


From marketising to empowering: Evaluating union responses to devolutionary policies in education

The Economic and
Labour Relations Review
2022, Vol. 33(1) 80–99
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DOI: 10.1177/10353046221077276
journals.sagepub.com/home/elra


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Abstract

Major reforms in education, globally, have focused on increased accountability and devolution of responsibility to the local school level to improve the efficiency and quality of education. While emerging research is considering implications of these changed governance arrangements at both a school and system level, little attention has been afforded to teacher union responses to devolutionary reform, despite teaching being a highly union-organised profession and the endurance of decentralising-style reforms in education for over 40 years. Drawing upon a power resources approach, this article examines union responses in cases of devolutionary reform in a populous Australian state. Through analysing evolving policy discourse, from anti-bureaucratic, managerialising rhetoric to a 'post-bureaucratic, empowerment' agenda, this article contributes to understandings of union power for resisting decentralising, neoliberal policy agendas by exposing the limits of public sector unions mobilising traditional power resources and arguing for strengthening of discursive and symbolic power.

JEL Code: J5

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Keywords

Devolution, public education, teacher unions, Australia, new public management, governance, framing, power resources

Introduction

School education, a fundamental public service, is undergoing radical change. In many countries, neoliberal-inspired agendas, underscored by New Public Management (NPM) ideals, have driven privatisation and marketisation of school education. Simultaneously, the state has assumed greater authority over educational decision-making and accountability over teachers' work to improve the 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' of educational provision (Wilkins et al., 2019). Following these international trends, new policies in Australian schooling have also focused on increased accountability and devolution of responsibility for student outcomes and school performance to the local school level. While these policies are better considered a 'loose assembly' of policy positions, having varied over time and across national policy contexts (Wilkins et al., 2019), a unifying feature has been driving a performativity agenda designed to support the 'knowledge economy' and economic revaluing of education (Connell, 2015). The imposition of NPM ideals is not unique to public education, but reflects a broader neoliberal agenda to enhance competition and efficiency in the delivery of public services (Connell, 2015).

Within this context, teacher trade unions have been increasingly marginalised from policymaking processes and experienced weakened structural and institutional power, despite retaining high membership density (Bascia and Stevenson, 2017). Education reforms are often unilaterally imposed by governments; unions that challenge reform directions are viewed as 'obstructing change' (Bascia and Stevenson, 2017). In opposing change which they view as deleterious to teachers and students, teacher unions have been confronted with a shift in how education policy 'reform' has been framed, promoted and enacted by governments. This has posed additional, complex challenges for union organising and mobilising. Such circumstances are not unique to teacher unions, or indeed unions in the public sector, but reflect broader, global debates about renewal of union power (Murray, 2017).

Despite representing one of the largest, most highly-unionised professional occupations, there are surprisingly few insights about how teacher unions have responded to changing global governance agendas and ensuing NPM-inspired educational policy. This article examines responses by the NSW Teachers' Federation (NSWTF), the largest state-based teacher union in Australia representing public school teachers and principals in New South Wales (NSW), to NPM policies in that state – one of the largest public education systems globally,¹ characterised by high union coverage.² Drawing on empirical findings from a case study on teacher unionism, this article examines the impact of 35 years of devolutionary reform for mobilisation of union power. Analysis begins with the *Scott Review* of the late 1980s, which saw a largely unsuccessful government effort to unilaterally shift to a school-centred organisational form under a decentralising,

managerialising agenda. Some 20 years later, devolutionary reform was re-enacted under the *Local Schools, Local Decisions (LSLD)* policy through ‘empowerment’ discourse framed around enhancing local decision-making and community participation. In analysing union responses to these policies, this article extends our understanding of challenges facing public sector union power by unpicking the complex tensions that unions face in strategically responding to system restructuring that drives devolution. It does this through engagement with the associational, coalitional and discursive power unions can draw on and mobilise as employing organisations shift the framing and enactment of policy (Schmalz et al., 2018). While our focus is specific to teacher unions, our analysis of union power is contextualised in a broader neoliberal logic that has attempted to undermine union influence, thus contributing to deeper understandings of public sector union power.

This article first provides a background to NPM in Australian public schooling, articulating the variations in NPM framing. It then introduces the conceptual framework utilised in this article to analyse the case material. After detailing the research methodology of the study, we present data from two union campaigns challenging devolutionary reform. Following analysis and discussion of the campaigns applying the conceptual framework, we draw conclusions for understanding union power in a context of changed governance arrangements and shifting policy discourses.

New public management, devolution and school education

Neoliberalism promotes market ideals and entrepreneurialism through prioritising private sector logics of competition and economic efficiency across areas including welfare, health and education (Brunetto and Beattie, 2020). The ascendancy of neoliberalism in Australia has primarily been associated with the adoption of NPM principles to ‘modernise’ public services and deliver greater efficiency and effectiveness (Brunetto and Beattie, 2020). While free reign of the market is promoted through a ‘rolling back’ of the state, paradoxically, neoliberalism involves enhanced state intervention to engender forms of governance suited to a market-driven economy (Peck, 2001). Within schooling, centralised arrangements have been criticised for their inflexibility and perceived barrier to improving student outcomes, with schools portrayed as having little capacity to respond to their local context. Decentralising governance to the local school level while maintaining centrally determined forms of accountability has fuelled normative debates about the merits of giving schools greater power to shape their structure and determine educational outcomes, and represents a defining feature of contemporary education policy (Lingard et al., 2002, cited in Gerrard and Savage, 2021).

