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Mind the gap! Policy change in practice

School qualifications reform in New Zealand, 1980-2002

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In
Education

at Massey University,
Palmerston North, New Zealand.

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2007

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.

Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to my supervisor and co-supervisor, 'the two Johns', Emeritus Professor John Codd and Professor John O'Neill, for their unflagging support and friendly critique during the writing of this thesis. Our regular meetings have been at times challenging but always fun, making every trip to Palmerston North a pleasure.

I am also grateful to my two daughters, Miranda and Kate, for their unswerving faith that I could undertake this task, even though Miranda, with the wisdom of experience, warned of the massive toll a PhD takes on one's life. She was right, and so I also am grateful to Jills for her patient acceptance that while the thesis has taken time that we could have spent together, it would not be forever!

I thank my employer, PPTA, for its generosity with funding, study leave and access to union documents, and my work colleagues, especially the members of the Policy and Advocacy team, for their encouragement and their contributions to my thinking.

And finally, I owe a debt to my participants, teachers and others, who gave their time to be interviewed and to meticulously check transcripts. It was a privilege to be allowed to share their memories of times that for many have been difficult, whichever side of the fence they have found themselves on.

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Abbreviations used

ABA	Achievement-based assessment (see Appendix 4)
CICAQ	Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications
ERO	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)