A lesson in how not to make education policy change: New Zealand school qualifications and the struggle for hegemony

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Introduction

This paper discusses aspects of my PhD research (Alison, in progress). I am a classroom teacher who turned gradually into a union policy-maker, firstly at the level of an elected official and later as a paid policy adviser, within the secondary teachers' union in New Zealand, the New Zealand Post-Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA). In the early 1990’s I was elected to regional office and then to national office as an Executive member from Auckland, the union’s largest region. During my term on the Executive, from 1994 to 2000, I took special interest in a range of professional areas, particularly curriculum and qualifications. This was a period of rapid change and intense conflict over school qualifications. In 2002, I became the staff member at PPTA National Office responsible for policy advice and advocacy on qualifications.

As a head of English between 1990 and 2002 in two successive secondary schools in low socio-economic parts of Auckland, I leaned towards supporting change in the qualifications system because I could see that students like ours were not easily finding recognition for their achievements through the existing system. On the other hand, I knew that qualifications reform was far from universally supported by my colleagues.

I realised that grassroots members of the union were generally unaware of the extent to which their own union had been an active participant in and in many ways initiator of the policy shifts in the qualifications area at key stages of developments. As a union activist, when members decried the reforms of the 1990’s, I often found myself saying, “But we must remember that the union has a long history of support for standards-based rather than norm-referenced assessment.” This comment was mostly met with at least incomprehension and at worst derision. This revealed a conundrum. The union’s long history of advocacy for standards-based assessment did not appear to be remembered by union members (the vast majority of secondary teachers), except among a few key activists. I wondered why that was so.

My thesis argues that the cause of this ‘professional amnesia’ lies in the struggle for hegemony of discourses that was taking place at the time. This resulted in a neo-liberal government and teachers ‘talking past each other’. This was further exacerbated by government’s attempt to avoid ‘provider capture’ by excluding teachers, and particularly their union, from participation in the policy-making process, a significant break from a long tradition of partnership between the profession and government.

Eventually the power of the neo-liberal wave that had swept across New Zealand from the late 1980’s began to dissipate, a process assisted by a new proportional electoral system that made coalition government and policy
compromise the norm. By 1998, teachers and their union representatives were being invited back into government policy-making processes. A new version of standards-based assessment was developed that was much closer to the original union vision, and communicated in language that was less unremittingly neo-liberal.

However, the evidence from my research suggests that the policy gap remains, in that teachers still perceive this latest qualifications system as something imposed on the profession by government, rather than as the culmination of decades of pressure by secondary teachers through their union.

The Struggle for Hegemony

Largely social democratic discourses underpinned education policy in New Zealand for many decades. Until the mid- to late-1980's, the discourses of government and union policy documents on school qualifications were pretty similar. However, in 1987 the NZ Treasury published a volume of its Brief to the Incoming Government devoted entirely to education (NZ Treasury, 1987), and this marked a significant lurch in the government discourses towards a strongly neo-liberal discourse that must inevitably have been alienating for teachers. (While aspects of neo-liberal discourses occasionally crept into government documents before then, they were far from dominant.) The Brief is suffused with the concepts of ‘human capital’ theory, in which schools, teachers and curriculum become ‘resources’ whose ‘productivity’ must be analysed because of their significant ‘volume’. The history of consensus policy-making in education is accused of having caused education policy to fail to keep up with new economic demands.

The Brief (NZ Treasury, 1987) positions qualifications as the way that an individual can ‘signal’ to a potential employer their economic value:

Thus, educational qualifications serve a number of purposes in relation to the economic function: they indicate the possession of basic skills or of higher skills, of basic abilities or of higher abilities including adaptability and trainability, and they sort and rank individuals for the labour market… The employer will utilise the qualifications and education concerned to reduce his transaction costs in hiring employees and, where the particular content of the education is relevant to the job, to externalise his or her training costs. (p.122)

Educational credentials therefore need to be reliable indicators, in order to reduce employers’ transaction costs: “To the extent that the employer can trust educational credentials to indicate a certain level of ability, then the transaction costs of obtaining new employees is reduced” (NZ Treasury, 1987, p.125). Such arguments lead naturally to support for standards-based rather than norm-referenced assessment, because, in theory, they provide employers with greater specificity of knowledge about what applicants can do.

This Treasury Brief was followed rapidly over the next few years by a succession of government policy documents that advocated the establishment of a national framework of standards-based qualifications that would apply
from the senior secondary school right through to the end of tertiary education, including at university level. A new government agency, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) was established to administer the framework. Assessment would be ‘seamless’, because students would be able to carry credits over from school to tertiary institutions or the workplace, and the system would make the process of cross-crediting between qualifications much easier. (e.g. Minister & Associate Minister of Education, 1989; Minister of Education, 1989; NZQA, 1990; NZQA, 1991).