These debates have in turn been shaped by significant variations in how some of NPM’s elements have been framed. NPM discourse has appropriated the vocabulary of citizen participation and democratic collaboration via language that suggests that outsourcing and devolvement should be guided by governance mechanisms founded on trust, partnership, and deeper community involvement (Fitzgerald and Rainnie, 2012). Some suggest this reflects a shift from ‘markets, principal-agent contracting, and performance controls, to more horizontal, relational governance that emphasises interorganisational

networks...and a broad range of policy tools' (Phillips and Smith, 2009: 2), a policy shift which distinguishes NPM and New Public Governance (NPG) (Brunetto and Beattie, 2020). However, the core elements of NPM (disaggregation, competition, and incentivisation) remain evident today and can be traced back to policy origins in England of the 1980s and 1990s under the conservative Thatcher government (Wilkins et al., 2019). This agenda was also spearheaded by the 'New Right' educational agenda of the national Hawke Government in Australia, which suppressed notions of equality and opportunity (typically associated with progressive governments) and advanced reforms linking education to a national economic agenda to produce a more flexible, multi-skilled workforce (Connell, 2015).

The development of a neoliberal policy assemblage in Australia has been complicated given school education remains a constitutional responsibility of each state and territory. Thus, NPM and devolution processes, while following a similar reform direction, have manifested with differing intensity and complexion across education systems (Gerrard and Savage, 2021). In NSW, an NPM-agenda first emerged under the Greiner Government's school de-zoning reforms in the late 1980s. This agenda was revisited two decades later with *LSDL*, which devolved greater authority to school principals, particularly around staffing and finances. Such reforms were supported by the national Coalition government which endorsed 'school autonomy' as national school policy, embodied in the Empowering Local Schools initiative (Gobby, 2016; cited in Gerrard and Savage, 2021). As noted, while decentralisation and disaggregation remain key policy objectives, these recent formulations of reform return to the language of the 1970s associated with social democratic critique of bureaucratic school systems and an emphasis on grassroots community engagement (Fitzgerald and Rainnie, 2012). Engaged parent-citizens and communities now feature more prominently in policy discourse (Gerrard and Savage, 2021), a rhetorical shift that poses challenges for (teacher) union power, as examined in this article.

Wright (2012) argues that this contemporary rearticulation of governance has been coupled with an ideological fantasy of 'empowerment', whereby parents and teachers are reconstituted as powerful actors who have been 'freed' from constraints imposed by central bureaucratic governments. While in the past, empowerment discourse mostly related to parental choice, signifiers of 'trust' also re-professionalise teachers' status by propelling teachers to take on greater control and responsibility. Wright (2012), however, argues that this 're-professionalisation' has a market-oriented dimension as 'trust' embedded in the policy discourse is 'built on a fantasy [of empowerment]...and not on a tangible shift in the balance of power in education initiated by the policies themselves' (Wright, 2012: 289). Thus, greater trust and autonomy is confounded within a broader neoliberal agenda which shifts responsibility for social problems from the state to individuals through the logic of the market and responsabilisation, but which intensifies control over these actors.

Union power in the public sector

Teacher unions have not suffered the same decline experienced by the broader labour movement, nor that suffered by other public sector unions. Nevertheless, the contemporary challenges facing teacher unions still require consideration of strategies to mobilise power, especially given the relative lack of theorisation around teacher union responses to neoliberal-inspired ‘reforms’ (Bascia and Stevenson, 2017).

This article draws on a power resources approach, constructively adopted in studies of union renewal, to understand teacher union responses to devolutionary reform (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). This approach assumes that the workforce can successfully defend its interests through collective mobilisation of power resources. This approach has its origins in the work of Wright (2000) and Silver (2003) who proposed two fundamental sources of power – structural power, meaning the capacity to disrupt production or distribution, and associational power, which is the capacity to act collectively to achieve shared goals. Scholars have since identified other resources, notably institutional power (the extent to which organised labour is embedded in political, legal and industrial relations systems), as well as coalitional power, symbolic power, and discursive power (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Ford and Gillan (2021) observe complexity around the privileging of certain power resources in existing studies and their interrelationship where strength in one power resource can compensate for weakness in another. Importantly, power resources may also be shaped by different historical, political and social contexts (Schmalz et al., 2018), and can vary in significance across sectors (Ford and Gillan, 2021).

