The NCEA and How We Got There: The Role of PPTA in School Qualifications Reform 1980-2002

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ABSTRACT

The NCEA, like many other government policies, tends to be seen by teachers as something imposed on the profession, and introduced without due recognition of the realities of teachers' work. This article argues that the NCEA could instead be seen as the fulfilment of decades of advocacy by NZPPTA, the secondary teachers' union in New Zealand. It uses evidence from the author's PhD research, including documents from union files supplemented by interviews with union policy-makers, to trace the development of the union's advocacy for a standards-based assessment system to replace the traditional norm-referenced assessment. It concludes by proposing an explanation as to why a policy with such a long union history would continue to be received with ambivalence or outright rejection by a significant proportion of secondary teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) has, since 2002, been the sole state-funded school qualification in New Zealand. It is actually a series of qualifications, National Certificates at Levels 1 to 3, registered on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework.

The introduction of the NCEA was far from smooth. It was a re-working of a previous attempt in the mid-1990's to introduce standards-based assessment for school qualifications. The previous attempt had failed for a number of reasons: the previous qualifications continued to exist alongside the new, the model of standards-based assessment proposed was a pass/fail competency-based system, and the involvement of teachers in the development of the 'unit standards' in curriculum subjects was limited.

The NCEA was different. As each successive level was introduced, the previous qualification offered at that level was abolished. The NCEA introduced 'achievement standards' which offered three passing grades: Achieved, Merit and Excellence. There was significant involvement of the profession, including substantial union representation, in its development and in the training that accompanied implementation.

Yet by the end of 2004, when all three levels were in place, about two-thirds of teachers were either ambivalent about the new qualification or downright opposed (Alison, 2005). According to PPTA research that number had not changed significantly two years later (NZPPTA, 2006), although another

source whose fieldwork was in that same year, Hipkins (2007), put the number of teachers who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I am supportive of NCEA" at 59% (p.10). Whichever figure is chosen, this is still far from being an overwhelming majority in support of the qualification.

Given that the union representing the vast majority of secondary teachers, PPTA, had been advocating a shift to a standards-based assessment system since the mid-1960's, this resistance to a new qualification which saw the union's demands over the previous four decades substantially met at last could be seen as inexplicable, or at least surprising.

This article sets out the history of that advocacy from the 1960's to 2002, drawing largely on information from PPTA files and published documents. It focuses on development of union thinking about standards-based assessment as the key distinguishing element of the NCEA. Other related aspects, such as the union's position on internal assessment and its advocacy for a Board of Studies and for the removal of University Entrance from Form 6, are not in the scope of this article, but are discussed in detail in Alison (2007).

Finally, the article suggests why it might be that a significant number of teachers would continue to oppose something their union had fought for over so many years.

THE 1960's

Dissatisfaction with the norm-referenced School Certificate exam was noted by the union's Annual Conference as far back as 1965, when there were concerns expressed about the inability of School Certificate as it was then structured to meet the needs of the increasingly wide range of students staying on at secondary school for three years. The conference called for modifications and "a rethinking of the educational philosophies on which it is based" (NZPPTA, 1966).

To establish a clear philosophical basis to the union's position on qualifications, a Curriculum Review Group was established, and it reported in the form of a policy statement titled *Education in Change* (NZPPTA, 1969). The Group had clearly been influenced by the 'objectives movement'. They advocate the setting of educational objectives, citing B.S. Bloom, R.W. Tyler and others from that movement frequently. Objectives are explained as "performance-oriented", language highly prescient of that used in the Qualifications Framework developed in the 1990's:

> The advantages of the behaviour position lie in the fact that words like *understanding* and *knowledge* must be defined in terms of abilities: What do children *do* when they understand? What do they *do* when they know? Any statement of objectives must therefore be a statement about the performances expected of pupils.
>
> (NZPPTA, 1969, p.30, italics in original)

The committee rejects competitive assessment and argues essentially for standards-based assessment:

