

CHAPTER 3 STATUS AND PROFESSIONALISM

What is status? What is professionalism? This section of the Report discusses these questions with relation to teachers. It sets the scene for later consideration of the factors which enhance teacher status and professionalism and those which undermine them.

THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONALISM

Much has been written on this subject. There is no absolute agreement on what constitutes a profession. However, certain characteristics of professions and professionals are recognised by most writers on this subject. These characteristics include:

- a strong motivation or calling
- the possession of a specialised body of knowledge and skills acquired during a long period of education and training
- control of standards, admission, career paths and disciplinary issues
- autonomy in organising and carrying out their work
- the need for the ongoing exercise of professional judgement
- members accept and apply a professional code of practice.¹

Some writers on this subject² have gone so far as to identify six different types of professionalism which they call classical, flexible, practical, extended, complex and post modern. While the emphasis is rather different in each, they all include most of the characteristics listed above as being central to the definition of a profession.

1 For discussion of these issue see, for example, John Sheldon. *Are we Professionals?* Australian College of Education Newsletter, NSW Chapter, September 1993, pp 19-23; Terri Seddon (ed). *Pay, professionalism and politics: Reforming teachers Reforming education*, Australian Education Review No 37, 1996; Barbara Preston. *Professional practice in school teaching*. Australian Journal of Education, vol 40, no 3, 1996, pp 248-264

2 See for example Ivor F Goodson & Andy Hargreaves (eds). *Teachers' Professional Lives*. Falmer Press, London, 1996, pp 4-24

A slightly different perspective on professionalism was provided by Professor Anna Yeatman from Macquarie University in her evaluation of the National Schools Network.³ She drew attention to what she considered to be the four fundamental features of professionalism, which she described as:

- an ethic of service
- a lifelong openness to learning about the demands of professional practice
- a recognition that the best evaluators of professional practice are professional peers (although other stakeholders should also be involved)
- openness and accountability to all stakeholders.

Teaching has been conceptualised as a labour, a craft, and an art as well as a profession,⁴ as follows:

- **teaching as labour** - where the teacher carries out a program devised by others
- **teaching as craft** - where the teacher possesses specialised techniques and understands the rules governing their application
- **teaching as profession** - where the teacher possesses specialised techniques and exercises judgement about their application, thus building a body of theoretical knowledge
- **teaching as art** - where the teacher possesses professional knowledge and skills and personal resources enabling them to use these skills in novel, unconventional and unpredictable applications.

3 Professor Anna Yeatman and Judyth Sachs. *Making the Links: a Formative Evaluation of the first Year of the Innovative Links Project*, School of Education, Murdoch University, 1995

4 See for example the Report of the Ministerial Taskforce on the Condition and Status of Teaching in Western Australian Schools. '*... good teachers make good schools...*' Perth, 1990, p 4

The Hon Dr David Kemp MP, when Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training nominated the factors which he regarded as identifying a profession.⁵ These included:

- respect for the professional expertise of its members and for their capacity to achieve objectives which are highly valued by the community
- recognition of the positive and helpful contribution the profession makes to people's daily lives
- the maintenance of professional standards and ethical behaviour of its members
- significant rewards for outstanding professional work.

A wide range of views was presented to the Committee, and exist in the literature, on the extent to which teaching can be classified as a profession. UNESCO has no doubt that teaching is a profession. At a 1966 intergovernmental conference on the status of teachers it declared:

Teaching should be regarded as a profession: it is a form of public service which requires of teachers expert knowledge and specialized skills, acquired and maintained through rigorous and continuing study; it calls also for a sense of personal and corporate responsibility for the education and welfare of the pupils in their charge.⁶

In most submissions to the Committee and in evidence at public hearings teachers distinguished between their own assessment of the importance of their work and how it is viewed by the community at large. Teachers considered themselves to be professionals but felt that their professionalism was not recognised by others. A view of teaching persists which emphasises the interpersonal aspects of the task rather than the pedagogical. The result is a failure to appreciate the complexity of teaching and the high level of skill required to teach effectively.