It is not enough to simply possess power resources; we need to understand how they can be developed, used and transformed by the structural and political opportunities available to unions (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Thus, capabilities, like framing or learning, are needed to mobilise individual power resources (Lévesque and Murray, 2010). Framing processes shape the capacity to mobilise support. Frames that ‘resonate’ strongly with workers are more likely to achieve an organisation’s mobilisation goals. This involves locating a problem, identifying those responsible for the problem, and then counter-posing an alternative (‘reframing’) as a precursor to developing collective action (Benford and Snow, 2000; Gahan and Pekarek, 2013). The concept of frame resonance therefore serves as a measure of an organisation’s ability to develop a ‘collective action frame’ that facilitates mobilisation (Gahan and Pekarek, 2013). As examined in this article, these frames are also subject to contestation and redefinition by oppositional and interested bodies, requiring a continual process of counter-framing and counter-mobilisation (Benford and Snow, 2000).

In examining mobilisation of union power, it is also important to understand how the political and regulatory environment shapes this process. Ford and Ward (2021) argue that models of union power need to accommodate the specificities of teacher unionism, given teacher unions operate as both industrial relations actors and professional associations. Repertoires of action are complicated because the political distribution of power is skewed towards public employers as both budgetary authority and legislators (Ford and Ward, 2021). Additionally, teachers’ identity as ‘professionals’ also fosters contention around the appropriateness to withdraw labour (Ford and Ward, 2021). In NSW, militant

action has been curtailed through significant increases in penalties for unions breaching ‘no-strike’ orders and the limited period that allows protected action (Gavin, 2019a). While militancy may still be appropriate under certain conditions (McAlevy 2016), it does invoke the need to understand the complexity and limitations on public sector unions in mobilising traditionally strong power resources. For instance, Krachler et al. (2021) argue that unions can mobilise professionals with militancy by successfully combining employee-focused (i.e. as a trade union) or professional-focused (i.e. as an occupational association) orientations through leadership, professional and public interest framing, and supportive coalitions. While the assumption that professionalism automatically runs counter to union mobilisation is problematic, aligning these representative stances becomes more difficult when organisational counter-framing occurs around professional and public interests.

In seeking to mobilise member and community support as a form of coalitional power, public sector unions have often crafted frames around the public sector ethos and social democratic ideals of equity and inclusion to oppose education ‘reform’. These symbolic resources were most pronounced when the logic of NPM was expressed principally in the idiom of private sector values and calculation. But as NPM, particularly in the area of education policy, emphasises the co-creation, co-production and co-delivery of public services (Osborne, 2006), as well as trust and partnership with parents and teachers (Wright, 2012), the symbolic resources of opposition to NPM, coupled with the ability to mobilise coalitional power, becomes much more difficult. This is especially so when the enactment of policy supports a particular orientation on behalf of parents and principals, and as basic assumptions about education as a competitive positional good become normalised within society.

Methodology

This article reports findings from a qualitative study on the NSWTF’s strategic response to neoliberal education reform, including the enactment of devolutionary policy, over 35 years from the 1980s to 2017. In this study, 11 union campaigns were examined, of which two are reported in this article that specifically relate to devolutionary policy. In discussing the empirical study with key informants and analysing union archival records, it became apparent that neoliberal agendas were shifting approaches to governance in public schooling. To understand the enactment of devolutionary policy and union responses, two campaigns involving major state-initiated reforms were analysed – the *Scott Review* and *Local Schools, Local Decisions* – with data drawn from interviews and union documents to understand the union’s response to these reforms.

In the first phase of data collection, over 2600 archival documents were analysed, ranging in date across this 35-year period. These records, including NSWTF annual reports, union minutes and union journal articles, provided insight into internal decision-making in situ and public messaging of the union’s campaigning, and also helped to confirm and/or refute participants’ recollections of events raised in interviews. Publicly-available State Education Department policy documents were also analysed. To gain a deeper understanding of phenomena observed in the document analysis process, data

were collected via semi-structured interviews. Participants were ‘purposively sampled’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985): interviews were sourced with participants who were directly involved in the campaigns at the time of their occurrence and could offer specific knowledge of the union’s response, or had knowledge about aspects of broader NSWTF strategy. Seventy-one interviews were conducted with NSWTF officers (52), rank-and-file members (9), leaders of NSW principals’ organisations (3), NSW Department of Education senior officials (3), former NSW Education Ministers (3) and the chair of a union-commissioned Inquiry (1). Interview themes across all campaigns considered the formulation of campaign strategy, the nature and effectiveness of campaign tactics including power sources drawn upon and repertoires of action deployed, and evaluation of campaign success. Most data reported in this article is sourced from interviews with NSWTF officers active in the two campaigns, and from relevant archival documents; however, it draws on the larger array of data outlined above as context to provide deeper understanding and interpretation of union strategy in both campaigns.