> The motivation most helpful to valid testing is the candidate's desire that the score should give *him* a true index of his growth, his desire to find out the truth even if it is unpalatable. This is not the normal competitive desire, where a high score is sought whether it is meaningful or not … Co-operation between tester and subject is not an impossible goal: it can be achieved by taking the subject into one's confidence as to the test's purpose and letting him feel that it gives him an opportunity to find out about himself … In this context testing is conceived as a means of finding out about the pupil in order to aid his growth.
>
> (NZPPTA, 1969, pp.45-46, italics in original)

The Committee suggests that if schools were concerned with promoting the growth of individual students, then the current external examinations, which fail to aid further growth, should be abolished. They propose instead a system in which standardised diagnostic and teacher-designed 'achievement' tests, accompanied by profile reporting on the non-examinable personal qualities of students, will constitute the information provided to future employers and tertiary institutions (NZPPTA, 1969, pp.46-47).

This approach to objective-setting differs significantly from the more recent outcomes-based education, however, in that the 1969 version involves teachers setting objectives themselves for their particular contexts and students, unlike the nationally designated curriculum and assessment objectives of the 1990's.

In a submission to a Lopdell House conference three years later (Department of Education, 1972), the union talked again about the need to clarify the objectives of education, referring to Bloom's advocacy for national or state curricula "which set out minutely defined sets of objectives in the context of highly systematised evaluation" but warning of the danger that "new orthodoxies may inhibit experimentation" (pp.8-9). (This warning suggests that union personnel may also have been reading critiques of the objectives movement, such as those of Eisner [1967].) The union also called for professional development for teachers so that they could learn about "new concepts of the learning process and the growing emphasis on evaluating the effectiveness of education, based on clearly stated and shared educational objectives" (p.14). Charmaine Pountney, active in union curriculum matters in the 1970's, talked to the author about the objectives movement:

> In the National English Syllabus Committee, we were looking at measuring objectives and it was all about aims and objectives in those days … I went and saw Benjamin Bloom and people like that [in 1985 on a Nuffield Fellowship].
>
> (Interview with Charmaine Pountney, 15/11/04)

Thus the 1960's appear to mark the beginnings of the union's advocacy for assessment against standards, although that word was not used then. Words like 'non-competitive assessment', 'profile reporting' and 'assessment against objectives' were to be replaced in future decades by, firstly, 'criterion-referenced assessment', then 'achievement-based assessment' and 'standards-based assessment'.

1970's POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Education in Change established the philosophical base for the lively debates of the 1970's about qualifications issues.

Significantly, the 1976 Annual Conference passed, unamended, a very specific and radical recommendation from the Executive (NZPPTA, 1976) that asked that the School Certificate Examination Board investigate different assessment procedures and grading systems:

> … with a view to abolishing as soon as possible:
>
> i) a 'pass-fail' concept, which is centred on the most unreliable point of the normal distribution curve,
>
> ii) percentage scores, which give a spurious appearance of fine distinctions, based on many areas of highly subjective judgements,
>
> iii) written examination papers as the sole means of assessment in most subjects which mean
>
> a) many of the objectives of current prescriptions are not being measured, and
>
> b) 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:
>
> i) extension of the concept of 'level' awards to subjects which, like Mathematics, can be assessed in terms of both developmental level and differing content …
>
> ii) credit for practical work in such subjects as Science, Engineering, Home Economics,
>
> iii) 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. (p.3)

This is the first use I can find in PPTA policy of the term 'criterion-referenced assessment'. Frustratingly, the Executive paper to conference delegates contains no argument to support the recommendation.