5 Hon Dr David Kemp MP, Minister for Schools, Vocational Education and Training. *Supporting Quality Teachers*. Address to Australian College of Education conference on the Status of Teachers, Melbourne, 30 April, 1997

6 UNESCO. Intergovernmental conference on the Status of Teachers, Paris, 1966

There can be little doubt that, as a profession, teaching suffers from an identity crisis of monumental proportions. The historical notion of teaching as a 'calling' or 'vocation' has done very little to help the cause in establishing teaching as a 'real profession.' The very term 'vocation' invokes an array of terms to do with reliance, self-sacrifice, loyalty, faith and devotion. The marginality of teaching as a profession owes much to such language.⁷

A common theme in evidence to the Committee was teachers' lack of influence over curriculum, training and professional development. This undermined their professionalism.

Many people accepted that controlling standards and entry was an important part of being a professional and that the absence of this control is one reason that teaching is not considered to be a profession.⁸

As employees, teachers generally have not had the opportunity to define their own professional standards or to have input to their own accreditation or registration processes in the way other professions have done.⁹

In some professions status is enhanced by the specialised knowledge of its practitioners. It could be argued therefore that teachers' professional standing would increase if greater efforts were made to emphasise the special skills and knowledge they possess. In this view teachers suffer in comparison with other professionals just because everybody has been to school and therefore supposes they understand what teaching is all about.

On the basis of evidence received during the Inquiry the Committee has formed the view that a major contributor to the low status of teachers is the community's lack of understanding of just what is involved in teaching. It would therefore be more helpful to improving status if teachers were able to articulate more clearly their professional skills and convey more emphatically how these enabled students to learn.

7 Submission no 147, vol 6, p 88 (Mr Wilkowski, NT)

8 Submission no 238, vol 11, p 188 (Tasmanian Secondary Principals' Association)

9 Submission no 155, vol 6, p 175 (Australian Joint Council of Professional Teaching Associations Ltd)

THE CONCEPT OF STATUS

Status is a measure of the esteem in which an individual, group or occupation holds itself or is held by others. A number of factors contribute to high status. These include the possession of highly valued and specialised knowledge and skills and, often, large financial rewards. But status is difficult to measure. It often has to be earned personally but, at the same time, it is often ascribed to someone merely by virtue of their belonging to a particular group. These different aspects of status, one which attaches directly to individuals and another which attaches to a group, are worth teasing out, especially given the apparent contradiction between the esteem in which individual teachers might be held and that in which teachers as a group might be held.

‘Individual’ status can be described as that which is earned by or ascribed to a person on the basis of personal merit. Such a person demonstrates the skills, integrity and professional acumen which result in their being held in high regard by those with whom they are directly involved. Many teachers enjoy that kind of regard from students, parents or colleagues.

‘Group’ status, for present purposes, is described as that which somebody enjoys or has ascribed to them not because they are *known* to possess certain skills, qualities or attributes, but because they are *presumed* to possess them simply because they are members of a particular group. Whether that member is worthy of such status is a separate question, but as a member of a particular group they are presumed to possess the appropriate qualities until proven otherwise.

Group status as we have just described it is largely secured as a result of that group establishing itself on some kind of institutional basis, asserting itself as the voice of its members and being accepted by others on those terms. What flows from this is influence on political and financial decision-making processes, a capacity to make other groups or institutions take your interests and needs into account, and the power to attract high rewards for members of the group.

To date teachers have frequently enjoyed individual status but they have failed to establish their group status which would enable them to exercise authority and influence in the way normally associated with a

profession. In the Committee's view, it is vital that teachers establish themselves as a self-regulating, autonomous professional group of the type described above.

Teachers' sense of alienation from decision-making processes was a recurring theme in this Inquiry. An organised professional voice would address this problem.

The first 15 years of my teaching career I was able, through my professional associations, my union and my involvement in school based committees, to have a positive effect on the level and standard of education I have been able to offer my students or at least I feel as if that were the case. In the last few years I feel as if I have effectively been disenfranchised from the decision making processes at all levels.¹⁰

The status of teachers in Australia is declining. This was the view expressed almost universally to the Committee by teachers, students, academics, professional associations, parent organisations and bureaucrats. It is a view supported by the general literature on the subject and by specific research findings.