Data sources were analysed and coded inductively with a constant comparative method using NVivo software (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Documents were first analysed to establish initial codes that could inform the interview themes (e.g. financial resources and staffing), as well as understand key facts of campaigns as a means to interrogate union strategy and decision-making in the interviews. In this process, tentative categories were formed and incidents relating to these categories were grouped. These categories then informed the interview themes described above (e.g. regarding financial resources: global budgeting and cost-cutting). Documents were re-analysed if new themes emerged during interviewing or existing themes needed refining. This iterative process allowed for re-contextualisation and retriangulation of the data to better understand themes emerging from the various data sources and strengthen interpretations (Forster, 1994). Illustrations of this regarding financial resources include hiring of casuals, cheapest staffing costs, and so on.

Restructuring NSW public schooling: The framing and enactment of devolutionary reform

The managerialisation of education: The Scott Review

Devolutionary ideas were first promoted in NSW public education through the Schools Renewal (1989) and School-Centred Education (1990) reports (collectively known as the ‘Scott Review’) following a commissioned review into the school education portfolio by the NSW Greiner Government. The review proposed recommendations for the most efficient and effective form of management, administration and resource allocation in the system. Finding that ‘the traditional centralised [education] system is no longer appropriate for today’s schooling needs’ (Scott, 1989: 1) and that identified problems in NSW public education could be ‘directly attributable to the fact that the systems are rigidified’ (Scott, 1990: xii), the review recommended decentralisation to ‘shift emphasis from a system-centred to a school-centred form of organisation’ (Scott, 1990: 69). The

review was symptomatic of a broader decentralising and managerialising agenda in the public sector, which focused on delivering greater efficiency.

A key aspect of this restructuring was the introduction of global budgeting to provide school principals with greater flexibility around financial resources and drive 'entrepreneurial' cost-savings (Scott, 1990). By early 1991, all NSW public schools had adopted a model of global budgeting with significantly enhanced discretion over certain finances, including casual relief salaries, maintenance and utilities (NSWTF, 1989a). Within the Department, the decentralisation of these functions led to restructuring and cutting of 1700 positions (Sharpe, 1992, cited in Nation, 2001). With respect to staffing, the review found that the existing staffing formula facilitated a 'mechanistic centralised system' that failed to reflect local needs (Scott, 1990: 239). Recommendations were made for local teaching appointments based on merit and abandoning the 'list' system that promoted teachers based on seniority, alongside flexibility to employ a different staffing mix (Scott, 1990). Teaching positions could also be filled by non-teacher professionals and reviewed every 10 years. Principals would be appointed for 5-years terms (Scott, 1990). The review also proposed establishing a school council overseeing every public school to better engage parents and the community in school decision-making.

Union response

In response to the policy recommendations, the NSWTF established a context of frame contestation through denouncing the review's economic rationalist and managerialist imperatives as a means to mobilise its existing power resources (associational and coalitional power). Discursively, the review 'used the language of business [and]...look[ed] at schools as businesses' (Former NSWTF President) and was imbued with 'managerial speak' (Former NSWTF Senior Officer). Investigation into the global budgeting trial provided evidence of a cost-cutting agenda, finding many schools hiring the 'cheapest casuals' to save money (NSWTF, 1990a), while responses to a union survey found 16% of schools had vacancies not filled by permanent teachers, with some regions reporting as high as 25% (NSWTF, 1991a). This evidence was supported by a deep-seated concern that 'flexibility' could undermine teacher permanency and potentially increase class sizes (NSWTF, 1990b). The emphasis on hiring teachers using 'an 8-page CV...and 30-minute interview' was also viewed as potentially deteriorating the rigour of the hiring process, compared to the existing inspectorial system (Former NSWTF Senior Vice-President). Meanwhile, Department staffing cuts could see schools lose critical support functions (Former NSWTF Assistant General Secretary). Critical to mobilising the union's existing power resources was also crafting a frame around how the policy empowered the 'centre' to retain decision-making around major curriculum and pedagogical issues, with 'lower level' administrative functions being devolved to schools (Former NSWTF Senior Vice-President).

The NSWTF's response therefore involved mobilising existing power resources through crafting a frame that could resonate with teachers: framing the policy as cost-cutting and managerialised, antithetical to the values of public education, and using industrial, political and educational campaigning to quash the policy's 'worst features'

(NSWTF, 1989b). One Senior Officer also commented that *how* the policy was introduced also supported mobilisation of associational power, with consultation with the union seemingly absent. A sense of ‘imposed change’ was felt, which invoked a sense of injustice in teachers, whereby

it just seemed, from the get-go [start], such a profound insult in terms of union exclusion. We were completely excluded from the process, as were teachers... [I]t was imposed change, and imposed change, imposed culture, scarcely works on a sceptical... profession like teaching. (Former NSWTF Senior Officer).

Schools were encouraged to refuse participating in the flexible staffing trial and limit their appointment of teachers via local selection in favour of the transfer system (NSWTF, 1991b). Critical to the union’s response was also extending its framing to activate another power source – coalitional power – by framing the proposed reforms as diminishing the quality of public education. As noted by the union’s Annual Conference in 1989: ‘[a]s long... as the proposed changes are seen by the public as only affecting teachers’ working conditions rather than the future quality of the public education system, the Federation will simply fight a defensive campaign’ (NSWTF, 1989c).

