

CURRICULUM REVIEW AND THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF EDUCATION

With Cheryl Brennan, President
of the Australian Professional Teachers Association

The following represents excerpts from an interview conducted by the editors with Cheryl Brennan the author of the printed article also republished in this edition with permission "Professional teacher associations as a vehicle for collaborative professionalism and teacher agency". The article and interview provided interesting insight into the ongoing process of curriculum review and changing landscape of education throughout 2020.

Amanda: In the article you make a point that "professional teacher associations are able to respond relatively quickly to changed circumstances". In your experience in 2020 how important do you think teacher associations have been in assisting teachers respond to the changing teaching and learning demands of Covid-19?

Cheryl: I think Teacher Associations have played a really important role. The reason why they can respond quickly is because of the smaller decision making structure of associations compared with school systems, or a larger decision making body. There is usually a smaller board of people of associations who will work together and are close to the classroom situation and so they are more aware of emerging issues like the COVID 19 situation. The board knew straight away what was happening because the board was directly involved and knew what the problems and challenges were and were able to come up with solutions.

So, the teacher association boards are involved with the processes and what is happening in the classrooms and they are able to put into action in a few days or weeks a strategy for the teachers within that association which is much quicker than a system wide solution or focus. There is less bureaucracy to work through with those decisions.

Emily: How are smaller associations, best positioned to leverage opportunities for collaborative professionalism?

Cheryl: One of the main ways is that a lot of the associations have been able to expand offerings through zoom sessions online. There has been a huge expansion in Teacher Associations using these platforms to run Professional Development Courses throughout COVID 19; there has been a shift from face to face PD and a move to virtual platforms. Some associations had already been doing this, and moving into this area, but most were not really engaged and were relying on face to face professional learning. But once teachers in the classroom were using ZOOM in their classrooms a lot more, this made Associations more comfortable with this platform, and participants more willing to engage with this format. This has been one of the huge things to come out of COVID 19. Some smaller associations have been able to take advantage of the opportunity involved there, and have been able to be more inclusive of regional and remote teachers. This is a huge advantage, teachers who were isolated and unlikely to be able to attend face to face professional development that tended to be capital cities were now on an equal footing, and therefore fostered greeted inclusion across all teachers across the state. Also, within the associations, some of the members on the board, it is easier to be involved if the work is organised across ZOOM or other digital platforms.

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Smaller associations are in a good position to take advantage of tech and be on an even footing with larger associations. Larger associations often have paid staff or retired teachers on board who have more time and can assist with stresses and issues associated with remote learning. Smaller associations have struggled, they don't have staff and the pressure has fallen on boards of smaller associations and they have to think more creatively about how they use their time more effectively. The larger associations, if they have more full time staff they have access to government assistance; Job Keeper is available to larger associations but not smaller associations. The State Joint Councils have been available to assist associations throughout COVID 19, and have helped smaller associa to adapt and respond as well. So, being smaller doesn't necessarily mean that you are at a disadvantage, you just have to think more creatively. If they [smaller associations] are smart, and on the leading edge of what is happening, they can take advantage of technology and people's willingness to engage with it a lot more to set up and create more networks within their community of teachers to move ahead.

One thing to consider, however, is how to make these changes work in a cost perspective. Some large associations this year stand to incur large financial losses as a result of these changes, and they will need to rethink these processes as they move into the future to remain economically viable. We all have to think about how things will work, and what is of interest to our members. There will be more trial and error in the next few months going head.

Amanda: How do you see that Professional Teacher Associations might be able to exercise agency with regards to the current Curriculum Review?