In 1993, the board of the new Authority resolved that all assessment would be competency-based in the form of ‘unit standards’ that could be either Achieved or Not Achieved (NZQA, 1993). Competency-based assessment is the most extreme form of standards-based assessment. Not surprisingly, it was rejected by the universities for their qualifications. The response from schools was more divided. Schools in higher socio-economic areas whose students had largely benefited from the traditional norm-referenced qualifications system rejected the proposals outright. Schools in lower socio-economic areas whose students had generally experienced high levels of failure under the traditional qualifications were less willing to reject the proposals, and as the Qualifications Framework developed during the 1990’s, many of these schools began to enter trials of unit standards.

However, there were high levels of suspicion throughout the profession about the reforms, and no consensus emerged that would allow government to mandate the new standards-based qualifications for school use. Teachers who did engage with the trials found that there were many fish-hooks in the system that they were expected to try to resolve (O’Neill, 2001).

The discourse of the publications issued by the new Qualifications Authority to ‘market’ the unit standards-based qualifications in the early 1990’s is unremittingly neo-liberal, and in sharp contrast to the discourses of earlier government documents, or those used by secondary teachers and their union, PPTA. Qualifications are presented as the key to New Zealand’s economic growth, and a sense of urgency is conveyed. The language is technicist, using words like ‘instrumental’, ‘tapping’, and ‘harnessing’. People become ‘human resources’. For example, in Towards a National Qualifications Framework: General Principles and Directions (NZQA, 1990):

It [NZQA] has been set up to bring about change. There has long been criticism of our fragmented and inflexible qualifications system and low participation rates in further education and training. That situation must be turned around quickly. A reformed qualifications system will be instrumental in fostering an education and training culture in this country. Tapping the potential of all New Zealanders is the key to growth in a world in which economic and social development depend on harnessing the human resources of a nation. (p.1)

The Framework is described in structural terms such as ‘building blocks’, ‘barriers’, ‘flexible movement’:

A module is a unit of study built around specific, measurable competencies. It can be thought of as a building block. An appropriate
combination of modules would comprise a programme leading to a qualification ... A module needs to be large enough to provide a satisfactory unit of study but not so large as to be unattainable by an average student in a reasonable length of time ... The barriers that have impeded flexible movement within the qualifications system will be reduced. (NZQA, 1990, pp.9-13)

The word ‘skills’ appears frequently, but with a range of meanings. For example, in relation to the original intention of retaining the existing norm-referenced School Certificate as a final level below the Framework, NZQA says that qualification should reflect a broad general education rather than a vocational focus, however the concept of a broad general education represented here is very different from the same concept in most documents of earlier decades:

   While [compulsory schooling] should take into account the needs of employers and tertiary education, it should not be driven by them. It follows that employment training for under-fifteens should be limited to general preparation for the world of work, with the emphasis on generic skills useful in more than one type of job. (NZQA, 1991, p.28)

Education for self-awareness, for citizenship, or for living in a multi-cultural society are absent. While employers and tertiary education should not drive the curriculum, skills, described here as “generic” but signalled as work-related by the words “useful in more than one type of job”, are what count.

NZQA’s arguments for the Qualifications Framework use the language of managerialism, e.g. “It will involve setting simple and clearly identified targets and expectations of delivery” (NZQA, 1991, p.2). There is repeated reference to quality management systems, and to separation of roles: assessment is NZQA’s responsibility, but teaching and learning are not. Units of learning will be defined in terms of ‘learning outcomes’.

The Discourses Shift Again
Eventually, when the 1996 election delivered a result that required the incumbent National government to negotiate a coalition agreement with a small and somewhat unpredictable party in order to retain a majority, the neo-liberal tide began to turn. Compromise became the order of the day. A new Minister of Education, known as a political pragmatist rather than an ideologue, took office. A more conciliatory Secretary for Education was appointed. During 1997, there were signals that a new way forward on school qualifications was being sought by government.

The union was also looking for a way out of the constant conflict with government and within its membership. Its members had twice, in 1992-93 and 1995-96, been instructed to boycott work on developing the new system in their schools. In both cases this was partly as a response to the policy itself, but also in response to profound attacks on the employment conditions of the membership that could have destroyed the union altogether (Alison, Cross & Willetts, 2003). In 1997 the union commissioned an expert panel to consider a way forward for the qualifications system. The report of this expert panel (Allen, Crooks, Hearn & Irwin, 1997) has been described by Ministry of
Education officials as having laid out the blueprint for the compromise policy eventually adopted.