The political and institutional conditions of the late 1980s and early 1990s also supported the crafting of framing logics to activate these power resources. The *Scott Review* was introduced alongside a suite of reforms driving a rapid and ruthless restructuring of public education through an economic rationalist and market-driven agenda under the Ministership of Terry Metherell (Gavin, 2019b), inspired also by the corporate managerialism of the newly elected NSW Greiner Government. For instance, a year prior to the release of the first Scott Report, Metherell announced the cutting of over 2500 teaching positions from the public education system to fund key election promises, alongside other reforms, such as de-zoning of schools, to advance market logics in public education (Gavin, 2019b).

Industrially-led mobilisation then intensified when the Department announced its intention to abolish transfer entitlements for classroom teachers as part of this decentralising agenda – an action that would essentially dismantle the state’s centralised transfer system (NSWTF, 1992a). Again framed as a market-driven initiative, teachers’ collective feeling of threat from this announcement inspired a 48-hour strike in June 1992, with bans also placed on all future flexible staffing initiatives (NSWTF, 1992b). In persistence of its reform agenda, but recognising the need for concession, the Department issued a discussion paper on new staffing proposals entitled ‘Your School’s Right to Choose’, which continued the flexible staffing proposals but protected some transfer rights (NSW Department of School Education, 1992). The NSWTF responded with a counter-message, ‘Your School’s Right to Say No’, which encouraged teachers and parents to submit a response to the proposed reforms (NSWTF, 1992c). The over 1500 submissions received expressed concerns about dismantling of the centralised staffing system (NSWTF, 1992c). The dispute eventually ended after the historic signing of a Staffing Agreement between the NSWTF and Department in June 1993, which provided an industrially-binding agreement that retained a centralised system of state-

wide staffing, banned further local selection and set formal class size limits (NSWTF, 2015). Thus, while some operational and administrative functions were devolved to local schools as part of a functional realignment agenda to achieve operational efficiency (e.g. casual staff hiring, resources and maintenance), many of the union-perceived ‘worst features’ of the policy failed to be implemented. This notably included avoiding dismantling of the centralised school staffing system, thus preserving the existing ‘system’ of school education in the state.

A reframed discourse of empowerment: Local Schools, Local Decisions

Further efforts to decentralise school education were enacted nearly two decades later through a re-framed, ‘post-bureaucratic’ policy agenda. While the *Scott Review* focused on decentralisation as a means to achieve operational efficiency and dismantle ‘rigidities’ of centralisation, the framing of devolved responsibility in *LSLD* emphasised notions of choice and empowerment in enabling schools to better respond to their unique local needs. In 2009, all NSW public schools received notice from the Department’s Director-General of a ‘47-school pilot’ designed to ‘trial increased school-based decision-making about recruitment, staffing mix and budget’ (NSWTF, 2009). This trial would form the basis of the *LSLD* devolution policy released in 2012. Through operationalising five reform areas of the policy, *LSLD* intended to enhance authority for schools to hire and determine the composition of staff, and provide greater responsibility and accountability over budgeting and resource allocation through a new consolidated budget model, in consultation with local communities. Schools would also be ‘freed’ from ‘red tape’ to prioritise focus on quality teaching and student learning.

Policy discourse emphasised how the ‘relatively centralised’ state public education system ‘limits the flexibility and authority of schools to make local decisions that best suit their students’ (NSW DEC, 2011: 4). At the time of the policy’s release, the state Minister for Education commented that: ‘For too long public schools have had their capacity to adapt to meet the needs of their students stymied by bureaucratic red tape and over-centralised command and control’ (Piccoli, 2011). Likewise, the policy articulated that

Our current rules and processes can make it hard for principals and teachers to respond quickly to these issues [about student learning needs]. It can be very frustrating when a decision that is made in the best interests of a student is hindered by a process that just doesn’t quite fit. Parents can find this difficult to understand as well. (NSW DEC, 2011: 3).

This paints the picture of an education system being stifled by an inefficient, centralised bureaucracy, encroaching upon individual rights and freedoms. The reforms would therefore afford school principals ‘authority to adapt what they do and how they do it to meet the needs of their students’ (NSW DEC, 2011: 3). A communitarian dimension was also emphasised, whereby local decisions would be made via enhanced consultation with parents and the local community, considered ‘[t]he people best placed to know the educational needs of students’ (NSW DEC, 2011: 4). Discourse around teacher professionalism was also emphasised, where enhanced local decision-making about teacher

performance, professional learning and programme delivery would improve teaching quality (NSW DEC, 2011: 7).