Many reasons were advanced to account for this perceived decline in teacher status, and these will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters. However, it is important to draw attention to a number of the most significant contributing factors to declining status early in the discussion.

A consideration of the status of teachers and teaching must take into account questions about the values placed on various forms of work by the society in which that work is undertaken. For some, the status of teachers reflects the low value placed on teaching in Australia. This point was made in a submission from the Early Childhood Association.

Any work that cannot be easily counted and measured in monetary terms has been accorded less status in our increasingly economically rational society. Teaching, because it is concerned with long-term outcomes and is part of our society's investment in the development

10 Submission no 144, vol 6, p 58, (Mr Aich, Vic)

of human and social capital, (as opposed to economic capital) is not highly esteemed.¹¹

In Australia there is something of a contradiction between community and government commitment to education and their lack of commitment to teachers. Government commitment to education over the last twenty years has found practical expression in rapidly rising school retention rates (at least until 1992) and a major expansion in higher education provision, to give but two examples. Even the market model of education now in force continues to value education as a commodity, while largely disregarding the interests of those who provide it. To some extent this is also the position of parents and of the community more generally. They value education because they recognise the difference it can make to an individual's life but they do not, in many cases, extend this recognition to those who make it possible - our teachers. Any consideration of the status of teachers must be mindful of this underlying contradiction.

The same phenomenon is evident in many comparable Western countries (with the possible exception of Canada). Any serious attempt to halt or reverse the declining status of teachers therefore will require acknowledgment of the powerful countervailing influences in the broader environment which cut across the aims of education, teaching and teachers. This is a daunting prospect, but one which has been confronted by some current leaders. For example, President Clinton and Prime Minister Blair have both recently set in train educational changes designed, in large part, to refocus attention on teachers as the single most critical component of a successful school education system. The Committee endorses such an approach.

In Australia children have low status. The low status of teachers in our society reflects the low status we accord our children. It has also resulted in a hierarchy of status within the teaching profession whereby teachers of the youngest children are accorded the lowest status (by the community generally and often by teachers themselves) and those teaching the oldest children are accorded the highest status. Such a

11 Submission no 249, vol 12, p 185 (Australian Early Childhood Association Inc)

ranking is quite contrary to what is known about the critical importance of early childhood education,¹² but nevertheless it persists.

Status goes with power and power is usually economic. Children have no economic or political power. It seems that those teaching children are also accorded limited status and power, and the younger the children are, the more limited the status and power their teachers receive.¹³

Within the community and the profession of teaching there is a hierarchy of respect that corresponds to the age of the child. The perception is that the older and more able the student, the more skills are required to teach them.¹⁴

A separate teacher hierarchy also exists. This relates to subject specialisation rather than to the age of the children taught. Teachers who specialise in one academic subject have traditionally enjoyed higher status than generalists. However, this distinction appears to be breaking down with the move away from school organisation based around related subject areas or disciplines.

At the top of the school hierarchy are principals, deputy principals and a range of administrators or managers. Although promoted from the classroom, occupants of these positions generally have very limited direct classroom contact thereafter. The system thus encourages ambitious and talented teachers out of the classroom rather than rewarding them for remaining there. It sends a signal about how it values teaching, as compared with administration.

The more teaching you do, the lower your rank in the bureaucratic hierarchy.¹⁵

While many witnesses and submissions commented on the hierarchy of status within teaching and the position of early childhood teachers at the bottom of the hierarchy, several also commented on the low status of

12 See for example Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee Report *Childhood Matters*. Canberra, 1996

13 Submission no 249, vol 12, p 186 (Australian Early Childhood Association Inc)

14 Submission no 278, vol 15, p 64 (Association of Women Educators, ACT Branch)

15 Submission no 174, vol 7, p 118 (Dr Jansen, Tas)

relief teachers. The position of casual teachers and those on short term contracts is an issue of particular concern to teachers and to parents, given the deliberate move to casualisation of the teaching force on the part of a number of State education departments.