The general shape of the current New Zealand school qualification, the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) was unveiled in late 1998, and over the next three years until implementation in 2002, development work involved large numbers of practising teachers, including union representatives. The NCEA is a standards-based qualification able to be achieved at the first three levels of the Qualifications Framework. Up to nine separate ‘achievement standards’ have been developed for each school subject, with assessment for these standards criterion-referenced with four possible grades achievable: Excellence, Merit, Achieved and Not Achieved. The unit standards in school subjects that had been trialled in the 1990’s have largely continued to be available, and students can also have them, or industry-developed standards that their schools choose to offer, credited to their NCEA qualification. These, however, are all competency-based.

Interestingly, in the early 1990’s the intention had been to allow for more than one kind of assessment on the Qualifications Framework so that the most appropriate form of assessment for purpose could be used, but in 1993 the Board of the Qualifications Authority suddenly announced that only competency-based assessment would be used. The NCEA reverses that decision, by allowing criterion-referenced assessment for a Framework-linked qualification.

It is very noticeable that the discourses of the government documents explaining the NCEA are relatively devoid of neo-liberal language and make strenuous attempts to be inclusive of teachers. I contend that this is because it had finally been recognised in government that leaving teachers out of policy development, and speaking a language that does not reverberate with them, had led to conflict rather than consensus.

The language of the first publication on the NCEA is clearly seeking to reassure people from all parts of the debates: “Achievement 2001 [the name for the policy development process] is a unified system of national qualifications that builds on current examinations and unit standards. It introduces a balanced and flexible qualifications system for 16 to 19 year olds” (Ministry of Education & NZQA, 1998, p.1). The explanation for the change covers the usual ground: more students are staying at school, the community wants more diverse options from schools and recognition of a wider range of skills and knowledge, traditional assessment approaches don’t suit this wider range. However, in a new departure doubtless aimed at teachers, it acknowledges that the various changes in assessment in recent years have increased the workload for both students and teachers.

In a later leaflet for teachers, much is made of the fact that practising teachers are heavily involved in the development work and that not everything is going to change: “Expert panels of teachers decide what standards should be developed in each curriculum area. In doing so the panels refer to curriculum

**Union policy on qualifications**

There is not room in this paper to discuss in detail the union’s long-standing policies in support of standards-based rather than norm-referenced assessment. (For a more substantial discussion of this, see Alison, 2006a or Alison, 2006b.) It is clear, however, that from the late 1960’s the union was beginning to discuss the shortcomings of norm-referenced assessment and consider how different forms of assessment could be used to “encourage learning and to measure pupil growth accurately” (NZPPTA, 1969, pp.46-47). By 1976, there was sufficient consensus on the matter for the annual conference of the union to pass a resolution asking the School Certificate Examination Board (of which the union was a member) to investigate different assessment procedures and grading systems:

- with a view to abolishing as soon as possible
  - a ‘pass-fail’ concept, which is centred on the most unreliable point of the normal distribution curve,
  - percentage scores, which give a spurious appearance of fine distinctions, based on many areas of highly subjective judgements,
  - written examination papers as the sole means of assessment in most subjects which mean
    - many of the objectives of current prescriptions are not being measured, and
    - there is an unreasonably high correlation between almost all subjects and the general verbal intelligence of students so that one might as well base School Certificate awards on a single written intelligence test;

- and with a view to developing
  - extension of the concept of ‘level’ awards to subjects which, like Mathematics, can be assessed in terms of both developmental level and differing content...
  - credit for practical work in such subjects as Science, Engineering, Home Economics,
  - criterion-referenced statements in areas where range of activities, rate of progress, creativity, and personal growth are more significant than actual present achievements in a limited range of skills, e.g. in Native Language Learning, Art, and Social Studies. (NZPPTA, 1976, p.3)

This is a very clear statement of commitment to a shift to standards-based assessment for school qualifications. A change to a Labour government in mid-1984 saw a resurgence of enthusiasm for change and optimism that it might happen. In 1985, a whole issue of the union’s main publication for members was devoted to articles advocating change (NZPPTA, 1985). Discussion of the merits of different types of assessment continued, and experimentation with internal assessment for the existing norm-referenced qualifications grew. A form of criterion-referenced assessment, termed
‘achievement-based assessment’, or ABA, was voluntarily trialled by many teachers, generally for the internally assessed Sixth Form Certificate.

However, the failure of governments in the 1980’s to adequately address the increased workload associated with internal assessment appears to have somewhat diminished teachers’ enthusiasm to pursue radical change, although in principle the union remained committed to it. By the 1990’s, teachers’ knowledge of the profession’s long history of advocacy for change appeared to have largely disappeared.