Union response

In an effort to mobilise its existing power resources against another devolutionary-style reform, the NSWTF extended its framing of the *Scott Review* to *LSDL* by again advancing a ‘cost-saving’ narrative based on perceptions that the reforms were exclusively focused of reducing public spending. A leaked government-commissioned report costed the savings to the education portfolio from the policy’s implementation, with spending on NSW public schools proposed to drop by 12%, which would cut 7500 teaching positions and 1500 support staff (Boston Consulting Group, 2011). The union also viewed the introduction of a new financial management tool as a mechanism to cut the number of administrative staff in schools, and the new funding model – the Resource Allocation Model – as a means by which government could potentially shrink budget allocations to schools. With the reforms enabling schools to now control 70% of financial decision-making, the NSWTF again framed *LSDL* as a ‘cost-cutting’ policy where schools could potentially make staffing decisions solely driven by cost (NSWTF, 2012a; Current NSWTF Deputy President). This concern was supported by evidence showing that during the policy’s trial, an average of 3.6 permanent positions were replaced by temporary appointments at each participating school as a result of enhanced flexibility (NSWTF, 2012b).

Framing this policy as a ‘cost-saving’ agenda that also attempted to erode system-level conditions, like the centralised transfer system and permanent employment, aimed to mobilise the union’s associational power. The union’s initial campaign response focused on grassroots organising where union delegates convened meetings of members to refuse their school’s participation in the trial and union organisers coordinated local protest action (NSWTF, 2012c). To mobilise existing coalitional power, the union drew similarities with the *Scott Review* and framed the policy as potentially diminishing education quality (Current NSWTF Deputy Secretary). Under the message of ‘Putting Students First’, the union attempted to mobilise a ‘broad coalition’ of support from principals, parents and the general public (Former NSWTF Assistant General Secretary). Discourse aimed at school principals attempted to demystify the ‘shiny ball’ (Current NSWTF City Organiser 2) rhetoric of greater autonomy and instead emphasise key policy ‘flaws’ (Former NSWTF Assistant General Secretary), such as the loss of support services and managerialisation of their role (Former NSWTF Assistant General Secretary). For parents and the community, the NSWTF framed their message around the impact of devolution for students’ learning and increased competitiveness of resources locally (Former NSWTF Assistant General Secretary; Current NSWTF Country Organiser). Comparisons were also drawn with market-driven, school autonomy reforms in the UK and USA to ‘debunk a whole bunch of myths around the benefits of [devolution]’ (Current NSWTF City Organiser 1). In an example of limited but well-supported industrial action, a strike was held in June 2012 (NSWTF, 2012d).

However, despite union efforts to *extend* the framing of the *Scott Review* to *LSLD* as a means to mobilise existing power resources against a similar devolutionary policy, limited *transformation* of framing logics weakened the union's resistance. Notions of 'empowerment' embedded in the policy discourse stifled the union's framing of *LSLD* as a cost-cutting, market-driven reform, as the union's supporters held conflicting views about the policy's merit. This ultimately saw introduction of operational aspects of the policy from 2012. New flexibilities were also afforded in a key re-negotiated industrial mechanism (the 2012–2016 Staffing Agreement) that operationalised enhanced staffing authority for schools. Principals could now locally appoint every second teacher at their school, representing a significant break with the existing centralised staffing system (NSWTF, 2012e). Other flexibilities were also allowed, such as temporary appointments to permanent vacancies for whole-school programmes in addition to flexibilities around the school's staffing mix (NSWTF, 2013).

Although *LSLD* contained residual elements of NPM such as a disdain for bureaucracy, the emergent aspect of 'empowering' parents, teachers and principals diluted the sense of injustice felt by these groups, thus weakening the union's discursive framing to mobilise resistance. Mobilising associational power was weakened when some principals and state principals' organisations publicly praised the greater decision-making power they would be afforded, although concerns were retained around some operational aspects of the policy (Current leader of principals' association 1, 2). Mobilising this associational power was particularly critical given *LSLD* would significantly enhance school leaders' decision-making power. A study of the pilot reforms showed the majority of participating principals enthusiastically embrace the reforms, using their enhanced flexibility to not only hire additional staff, but create specialist positions and augment the existing composition of staffing (Gavin and McGrath-Champ, 2017). Principals from schools in remote and disadvantaged communities in NSW also praised *LSLD* for allowing their schools to implement staffing initiatives that responded to their unique local needs (Gavin and McGrath-Champ, 2017). This generally positive experience of the trial created tension in the union's messaging about the other less desirable consequences of devolutionary reform, thus weakening both its associational power and position entering into staffing negotiations. Parents were also largely positive about the outcomes of the pilot for participating schools (ARTD Consultants, 2011). Thus, the articulatory power of *LSLD* weakened the union's ability to instil a collective sense of injustice among its constituency or mobilise its existing power resources through traditional framing logics.

Discussion

Teacher unions globally are facing significant challenges in responding to devolutionary-style policies which drive market-led, competitive practices and erode system-level governance and support. While the intent of this article is not to fully examine the impact of devolutionary-style policy in schools (for fuller coverage see Gavin and McGrath-Champ, 2017), analysis of the *Scott Review* and *LSLD* reforms illustrate how evolving discursive framing of similar devolutionary policies can enable, or indeed limit, the mobilisation of traditional power resources and weaken resistance against

governance agendas. While organisational factors at the level of the union and its (potential) external coalition partners provide enabling conditions for mobilising professionals as unionists (Krachler et al., 2021), our study shows that aligning these approaches becomes more difficult when organisational counter-framing occurs around the interests of professionals and the public. This scenario prompts broader critical evaluation of mobilising union power in a neoliberal environment.