While increasing casualisation is evident throughout the general work force it is traditionally associated with low status occupations and its widespread introduction into teaching can be expected to have an adverse impact on general community perceptions of teachers' status and on teacher morale, not to mention the quality of education in our schools, to which continuity and stability of staffing make an important contribution).

The suggestion that a contracted teaching force will be more committed and professional than the current permanent teaching force is ludicrous and the motives behind the push for casualisation are transparent and unconscionable.¹⁶

Another factor affecting status is teaching's numerical domination by women. The majority of classroom teachers are women, although promotional positions are dominated by men (as discussed in Chapter 5). Because prevailing attitudes still mean that work done by women tends to be undervalued, the professions in which women are numerically dominant tend to have lower status. In teaching, the areas in which they are concentrated - early childhood and primary school education - have the lowest status. This pattern tends to reinforce the link between feminisation and low status. This is addressed in more detail in Chapter 5.

If we subscribe to the view that status and remuneration are closely linked then an examination of teachers' salaries should provide some insights into their status. A number of submissions provided information on the growing discrepancy between teachers' salaries and those of other groups with similar qualifications and training.

In the last twenty years [there has been...] a fall of 25% [in teachers' salaries] against average weekly earnings and a fall of 21% against CPI.¹⁷

16 Submission no 122, vol 5, p 15 (Mr Book, ACT)

17 Submission no 211, vol 10, p 26 (Mr Llew Davies)

Only the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs gave contrary evidence, at least in relation to secondary school teachers, and over a more recent period, saying:

ABS data on mean weekly earnings of full -time workers in their main job indicate that from August 1990 to August 1995 (latest data) earnings of Secondary School Teachers kept pace with those of all employed professionals and all employees (each group increasing by 24 per cent) and represented between 91 per cent to 95 per cent of Professional employee earnings and between 117 per cent and 123 per cent of earnings of all employees.¹⁸

Other ABS data for **all** school teachers confirms that salary relativities were maintained during the period May 1990 to May 1996.

The Department did however concede that Graduate Career Council data point to a longer term decline in the relative starting salaries for teachers. Salary relativities for teachers at all stages of the profession have in fact declined over this longer period. The issue of teachers' salaries is addressed further in Chapter 5.

While a case can be made for status being largely determined and measured by salary levels, it would be unduly simplistic to suppose that salary is the only relevant consideration in determining status. It would be misleading, for example, to argue that community perceptions of the value of teachers are accurately reflected in the salaries governments pay them. Likewise, to identify status with salary might erroneously imply that teachers seeking higher status are motivated principally by financial considerations and that their declining morale can be directly attributed to their falling salaries.

Almost every submission and every witness argued that teachers enter and remain within the teaching profession **despite** their salaries. Even those contemplating leaving the profession were usually doing so for reasons unconnected with, or only loosely connected with, remuneration. The factors affecting the status of teachers are complex and cannot be reduced to a question of extra dollars and cents in the pocket.

18 Submission no 276, vol 15, pp 30-31 (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs)

There is a strong argument for rewarding teachers' professionalism and their greater range of responsibilities more justly, but salary is not a panacea for the poor status of teachers, nor for increasing the satisfaction of teachers, matters which need to be addressed on a much wider front. A salary increase for teachers, no matter how large and how much deserved, will not remove the sources of teacher dissatisfaction and stress, although it might well provide a temporary respite.¹⁹

A different perspective was provided by a Melbourne witness who believed that status and professionalism are intrinsic to the individual teacher and attained (or not) irrespective of external factors such as salary, although he acknowledged that this was also important.

...my status as a professional is something that I own and that I am responsible for. And that is true of the teacher in any circumstance... In a way, one of the things that disturbs me... is that so many people have come before you saying... that my professional status depends on how you choose to fund the activity that I am engaged in.²⁰

The NSW Government stated clearly in evidence to the Committee that it recognised the link between status and salary. Accordingly, it has introduced a substantial progressive round of salary increases through to the year 2000.

