The 'legalisation' of education: a study of New South Wales teachers and their professional development needs in the area of law

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The ‘Legalisation’ of Education – A study of New South Wales teachers and their professional development needs in the area of law

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

from

University of Wollongong

by

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Faculty of Law

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Volume 1 of 2
ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the legal knowledge held by teachers of New South Wales Government schools and the need for continued professional development in this area. The study commenced in 1997 and primary research concluded in 2000. The Australian experience seems to be mirroring international experiences, particularly those of the United States of America, which have seen an increase in the legalisation of the field of education. From this increase there emerged a need for a systematic programme of instruction to address the problem of a lack of legal knowledge held by teachers in order to adequately perform their professional duties as teachers and protect themselves and their employer from potential legal liabilities.

The main purposes of this study were to determine the degree of legal knowledge that teachers in the State of New South Wales possessed, the need for the development of a course of instruction to address the perceived problem of a lack of legal knowledge and to investigate the methods available to address this problem. The study then proceeded to develop and trial a systematic curriculum designed to provide a background for teachers to education and the law.

This was a multimethod ethnographic exploratory study that integrated aspects of both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms. An initial focus group interview schedule was developed and then trialled with a group of teachers in order to gauge their experiences and knowledge of the law. This interview schedule was then refined and trialled with a larger sample of teachers drawn from
a wide variety of educational backgrounds. From those focus groups there emerged clear evidence that the majority of teachers lacked knowledge of the law as it affected the performance of their professional teaching duties. What legal knowledge teachers did possess was often based on myth or misunderstanding.

Therefore there emerged a need to canvas the views of the dominate stakeholders in the field of education to gain their interest/views on developing a course of legal instruction devised to address this problem. Additionally the question of which elements of the law would be necessary in such a course was also addressed. To this end the views of the teachers, their union and their government employer were all engaged. It became clear that there was general support, particularly high amongst the teachers, for the need for such a course of instruction.

This study then moved on to develop a course of instruction which could be used at either the pre or post service levels of teacher professional development. The study examined a number of potential models of curriculum and the conclusion was reached that no single model of curriculum could be used to devise a successful and progressive course. Instead the curriculum devised was based upon a hybrid model using elements from the process and dynamic models of curriculum.

This curriculum was then trialled with a sample of teachers. At the end of the trial, course participants were asked to complete a brief survey and their comments were reported to show that the majority believed they had engaged in a positively
rewarding experience, which made them more aware of how the law was a pervasive influence on their teaching.

Overall the findings indicate that there is a definite need for pre service and practising teachers to have a degree of legal knowledge which is provided in a professional manner. There is broad support for such a course of instruction amongst the teaching profession and its dominant union body. Unfortunately there was not the same degree of enthusiasm shown by the government employer.

The study concludes with a statement that there needs to be a unilateral effort between the teachers, their union and their employer towards a common goal of instructing teachers about the law if such a course of instruction is to gain credibility and acceptance amongst the members of the teaching profession.

All information, data and law is stated as at December 2000.
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

**VOLUME ONE:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>xii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Appendices</td>
<td>xiv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of original authorship</td>
<td>xv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>xvi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

1.1 Background .................................................1
1.2 Need for the study .......................................2
1.3 Design of the study .......................................3
   1.3.1 Background to the design ..........................3
   1.3.2 Specifics of the study .............................5
1.4 Rationale for the design of the study ...............5
1.5 Outline of the study .....................................6
1.6 Summary of Chapter One .................................7

**CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

TEACHERS AND THE LAW

2.1 Introduction ..............................................9
2.2 Nature of the law .........................................................10
  2.2.1 Introduction .........................................................10
  2.2.2 What is ‘law’? .......................................................11
2.3 Nature of educational law .............................................13
  2.3.1 Introduction .........................................................13
  2.3.2 Difficulties in defining the law affecting teachers ............15
2.4 Law affecting teachers .................................................18
  2.4.1 Generally ............................................................18
  2.4.2 The common law ..................................................21
  2.4.3 Statute law ..........................................................23
2.5 Legalisation of Education ..............................................26
  2.5.1 Introduction ........................................................26
  2.5.2 Defining the legalisation of education .......................27
  2.5.3 Identifying the legalisation of education ...................28
2.6 Reducing the risk of liability .......................................31
2.7 Content of courses ....................................................33
2.8 Summary of Chapter Two ...........................................35

CHAPTER THREE: OUTLINE OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

3.1 Introduction ............................................................37
3.2 Conceptual framework ...............................................37
3.3 Research Questions ....................................................39
  3.3.1 What knowledge do teachers in NSW government schools
        have about the law and how it affects them in the delivery
        of their professional duties .......................................39
3.3.2 Is it essential or even of use for NSW government teachers to have any degree of knowledge in legal areas? ...40

3.3.3 What substantive areas of the law do NSW government teacher require a working knowledge of in the performance of their usual duties? .........................41

3.3.4 How can this knowledge be most effectively delivered to NSW government teachers? .................................41