Union resistance of the *Scott Review* demonstrated how associational and coalitional power can be mobilised when narrative logics frame policy agendas as managerialising. Enacting ideals seemingly ‘alien’ to public education, coupled with a policy agenda focused on ‘cost-savings’ and ‘efficiency’, rather than improving student learning outcomes, provided a ‘frame of orientation’ for the union to activate these power resources. In terms of the political context, the volume and pace of Metherell’s broader reform programme, underpinned by an economic rationalist agenda, also furnished the conditions to activate collective injustice among teachers and parents. Emphasising the downgrading to be expected to public education due to this managerialising agenda, as evidenced from the staffing and budgeting trials, proved critical to leveraging these power sources. It is also worth noting the industrial conditions of the time, where certain repertoires of action, such as large-scale displays of protest, were more commonplace, and were exhibited by teachers in response to Metherell’s agenda (Gavin, 2019b).

Contrastingly, discursive (re)framing of the *LSLD* policy and changing political and institutional conditions weakened activation of the union’s traditional power resources as the government’s articulatory power was strengthened in promoting a ‘post-bureaucratic, empowerment’ agenda. To some extent, residual NPM-speak remained in the policy’s framing of ‘bureaucratic rigidities’; however, counter-mobilising discourse was embedded in policy initiatives deemed more ‘palatable’ to diverse constituencies. The discursive framing of *LSLD* was overlaid with ‘empowerment’ rhetoric, supposedly affording parents greater say in school decision-making, empowering principals with more authority in school management, generating esteem in teachers through notions of ‘trust’ and ‘professionalism’, and advancing a ‘student-centred’ focus.

The broader policy context surrounding *LSLD* also provides insight into the articulatory impact of policy framing, where other policy logics at state and national level strengthened this empowerment agenda. For instance, the NSW Government’s *Great Teaching, Inspired Learning* re-inscribed a sense of teacher professionalism and status through a policy agenda focused on enhancing teaching standards and strengthening professional practice (Stacey, 2017). At the national level, policy technologies like the ‘MySchool’ website have also empowered parents to make judgements about quality and performance in ‘their’ child’s school, rather than the education system as a whole. This reconceptualisation of parents’ power elevates them to the status of ‘governing parent-citizen’, not merely ‘consumers’ in the school marketplace (Gerrard and Savage (2021).

This article has therefore shown how the discursive framing of devolutionary policy, from a NPM to ‘post-bureaucratic’ NPG agenda, has particular implications for activating union power. Through constructing framing logics of cost-cutting and managerialism that resonate with union supporters as seemingly ‘alien’ to public education values, it was possible to activate existing power resources. However, state governments

that counter-frame with shifting neoliberal discourses which emphasise empowerment can undermine union power when frame transformation fails to account for this shifting discursive agenda. Governments hold articulatory power in crafting a narrative of choice and empowerment in a supposedly post-bureaucratic world, contrasted with earlier economic rationalist discourses. Parents, teachers and school leaders are seen as freed from control of central government and state bureaucracy. A communitarian dimension is also advanced whereby old elements of social democracy are rearticulated, such as ‘social justice’ and ‘partnership’, offering social inclusion in return for acceptance of individual responsibility (Wright, 2012). It is difficult to discern, however, whether it was government’s intent in using discursive (re-)framing as an instrument to ‘blunt’ union power. While *LSDL* is framed around ‘empowerment’, this policy is embedded within a broader political and discursive shift from NPM to NPG which adopts renewed language around state restructuring guided by notions of trust and relational governance (Brunetto and Beattie, 2020).

This discursive shift conceals the extension of market logics within education policy while proposing that teachers and principals accept a ‘warmer relationship’ with government under espoused notions of professionalism, trust and enhanced authority (Wright, 2012). As ‘governing parent-citizens’, parents are encouraged to feel empowered so as to actively craft a school’s strategic direction and increasingly surveil teachers’ work (Gerrard and Savage, 2021). This is despite vague definitions in the policy document of how ‘empowerment’ would be enacted for these groups. This was illustrated during the COVID-19 pandemic where teachers’ professionalism and commitment to students’ learning was distinctly emphasised, founded in teachers’ presumption that they must deliver what was asked of them, such as teaching without sufficient PPE provisions (in 2020), and acceptance of heavily increased workload with concurrent shift to remote learning (NSWTF, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). Although parent-supervision of their children’s school work fleetingly generated heightened appreciation of teachers’ work, it is too early yet to discern whether there are lasting changes, such as within the Department or to wider community perceptions of teachers’ work.

