Mind the gap! Policy change in practice

School qualifications reform
in New Zealand,
1980-2002

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Abstract

'Policy gaps' in education mean that the visions of policy-makers frequently fail to materialise fully, or at all, in teacher practice. This thesis argues that a significant 'policy gap' developed in New Zealand around school qualifications policy during the 1990's, and puts forward some explanations for that. A significant shift in government discourses over that period, from largely social democratic to predominantly neo-liberal discourses, was not matched by a similar shift in the discourses of teachers or the union that represents them. During the same period, teachers and their representative bodies were excluded from policy development, reflecting this shift in government discourses. Government and teachers were 'talking past each other'. As a result, qualifications reforms that might have been expected to be generally welcomed by the profession, as a government response to calls from the profession over many decades, were instead rejected by the majority of teachers. Furthermore, the absence of the teacher voice from policy development meant that the shape of the reforms moved significantly away from the profession's original vision, a further reason for its unacceptability to teachers. Reform was only able to be achieved when teachers and their union were brought back into the policy-making and policy-communicating processes and a version of standards-based assessment closer to the union's original vision was adopted by government. Nevertheless, the National Certificate of Educational Achievement that resulted appears to still be perceived by teachers as externally imposed and its origins in the profession's advocacy for reform over many years have been lost. This indicates that 'policy gaps', while easily opened, are not as easily closed.
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Abbreviations used

ABA  Achievement-based assessment (see Appendix 4)
CICAQ  Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications
ERD  Education Review Office
HOD  Head of Department (subject grouping)
MMP  Mixed Member Proportional representation (electoral system since the 1996 general election)
NCEA  National Certificate of Educational Achievement (used here for the secondary school qualification implemented from 2002, not for earlier qualification with a similar name)
NEQA  National Education Qualifications Authority (early name for what became NZQA)
NQF  National Qualifications Framework (a system for registering assessment standards and qualifications on unified framework, from Level 1/Year 11 to Level 9/PhD)
NZQA  New Zealand Qualifications Authority (administers the NQF)
OECD  Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OBE  Outcomes-based education
PCET  Post-compulsory education and training
PPTA/NZPPTA  New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (secondary teachers' union)