On the first matter - the New South Wales government's action to raise the status of teachers, particularly working through the public education system - the first thing I will refer to is the salaries agreement of August last year. If you read the documentation, you will see that, for the first time, in a very clear way it linked the status of teachers to a real increase in salary. [If] we wished to attract and retain sufficient numbers of high quality graduates, we needed to raise the status of teachers within the community... therefore ... we needed to show the real value of teachers' work by increasing their salaries in real terms.²¹

A number of submissions and witnesses pointed to the possibility that teacher shortages, already evident in some regions and some subject

19 Submission no 66, vol 2, p 197 (Dr Steve Dinham and Dr Catherine Scott)

20 *Transcript of Evidence*, Melbourne, 10 October 1997, p 742 (Mr Thomas)

21 *Transcript of Evidence*, Sydney, 29 August 1997, p 75 (Department of School Education, NSW)

areas and predicted to increase early next century, will be filled by placing teachers in subject areas in which they have no background, or by recruiting unqualified teachers. Such practices would certainly further detract from the status of teachers. The former practice already exists to a limited extent and is causing concern in some subject areas, especially maths and science.

Data collected by the Mathematical Association of Victoria indicates that many teachers at this level [early secondary school] do not have formal mathematics qualifications. Estimates vary but it is probably in excess of 30%. It is unlikely that these teachers have any specific training in the teaching of mathematics either.²²

ASTA [Australian Science Teachers' Association] is aware of anecdotal reports of detrimental effects on students due to unqualified staff being required to take science classes.

ASTA recognises that the lack of qualified staff is not a new issue. Many rural schools encounter this difficulty on an annual basis. Attracting and retaining suitable science staff is a major problem in rural and remote schools in general and in science faculties in particular.²³

Professional vs industrial

Many submissions and witnesses discussed the role of teacher unions and the extent to which they enhance or undermine teacher professionalism. This was one of the few issues on which there was a significant divergence of opinion among teachers. Given the proportion of teachers who are union members²⁴ this is an important issue.

Those who believed that teacher unions enhanced teacher professionalism pointed to the impossibility of separating professional issues such as class size and industrial issues such as salaries. Union representatives saw their role as promoting both. The following excerpt is typical of the views expressed by a number of union representatives.

22 Submission no 149, vol 6, p 108 (Australian Mathematical Sciences Council)

23 Submission no 212, vol 10, p 37 (Australian Science Teachers' Association)

24 Calculated by the Parliamentary Library as 81% of all primary and secondary school teachers

Obviously the union has got an industrial role within the community in relation to the representation of teachers and school officers who work with them, and obviously wages are fundamental to that. Nevertheless, it is very important for us to make clear on the record that our interests go to the professional lives and the work of teachers. We do not believe that a separation is to be made between the industrial and professional in terms of the work of teachers.²⁵

This view was shared by a number of commentators.

The industrial and the professional are inherently connected in school teaching to a far greater degree than in most other professions. This means that professional representation and industrial representation are in general best carried out within one organisation. This does not preclude specialist professional representation, by, for example, subject associations.

...The implications of this inherent connection between the industrial and professional in teaching is that the two teacher unions should be recognised as the organisations which generally represent teachers on professional as well as industrial matters.²⁶

One thing is clear, consolidating the political and economic basis of teaching, and the status of teachers, depends upon an integration of professional and industrial matters, not their disconnection.²⁷

Others had a different view. They saw unions as essentially promoting industrial issues, to the detriment of teachers' professional standing in the general community.