The union's position on the "pass/fail concept" referred to in this resolution was a preference for a system of grades rather than percentage marks (NZPPTA, 1977a; NZPPTA, 1977c). The concept of "mastery levels" was gaining currency, with the Nelson-Marlborough Mathematics scheme trialling the concept (NZPPTA, 1977b). An article in the PPTA *Journal* (Nightingale, 1978) explained the concept to members, and here the words "gain credit", so key to the Qualifications Framework, also appear:

> What is so difficult about stating what it is we hope to achieve and then determining whether or not we have achieved it? It is certainly possible in mathematics to say what it is we expect students to be able to do … We should then determine whether or not a student has achieved a result, without making any reference to what his neighbour did. In other words, I'm making a plea for criterion-referenced or domain-referenced, rather than norm-referenced tests. We should stop placing people in rank order and, instead, state the criteria they should meet. If they meet the criteria they gain credit for it regardless of the number or percentage of others who do so. (p.13)

THE 1980's – SHARPENING THE FOCUS

Discussion about reform of School Certificate continued to occupy the union in the 1980's. By the second half of the 1980's, once the Labour government had made the decision to shift University Entrance into the 7th form, the debates began to focus more on ways to assess and moderate Sixth Form Certificate, and there was increasing discussion about the principles and practices of standards-based assessment.

Purposes of assessment

In a position paper (NZPPTA, 1981), the union asserts that conflict over *how* to assess often has its roots in conflict over *why* to assess. It accepts the use of assessment to inform students, teachers and parents about progress and to assist employers to select among applicants, but rejects its use as a form of discipline, or to evaluate the school system's return on investment or the performance of individual schools and teachers. It recognises that some reasons for assessment focus on the needs of the student and some on community needs, and says:

> This conflict in perception as to the functions of an education system has been defined as the conflict between those who want 'humanized education' and those who want 'industrialized education'. The Association accepts that the assessment system should attempt to meet the needs of 'industrialized education', *but only in so far as these objectives are compatible with the ideals of a 'humanized' system*.
>
> (p.2, italics in original)

Two years later, Muckle (NZPPTA, 1983) asserts:

> Any system of assessment which requires rank ordering on a national basis will inevitably discriminate against cultural minorities. Secondly the rank ordering of students places an undesirable emphasis on competition between students and undermines the objective of cooperation and concern for others. (p.2)

He goes on to present as an alternative, "favoured by those who want more radical change", criterion-referenced assessment. Its benefits, he argues, are:

> Moderation to rank students would no longer be necessary, although courses of study would need to be moderated to achieve some 'uniformity'.
>
> Schools would be freer to develop their own courses, taking into account the needs of the cultural minorities disadvantaged by the present system.
>
> Assessment would be more closely linked to learning and teaching.
>
> Employers, the tertiary system and the community would receive more specific information about student achievements. (p.2)

These arguments are very similar to the ones advanced in favour of unit standards nearly ten years later.

The paper acknowledges that the profession is in different 'camps' on assessment: those who want radical change "would tend to see schools as agents of social change and would want to encourage the development of a more cooperative and caring society" and those who are content with the status quo "would regard the primary purpose of the education system as being to prepare students to adjust to, rather than question the existing social order" (NZPPTA, 1983, p.2). Muckle concedes therefore that the union does not have a membership mandate to pursue radical change, although it might have done so in the early 1970's. He suggests that this waning enthusiasm for change may be caused by the difficulties in persuading government to resource adequately the increased workload from internal assessment. He concludes: "If we wish to proceed with promoting real change we will therefore need to stimulate greater membership awareness and debate" (p.3).

An effort to do just that is evident in a 1985 *Journal* featuring articles on assessment by teachers and academics. It reflects a new sense of optimism, with the change of government, about the possibilities of reform. A Glossary to assist readers, including terms such as 'achievement-related grades' and 'criterion-referenced assessment' indicates the radical change being envisaged (NZPPTA, 1985, p.5).