3.4 Summary of Chapter Three ..............................................42

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A CONCEPTUAL BASIS

4.1 Introduction ......................................................................44

4.2 Concept of research .........................................................44

4.3 Methodological stance ....................................................46

4.4 Characteristics of approach adopted ....................................47

4.4.1 Ethnographic studies ....................................................47

4.4.2 Exploratory studies ......................................................51

4.4.3 Integration of research methodologies ..............................53

4.4.4 Multimethod research strategies .....................................55

4.4.5 Triangulation ............................................................60

4.4.6 Benefits of approach adopted ........................................63

4.5 Discussion of data collection procedures .............................65

4.5.1 Introduction .............................................................65

4.5.2 Focus groups ............................................................66

4.5.3 Questionnaire ...........................................................78
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.5.4</td>
<td>Other sources of information</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Population and Sample</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.1</td>
<td>Description of population – the schooling system</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.2</td>
<td>Description of population – the university system</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6.3</td>
<td>Description of sample</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>Treatment of the Data</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7.1</td>
<td>Quantitative data</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7.2</td>
<td>Qualitative data</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>Limitations of the study</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>Summary of Chapter Four</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER FIVE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE
CURRICULUM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Defining a curriculum</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>From curriculum to models</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Models of curriculum</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.1</td>
<td>Introduction and background</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.2</td>
<td>Rational model</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.3</td>
<td>Cyclical model</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.4</td>
<td>Dynamic model</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4.5</td>
<td>Process model</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Implication</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.1</td>
<td>In general</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5.2</td>
<td>A comparison with technology education</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER SIX:

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

6.1 Introduction ........................................................................147

6.2 Research Question One: Teachers’ knowledge of the law ........148

6.2.1 Overview ......................................................................148

6.2.2 Potential sources of legal information ..............................149

6.2.3 Focus groups .................................................................163

6.3 Research Question Two: Do teachers require legal knowledge?..201

6.3.1 Overview ......................................................................201

6.3.2 Views of the teachers ......................................................202

6.3.3 Views of the unions .........................................................205

6.3.4 Views of the employer ....................................................210

6.3.5 Summary and discussion of material from Research

Question Two .................................................................219

6.4 Research Question Three: What should teachers know about the

law? ........................................................................220
6.4.1 Overview ..................................................220
6.4.2 Views of the teachers ...........................................220
6.4.3 Views of the union ..............................................226
6.4.4 Views of the employer .........................................230
6.4.5 Summary and discussion of material from Research
Question Three ......................................................234

6.5 Research Question Four: How can legal knowledge be given to
teachers? ..........................................................236
6.5.1 Overview .......................................................236
6.5.2 Views of the teachers .........................................237
6.5.3 Views of the union ..............................................241
6.5.4 Views of the employer .........................................244
6.5.5 The curriculum .................................................249
6.5.6 Summary and discussion of material from Research
Question Four ......................................................272

6.6 Summary of Chapter Six ...........................................274
6.6.1 Research question one .........................................274
6.6.2 Research question two .........................................275
6.6.3 Research question three .......................................275
6.6.4 Research question four .........................................276

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS
7.1 Background ......................................................277
7.2 Overview ........................................................277
7.3 Conclusions .......................................................280
7.4 Implications .................................................................281
  7.4.1 Implications for future research .........................281
  7.4.2 Implications for teachers .................................282
  7.4.3 Implications for the employer .........................283

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................284

APPENDICIES .................................................................311

VOLUME TWO:

THE CURRICULUM
Education Law: Course Outline and Participant Workbook .............1
Education Law: Facilitator’s Notes ........................................19
Education Law: Extracted Materials ...................................26
LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER SIX: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

Figure 6.1 Details of the Category levels of legal information

provided by Australian Universities ..........................153
LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Table 4.1 Details of New South Wales Government Schools ........95
Table 4.2 New South Wales Government School Staff – Primary Schools .................................................98
Table 4.3 New South Wales Government School Staff – Secondary Schools .................................................98

CHAPTER FIVE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Table 5.1 Models of curriculum ................................................117

CHAPTER SIX: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

Table 6.1 Statistical Details of Education Entities surveyed for information in regard to legal education for teachers in Australia ........................................151
Table 6.2 Details of the number of education entities offering legal information sessions in Australia .................152
Table 6.3 Level of legal education delivered at Australian Universities in 1997 ..................................................155
Table 6.4 Level of legal education delivered at Australian Universities in 2000 ..................................................156
Table 6.5 Details of Education Entities surveyed for information on legal education for teachers in the State of New South Wales ........................................157
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>Details of the number of education entities offering legal information sessions in the State of New South Wales</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>Level of legal education delivered at New South Wales Universities in 1997</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>Level of legal education delivered at New South Wales Universities in 2000</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>Characteristics of trial focus group</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.10</td>
<td>Characteristics of live focus groups</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.11</td>
<td>Characteristics of curriculum groups</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>Characteristics of curriculum group participants who completed the questionnaire</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Letter of enquiry to all Educational Entities within Australia .................................312

Appendix B: Education Law Course Questionnaire.................................314

Appendix C: Letter of approval from the New South Wales Department of Education and Training to undertake research in Government schools.................................317

Appendix D: Notices of approval to undertake research obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong ........................................319
STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, David J. Newlyn, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Law, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Signed:………………………………………

David J. Newlyn
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