The application of the 'industrial model' to industrial relations in school staffs will have the effect of undermining vocation. Quantifying conditions and putting a time/monetary value on all aspects of a teacher's work is in tension with the concept of service and calling.²⁸

25 *Transcript of evidence*, Melbourne, 10 October 1997, p 671 (Independent Education Union)

26 Submission no 285, vol 16, p 119 (Ms Preston, ACT)

27 Terri Seddon & Lynton Brown. *Teachers' work: towards the year 2007*. Unicorn, vol 23, no 2, July 1997, p 37

28 Submission no 199, vol 9, p 84 (Lutheran Church of Australia)

...teachers, in general, lack credible professional advocacy. Instead of the head of the union being on the front page all of the time, it ought to be someone from the professional bodies talking about the real educational issues, rather than what the latest pay increase is or how many hours teachers work.²⁹

The vast majority of teachers are dedicated and hard working: the militants in the teacher unions do not speak for the majority. In many respects the teacher unions have stepped outside their traditional role to the detriment of teachers' working conditions and salaries.³⁰

Differences of opinion on the role of unions and their contribution to enhancing or undermining teacher status and professionalism have been exacerbated by recent enterprise bargaining cases. Many teachers and union representatives commented on the inappropriateness of wage bargaining in the education sector, where teachers have been required to demonstrate productivity gains and to trade off conditions in return for salary increases.

This approach to wage bargaining in the education sector has added to the frustrations of teachers as they are faced with choices which include further reducing the quality of teaching and also making colleagues redundant in order to justify a wage increase.³¹

The current system of (for all practical terms) linking wage rises under enterprise bargaining agreements to educational change immediately links two unrelated activities in an antagonistic environment. Thus educational innovation is fought on an industrial basis rather than on the merits of the proposal for change.... Educational change that must be bought with wage rises and/or which cannot be sold on its educational merits is perceived very poorly.³²

The manner in which teacher salaries are determined needs to be addressed. The industrial campaigns required to achieve salary

29 *Transcript of evidence*, Brisbane, 10 September 1997, p213 (Association of Independent Schools of Queensland)

30 Submission no 94, vol 3, p 170 (Mr Harding, Vic)

31 Submission no 151, vol 6, p 141 (ACTU)

32 Submission no 215, vol 10, p 66 (Mr Jaques, Qld)

justice undermine the public's confidence in public education and erode the status of the profession.³³

Opposition to enterprise bargaining was especially marked in the Northern Territory where protracted industrial action was seen to have soured teachers' relationships with government, destroyed teacher morale and undermined public confidence in the education system.

After the appalling treatment experienced by teachers during the recent Enterprise Bargaining process, morale is at an all-time low. Teachers did not take kindly to illegal stopping of pay, lockouts or vilification and denigration at tax payers' expense, during last year's industrial dispute over enterprise bargaining.³⁴

Even representatives of the Northern Territory Department of Education conceded that enterprise bargaining had significantly worsened relations between government and teachers in the Northern Territory.

I do not think that the current system which involves an adversarial approach to industrial relations is particularly constructive in terms of the sort of relationships that we are dealing with.³⁵

Teachers drew the Committee's attention to a number of current and projected changes within the education system with the potential to undermine the professionalism of their work. These include:

- centralisation of the curriculum, with little input from teachers
- increasing managerialism in schools, with principals as arms of the bureaucracy rather than part of the collective teaching force
- moves to introduce paraprofessionals into the classroom in place of some existing, qualified teachers
- the focus on fundraising, which diverts teachers' time and effort away from their core work
- externally devised and implemented standardised assessment.

33 Submission no 261, vol 13, p 138 (School of Education, Macquarie University)

34 Submission no 240, vol 12, p 24 (Australian Education Union, Northern Territory Branch)

35 *Transcript of evidence*, Darwin, 14 October 1997, p 804 (Department of Education, NT)

If we acknowledge the critical importance of education to the futures of all young Australians, and the central role of teachers in determining the quality of student learning, then we must also recognise the need to support our teachers more effectively.

The Committee is persuaded, on the basis of the evidence it received during its Inquiry, that teaching deserves the description of profession and acknowledges that it does not yet enjoy the status it deserves.

The recommendations in this Report are designed to consolidate teaching as a profession. They will enhance the status of the profession and thus of those who practice in it. They will assist the profession to attract able graduates and to retain our best teachers in our classrooms.

We know the causes of declining status and we know, in large part, how to overcome them. The remedy rests with the exercise of the necessary political will.