**Teachers’ perceptions of the changes**

It is particularly interesting is to consider how, in the space of only a few years, such a history could be forgotten by most members, and the union could be in conflict with government over its attempts to implement a standards-based system of qualifications that was inclusive of schools.

As part of data collection for my PhD research, I interviewed 13 teachers who had been in the profession for most of the period under consideration. Their median year of starting teaching was 1973, with no-one starting later than 1979 and two of them beginning teaching in the early to mid-1960’s. It seemed likely that if anyone, apart from the members who were leading activists over the period, would remember the union’s advocacy for reform, these teachers would.

I asked teacher participants what they believed to be the forces of change that had driven the changes in school qualifications they had experienced during their careers. Only one of them volunteered that perhaps the qualifications reforms had been influenced by the union. Overwhelmingly, their perception was that the reforms had been imposed on the teaching profession by forces outside of the profession. They expressed a high degree of cynicism, blaming various Ministers of Education, nameless public servants, and employers for imposing the changes on them. Some examples:

- *I really don’t know why they did, change for change’s sake, I think it was Lockwood Smith [Minister of Education in early 1990’s] who did it … I don’t know, maybe, why do politicians do anything? It’s vote-catching, it’s change again.* (Brian, high decile co-ed school)

- *My thought was that somebody somewhere had seen a similar system in another part of the world, where I don’t know, and convinced the Ministry, I don’t say the Minister of Education, I would say the Ministry first, that this [standards-based assessment] might be a good thing, and then it was taken on board and the Minister of Education would have been advised that this was indeed a better way of assessing students.* (Trevor, mid decile boys’ school)

- *So I think someone came up with an idea, like ABA and unit standards no doubt, someone came back from overseas, went for a trip and came back with a new idea for assessment and said, well this will suit us.* (Hugh, mid decile boys’ school)
It was noticeable that the sample of teachers found it quite difficult to identify the forces of change at all. One of them seemed to provide a reason for this hesitancy when she said:

*It’s not what we’re thinking about, not our goal when we go in front of a class and assess, we’re meeting the needs as best we can of the kids in front of us. That’s why we’re here, isn’t it? (Anne, mid decile girls’ school)*

Teachers tend to view education through a ‘close-up lens’ that focuses on their particular students in their particular context at a particular time (Leggett, 1997; McLaughlin, 1993). Describing major forces behind policy shifts does probably not come naturally to them. Nevertheless, the almost complete absence of reference to their own union’s policy positions is still quite startling, but matched my own experience as a union activist trying to justify to members the NCEA as a successful culmination of the union’s long-standing commitment to standards-based assessment.

If older members of the profession do not place the reforms into a historical context, there is little likelihood that newer teachers will be aware of the history. This situation may partly explain why a ‘policy gap’ still persists on school qualifications in New Zealand. The policy shift is still not ‘owned’ by the teaching profession, as evidenced by a recent union survey of members that revealed that only about a third of members are willing to give unqualified support to the NCEA, a third are ambivalent, and a third are firmly opposed (NZPPTA, 2006). There are, of course, other factors not discussed here, such as the perennial one of inadequate resourcing of the change, the fact that there have been some technical difficulties in implementation, and perceptions that the Qualifications Authority has been unresponsive to teacher concerns.

**Conclusions**

It is common for educational policy change to fail to have the desired impact at classroom level. One contributor to this failure is clearly policy gaps, where those who are responsible for producing and communicating a policy and those who are responsible for its implementation tend to see the policy differently. The qualifications reforms in New Zealand during the 1990’s suffered from a lethal combination of a significant shift in government discourses away from the discourses used by teachers and their union, and the exclusion of teachers’ representatives from policy development processes. The result was a policy that diverged from the original vision of the teaching profession, communicated in language that alienated rather than engaged teachers.

A goal of educational policy-makers should be to minimise rather than maximise policy gaps, and the way to do this is to make education policy in an inclusive fashion. This requires that practising teachers be involved at all stages of educational policy-making: identifying issues, scoping solutions, consulting with the profession and others, recommending preferred courses of action, communicating decisions and assisting with implementation. Clearly not every individual teacher can be involved in this way, but it is important that those who are involved are representative of the profession, either through
union or other professional association networks, with clear lines of communication from and to their colleagues that will give their advice credibility.

Only teachers can turn a policy-maker's vision into a classroom reality for students. Policy-makers' visions need the tempering of reality testing by teachers if they are to become shared visions that have a chance of reaching actuality.
List of References