Cheryl: It is really essential that associations are involved in all stages of the curriculum review process. In NSW we have a review of curriculum at the state level, and we also have a review of curriculum at the national level with ACARA, so we really need associations to have input at the early, middle and later stages of the process towards implementation. This is important because we are very close to the classroom where the changes are to be implemented, and we have a feel for what is going to work for our particular subject areas, what will interest students, what has worked in the past, and what opportunities are already there and to make it even better into the future. So we are aware of that. And teaching associations, because we are cross-sectoral, covering all school types, we have all different views represented on our boards and within our membership. Within that we discuss all those differing views and are best placed to understand the contexts of teachers; we are aware of more than our own school environment as we hear what is happening elsewhere and have to be flexible with solutions across contexts already. I think professional teachers associations have that broad perspective in members and boards and when engaged with NESAs or ACARA, we need to be aware of that advantage and push that. A lot of the consultation going on at the moment at state and national level seems to be dividing everything up into school sectors, and then taking representatives from school sectors, which may be still very narrow. Well, teachers associations are already structured this way and already have been operating within this structure and approach for a long time and really need to push the advantage of this when engaging with NESAs and ACARA. APTA has been pushing those points very strongly and I think the message is getting across about the advantages of teacher associations but not everyone making decisions is fully aware of that, and we need to keep pushing that message. Associations need to be aware of consultative processes and step forward to ensure that they are being heard. At the national level, the Australian Professional Teachers Council have been advocating a lot and making progress alongside PTC NSW at the state level which is excellent.

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Amanda: *What do you believe is the most important role of the Australian Professional Teachers' Association in 2020–2021?*

Cheryl: Definitely advocacy for professional associations, and the importance of teacher voice in educational decision-making. Throughout this year, this has been our core activity at the national level and as I just mentioned we have made headway. We have had lots of meetings with important staff members for members of ACARA and the Federal Department of Education, Skills and Employment and AITSL, and been involved with joint projects there. To the point that we are being asked to provide input on draft papers and documents before they are sometimes even made public. We are heading toward the stage where the Australian Professional Teachers Association will have to start drawing upon expertise from more people from state joint councils of professional teachers in NSW and other states and territories because we are getting more requests for feedback to national bodies.

Emily: *What do you see as the main challenge facing Professional Teacher Associations in the near future?*

Cheryl: For smaller associations across the country, there is some financial difficulty due to the changes brought about, and some have not been able to run face to face PL this year. This is something that these small associations have relied on for their financial stability. So that would be the main issue for smaller associations heading into 2021. They will need to rethink what they have done in the past. At this stage, there is no guarantee that you would be able to run a professional annual conference next year, so smaller associations need to keep that in mind. They will have to think of alternate ways to raise money, which might be through a ZOOM event. So there will be much more creativity needed to turn that challenge into an opportunity and to grasp opportunities that already exist as well. If they are struggling, they might be relying on a small number of people, and might need to rely on other smaller associations or PTC at the state level or APTA at the national level for guidance and advice. Most associations are very willing to collaborate and share their experiences. I know I sat in on many sessions run by other associations, where they were experiencing success, and this helped me to understand how to best run online sessions with many students. I got feedback on what people had learned, and these associations should really not be acting in isolation but seeking out support and help. It really opened up my eyes for new ways of doing things.

With larger associations a number of them will have to look at the shift in revenue sources that are likely to come in 2021. Large student conferences which brought in a large amount of revenue may not be viable due to covid restrictions on gathering and the shift in expectation of students that they can access a lot online now or through ZOOM. The price point of these sessions also appear to be lower than face to face, and a lot of thinking needs to go into this. This is a challenge for larger associations. But at the same time throughout all of this, with emerging technologies there are new opportunities and openings for greater equality between regional and remote students and teachers to be involved in learning as well which could see an increase in total numbers overall if marketed correctly or if the PL courses are set up to appeal to a larger number of people.

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The following article:

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Title: "Professional teacher associations as a vehicle for collaborative professionalism and teacher agency"

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By Cheryl Brennan

Summary:

The article gives a comprehensive analysis of the work of professional teacher associations in Australia and their role in building teacher capacity. It helps teachers involved in professional teacher associations to advocate for them as a critical source of support for teachers, in addition to their employer and universities.

Link: <https://www.apta.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Prof-Ed-Teaching-a-Noble-Profession-C-Brennan.pdf>