Unions are thus operating in a more complex discursive environment, requiring them to leverage new power resources, namely narrative resources, and exercise discursive power that challenges neoliberal hegemony. This situation is not unique to teacher unions and indeed prompts consideration of strategies for union renewal globally in a neoliberal environment. While mobilising certain power resources will necessarily shift depending on the political and social conditions (Schmalz et al., 2018), the current ‘post-bureaucratic’ environment that unions operate in invites consideration of ways forward for renewing union power. While industrial action was not a prominent response to *LSDL*, contemporary regulatory limitations on industrial avenues for unions has necessitated efforts to leverage power from other sources, including coalitional power (Gavin, 2021), notwithstanding the limitations of activating this power resource as described. At an institutional level, the marginalisation of legal and industrial avenues limits the ableness, and willingness, of public sector unions to mount resistance campaigns.

Most recently, the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the limits of these devolution-inspired reforms, with the NSWTF demanding the Department ‘take back’ central control of schools, eroded by *LSDL* (NSWTF, 2020). While the NSWTF successfully negotiated with the Department over vital matters, including PPE and enhanced school cleaning, seeking that the education ‘system respond as a system’ (NSWTF, 2020), there was no industrial action such as was exercised by essential service (healthcare) workers elsewhere (Hong Kong) contesting the framing of their profession (Li and Ng, 2021). While temporary wage freezes were introduced for NSW public sector workers during the pandemic to limit impacts on the state budget, in a climate of significant economic challenges for the state and greater reliance on teachers to support students’ (online) education during the pandemic, union ‘resistance’ appeared incongruent with these conditions.

This article has highlighted how narrative-building and frame *transformation*, rather than merely frame *extension*, is critically important where language has been re-appropriated by governments in an emerging NPG climate (Benford and Snow, 2000; Gahan and Pekarek, 2013). This requires unions to establish a new frame contestation and craft new frames that resonate with supporters to mobilise support as the narrative of neoliberalism changes from a cost-cutting, managerialising agenda, to an ‘empowerment’ narrative. This has implications for the mobilisation of union power resources, in addition to repertoires of action deployed in changing political, regulatory and institutional contexts. It is clear that traditional power resources of associational power and coalitional power, even when combined, are no longer enough for teacher unions to resist decentralising reforms driven by neoliberal logic.

To complement and re-activate these power resources, teacher unions must also build new forms of discursive and symbolic power that challenge dominant neoliberal discourses deriding public education as a system in need of ‘reform’ (Gavin, 2021; Lévesque and Murray, 2013). Dominant discourses, like neoliberalism, can constrain union action by promoting the belief that ‘there is no alternative’ or delegitimising alternative ideas. However, even dominant discourses can be contested. Hajer and Versteeg (2006: 67) argue that ‘[I]language has the capacity to make politics, to create signs and symbols that can shift power balances and that can impact on institutions and policy making’. The challenges facing teachers and their unions are not discrete or solely material issues, but components of a larger neoliberal political project. Renewing narrative resources is critical for winning the power to define the terms upon which the social world is perceived. Further studies on the building of discursive and symbolic power can therefore investigate how unions can construct ‘collective action frames’ through moral articulation of what is ‘right or ‘wrong’, as well as present solutions to these problems that inspire people to develop counter-hegemonic strategies (Benford and Snow, 2000). This study also reinforces opportunities for ‘learning’ to counter ‘path dependent’ approaches of unions. Hyman (2007 cited in Lévesque and Murray, 2010) emphasises how union leaders often mobilise well-worn repertoires ill-matched to changing conditions, but learning is an essential element of union adaptation, seemingly as neoliberal ‘empowerment’-style discourse weakens union power and requires frame transformation.

Conclusion

This article has examined how the (re-)framing of neoliberal policy generates implications for mobilisation of union power resources. In applying a power resources approach, it has illustrated the evolution of discursive framing around decentralising governance reforms in education and examined teacher union responses to these framing agendas over time. It has revealed how policy re-framing, from managerialising discourse to an ‘empowerment agenda’ can further entrench a reform paradigm centred on neoliberal ideals of flexibility, choice, autonomy and freedom from bureaucracy. In doing so, it serves to expand market logics in education and further legitimise the neoliberal dimension of education policy. Such discursive re-framing challenges the power resources drawn upon, and strategies leveraged, by teacher unions. This article has argued that in a neoliberal climate, relying on building traditional power resources including associational and coalition power is insufficient; building discursive and symbolic power and activating these power resources through transformed narrative framings that galvanise constituents around resistance to neoliberal paradigms is crucial to challenge contemporary reform agendas. While the insights produced by this article are limited to one case study organisation, implications may also be drawn for other teacher unions operating in a similar (neoliberal) context where ideas of autonomy and responsabilisation prevail. Further research may also examine the ways in which teacher unions – and taking into account contextual parameters – unions more widely, build discursive power to challenge neoliberal reforms.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. The government (public) school sector is the largest employer of teachers in NSW, employing over 60,000 teachers in 2020 (ABS, 2021), accounting for nearly 20% of the NSW public sector workforce (NSW Public Service Commission, 2017).
2. The NSWTF’s membership is currently at 82%, or 55,000 members (NSWTF, 2017: 20). This compares to a union membership rate Australia-wide of 14% (ABS, 2020).

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