the 5 Orgs group (previously the 3 Orgs) representing organisations which draw their membership primarily from the public school system in Victoria.

Victorian Teacher Education Forum (VTEF)

The Victorian Teacher Education Forum (VTEF) consists of representatives (selected by the Deans) from all teacher education faculties/departments in Victorian Universities, the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT), the Victorian Independent Education Union and the AEU. The university representatives are a combination from each institution of academics and some non-academics (who administer the school placement/experience programs). The body was set up by the AEU and is administered by the AEU. It has existed in various forms since the mid-1990s. The network links created by the VTEF facilitate ongoing contacts and negotiations about a range of issues between the AEU and individual universities.

The VTEF agenda covers areas of common interest relating to teacher education (in the broadest sense). It spends a lot of time discussing the practicum, new developments at an individual university level or from the VIT or the unions, state and federal government developments/inquiries/reports and various areas of common concern such as the

difficulties of school placement, teacher supply and demand, course selection, course accreditation etc The group has also lobbied entities like the state government, the state department and the VIT on behalf of agreed positions eg indigenous studies in pre-service education, rural placement incentives and support.

5 Orgs

The 5 Orgs represents the common interests of teachers, principals, parents, students and school councils in government schools in Victoria. The 5 organisations in the title are the AEU, Parents Victoria, the Victorian Council of School Organisations (VICCSO), the Victorian Student Representative Council and the Principal Class Association. The group existed for many years as the 3 Orgs representing the Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union (and prior to the setting up of the Victorian Branch of the AEU in 1995 the separate teacher unions which amalgamated into the AEU), parents in government schools and the school councils of government schools. In 2009 the body representing students in Victorian schools and one of the bodies representing principals in government schools were added. The 5 Orgs is hosted and administered by the AEU.

The major issue of common interest for the 5 Orgs is the support and promotion of public education. The Orgs have taken common positions on a number of issues and have lobbied education departments and governments for improvements in the quality of education in public schools and for the resources to enable that to happen. The 5 Orgs are presently developing a charter for public education. Existing campaigns by the combined Orgs include opposition to standardised population testing and school league tables.

THE AEU TASMANIAN BRANCH: A PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVE

AEU Tasmania, on a smaller scale, mirrors many of the professional functions of the AEU's larger branches and associated bodies. Specifically, these include:

- Conferences and forums for sectors of membership e.g. New Educators, Women in Education, Support Staff, Aboriginal Educators, Principals and Promoted Teachers and Early Years Educators
- Training for members on aspects of professional work e.g. Behaviour management; working with students with high needs.
- Publication of professional matters in the union's quarterly journal, *Ed.Lines*
- Advice and assistance to members on a range of professional matters.

AEU Tasmania also contributes to AEU Federal in advocating nationally for the teaching profession.

The focus of this part of the paper is on recent branch activism on matters that involve a significant professional perspective.

Recent AEU Members Focus Group

AEU members' views of the importance of a professional perspective are clear from a 2009 focus group of members who gave the following broad responses in answer to the question of how they saw their Union best representing their needs into the future.

- A Proactive Union – Setting the education agenda
- A Professional Voice – Advocating educational issues
- Strength Through Collective Action - Harnessing members' experience and expertise; democratic decision-making

A follow-up meeting refined their views about improving schools to effectively meet the needs of all students whilst treating teachers with dignity and respect. Such a view of their union seeks a balance between the industrial and the professional aims of the organisation:

A. Students require:

- Engaged teachers
- Alternative programs within schools
- Alternative programs off site

B. Teachers require:

- Access to means of renewal
- Alternative career paths
- Early retirement options

Audit of AEU Branch Activity

The AEU Tasmanian Branch September 2009 audit of union activity showed that there are a number of current union activities which involve a significant professional element. The six discussed below are by no means an exhaustive list, yet illustrate the use of various union approaches such as organising around issues, seeking allies, solving problems collectively, and empowering members to act at workplace level.

A Memorandum of Understanding on Key Issues

In 2007, in negotiations for a new Teachers Agreement, teacher salaries were assured yet a range of more professional matters remained unaddressed. Strike action on the part of Tasmanian teachers was narrowly averted when Minister Bartlett agreed to talks on these matters. At this meeting, a memorandum of understanding was established detailing the following issues to be dealt with over the course of the 4 year industrial agreement.

- *Student Behaviour:* alternative settings and alternative programs – AEU to follow up review of a DoE pilot program in the north (due for completion October); continue discussions about provision in the south for 2010.
- *Class Sizes:* The AEU continues to closely monitor class sizes due to Minister Bartlett's commitment, rolled out over five years, to fund schools to reduce class sizes to 25 or less (to year 7). For many schools the average class size is 25 or below but there are a number of schools that have averages of greater than 25.

Guarantees on class size reduction will remain a major lobbying issue and the AEU will seek the support of parent bodies on this area.

- *High and Additional Needs Funding:* The AEU has taken part in a review of the profiling mechanism about the funding allocation for students with special needs. It is hoped that a more equitable funding model has been developed as a result, but this will need to be reviewed after schools receive their allocations this year.
- *Schools Resourcing Review:* The AEU has representation on the DOE committee for the review of funding allocations to schools. The Union is aware of the need to review the funding of special schools and will continue to lobby in this area.
- *Reporting to Parents:* Reporting to parents on student progress is a major undertaking and professional responsibility of teachers and schools. A recent Ministerial push to have a state-wide uniform reporting format resulted in a burgeoning workload for teachers. The AEU is encouraging teachers and principals to adopt a manageable workload in this area.
- *Teacher Registration:* In the late 1990s, the AEU Tasmanian Branch was a key advocate for teacher registration – at a time when only two states had registration. The AEU has been involved in recent consultations organised by the Teachers Registration Board about amendments to the Teachers Registration Act 2000. This has involved some tidying up of words and clarification within the Act and some changes in relation to the following things.
 - Board Functions
 - Application for Limited Authorities to Teach (LATs)
 - Police Reports
 - Inquiries and Hearings
 - Notifications by employers re allegations of unacceptable employee behaviours.
 - Standards in teaching

All concerns about the draft legislation that were raised by the AEU were addressed prior to the Bill being presented to parliament in November 2009.

CONCLUSION

The two case studies presented in this paper illustrate the diversity of the professional role of the Australian Education Union. A broader paper encompassing all of the AEU's branches/associated bodies around Australia, and its Federal Office, would considerably extend this level of diversity. The professional agenda strongly informs the work of the union around the country and there is a growing awareness that this will only expand over the next decade.



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