

Passionate convictions

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My sister, Rosemary Richards, arrived in the ACT in 1974 and soon persuaded me how much more satisfying it would be to teach in the ACT than in Sydney.

I duly arrived in 1976, anticipating continuing to teach secondary English as a second language (ESL). Almost immediately that was altered to setting up a new primary school library, as the principal at Kaleen primary school had requested a professionally qualified librarian. This was the school with no pupils in its catchment area. Pupils were bussed in from neighbouring Giralang, as the school there was still being built. The National Capital Development Commission (now the National Capital Authority) had had a fault in its planning processes!

The staff felt like pioneers in the desert, no phone line was connected and supplies were short. The principal had to take his car along the one dirt road out of the suburb, on to the Barton Highway, and around to the schools office in the Macarthur building to get boxes of tissues and toilet paper.

Of course there was a male principal and deputy principal, and almost all teaching staff were women. I was horrified when the principal's secretary raised her eyebrows on hearing I had a 7 year old son, and told me I'd be unable to take leave if he caught an infectious disease, as he would. (Fortunately, he didn't.)

The much more friendly, supportive women I met at monthly Saturday meetings of the teachers union were a social lifeline, and made me feel much more confident living in a new city, and working in a different way. I absolutely looked forward to those meetings to gain insight into the operations of the schools and the personalities in the Canberra system.

Teacher librarians were also very supportive and informative to a new school librarian.

I was able to easily discuss the importance of trying to choose non-gendered reading and information material, and find a group of women who thought in a similar way.

Because the union and the Schools Authority chose to establish a position to 'eliminate sexism in schools' other teacher librarians were aware this was an 'issue of the day'. Union meetings on a Saturday morning at Weston gave me insight into how a very good education system had visions to become an even better one.

The passionate convictions of strong leaders who were moving in parallel with emerging social equity issues such as human rights, laws against discrimination of women, Aboriginal people, people of a different race, those with a disability, and so on, filled most teachers with hope (although some had concerns).

As a teacher who acted for a short time in the Elimination of Sexism role, and later in the Equal Employment role, I very much valued knowing that I had the support of our union. The opportunity to speak at monthly union meetings provided confidence that I could visit schools that were seeking a presentation on elimination of sexism and, later, equal employment opportunity and present with conviction to fellow teachers. More pertinently, I could answer their questions with assurance, perhaps changing a few opinions.

I very much valued the challenges of these roles, and finding that I could provide information to fellow teachers which actively assisted them to be more confident in applying for and obtaining jobs, or assisting them to negotiate in a useful way.

The women in education group grew from being a union concept to being a professional and social link, resulting in valuable interchanges both in training forums and social meetings.

During this early period of my time in the ACT, I was involved like all other teachers, in an industrial campaign relating to the ability to use alternative forms of protest to striking. This was a calculated union strategy to try to obtain progress in industrial conditions without closing down a school system.

It coincided with the Fraser government legislation that caused workers who took minor industrial action to be stood down. I haven't felt such a union camaraderie before or since!

The government intention was to pick off workers, and frighten others into ceasing minor action. It had quite the opposite effect on teachers. I recall being at a very large mass meeting, where teachers on Christmas Island, who were not affected, sent messages saying they wished to be included. There were people on sick leave and people on overseas holidays who sent messages that they had notified their industrial officer that they were not to be paid for that day. Needless to say the government capitulated reasonably quickly and withdrew its Commonwealth Employees Employment Provisions (CEEP) legislation, but I always regretted not having obtained the wonderful T-Shirt with a quacking duck saying 'I've been CEEPED'.

We have been fortunate to always have very strong leadership in our union, and perhaps there is an advantage in being a small union. Issues and leaders are unusually close. I think in that early period for many teachers, professionalism / union activism / women's issues / human rights were inextricably entwined.