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IS WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT WORKING?

A Critical Theory Analysis of the Stated Intentions for NQF Workplace Assessment in NZ; and their Realization in a Case Study in the Ambulance Service.

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ABSTRACT

Workplace Assessment (WPA) of National Qualifications Framework (NQF) competency standards has assumed significance as an alternative pathway for vocational qualifications for the NZ workforce.

The stated intentions of the initiators of workplace assessment of NQF qualifications were multiple, an, at times, uneasy alliance of differing ideologies. These intentions included: an increase in the capability of the workforce, unified qualifications, social well-being and upward mobility for workers, the widening of participation in education, more fair and valid assessment and public choice.

These official narratives for WPA are viewed through a critical theory ‘lens’, which is then focussed on a case study within the NZ Ambulance Service. The qualitative field work constitutes semi-structured interviews of six workplace assessors and eight candidates employed by Wellington Free Ambulance service.

This research indicates that the intention to increase skill levels was partly realised in the valid and direct assessment of performance offered by WPA. Yet, competition with university qualifications detracted from the unified nature of the NQF; its qualifications were relegated to lower levels of the ambulance service. The intention to provide equitable pathways encountered barriers, particularly for volunteer ambulance officers. Moreover, lessened provider capture has resulted in inconsistencies in assessment practice.

However, the assessors’ holistic evidence-gathering methodologies employed an interplay model, integrating atomistic competencies and holistic judgements of ambulance work. This hermeneutic knowledge counters tendencies to reductionist assessment of ambulance work. A further model of workplace assessors’ practice is developed showing how the level of closeness or distance between assessors and candidates influences the candidates’ confidence and therefore fairness in workplace assessment. Participatory practices and positive closeness favourably affected assessment events.
Costs, particularly the time required for WPA, are partly borne by the ambulance workers, with a resulting intrusive effect into the 'lifeworld' of these workers. The study concludes that WPA is a site where the ongoing contest for emancipation is played out, where workers may challenge the subjectivity of the learning organisation. Yet, candidates saw WPA as a way to meet their personal and career aspirations and valued the rewards attached to the qualifications gained, which offered them protection from the vagaries of the labour market.
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