Gavin Muckle (1985) begins his article with an assertion that the impetus for change comes largely from teachers, arising out of their daily experience of the current system:

> Most teachers recognise that examinations are at least fallible and that examination results are an inadequate and often unjust way of labelling and classifying young people. More than anyone else, teachers have personal experience of the effects of a system which tells many of these young people each year that they have failed. (p.6)

He recognises, however, that there is no clear consensus among teachers, and that a further complication is an increasing insistence by other groups, such as boards, parents, employers, trade unions, and university staff and students' organisations, to be involved in decision-making about education. While acknowledging their right to participate, he argues that this makes achievement of a consensus even more difficult. Assessment is fundamentally political, and people's positions on it reflect their values about society:

> Those who favour a strongly competitive and individualistic society tend to regard education as a sifting and sorting process which selects young people for particular roles. They therefore also tend to favour an assessment system which ranks students in order and are sympathetic towards the retention of external examinations. The advocates of a more cooperative society, however, want an assessment system which can make positive statements about achievement, and which serves the interests of individual students, rather than any particular interest group such as employers or tertiary institutions. (p.7)

National examinations, asserts Charmaine Pountney (1985), provide no information about students' actual knowledge or skills and use only a narrow range of assessment techniques:

> In effect, our nation states to young people and their teachers that what is valued is the obedient, private and competitive acquisition of knowledge; silent pen-and-paper skills; recall of arbitrarily fragmented information rather than information gathering, processing and generating; and the linguistic attributes of the present dominant social groups. In addition, the system values competition and comparison, not actual and described standards of achievement. (p.18)

My assertion that advocacy for qualifications reform originated within the union is supported by John Murdoch (NZPPTA, 1985). However, he makes an interesting link between pressure from teachers for change and the industrial context, suggesting that the late 1960's and early 1970's were more liberal than the later 1970's. In the early 1970's a big salary rise had made teachers feel more positive and willing to consider change, including internal assessment, but this faded as pay and conditions failed to keep up: "However, during the later 70s the boost of the salary increase and of the staffing changes died away, and I think that affected the whole approach of teachers towards curriculum and assessment" (p.42). This raises the question of whether, in a similar way, many teachers' resistance to the assessment reforms of the 1990's was related to the

antagonistic climate that prevailed for most of that period between the union and government over salary and conditions issues.

The standards-based assessment system introduced into Scottish schools in 1984 is described by Alan Burton (1985) as a possible model for New Zealand, in what appears to be one of the earliest detailed descriptions for teachers of a Framework-type system, and one of the earliest references to the 'Scotvec' system that was to prove so influential.

The Jagged Edge

Mid decade, PPTA staff member Phillip Capper (1986) summarised for the union executive the changes facing secondary education and their impact on the boundary between secondary education and beyond. He titled his paper 'Jagged Edge', arguing that this boundary was becoming increasingly blurred, or 'jagged'. The developments listed included curriculum and assessment reform, transition education, courses for unemployed school leavers, and Link programmes (students doing secondary and tertiary education simultaneously).

Yet despite Capper's warnings, PPTA was unprepared when the government's review of post-compulsory education and training (PCET) began (Allen, Crooks, Hearn & Irwin, 1997, p.16). A paper on PCET debated at the 1987 Annual Conference (NZPPTA, 1987) established a *pro forma* union position: commitment to high levels of participation and training for 15-19 year olds; and a demand that PCET be co-ordinated, accessible, equitable, and standards-based, to enable success for all students and detailed recognition of achievement. The paper appears to advocate standards-based assessment:

> The examination and certification system should therefore be reformed to be consistent with the need to provide all with a description of their actual achievements, to provide all with information which will assist them to make realistic choices about their future education and training, and which will lead to a recognised qualification for all. (p.4)

However, this pro forma position was not planned to become definitive policy until the August 1988 Conference, leaving the union unprepared to respond adequately when the Hawke Report (Hawke, 1988) was published a month earlier. This was unfortunate, as that Report, by recommending the establishment of a National Educational Qualifications Authority that would have oversight over school qualifications, had highly significant implications for the sector.

CONFLICT AND RE-ENGAGEMENT IN THE 1990's

The establishment of NZQA in July 1990 left the union out of decision-making processes. At the time of writing the Annual Report (NZPPTA, 1990), there was still to be a standing committee responsible for secondary awards and qualifications, however it was to be much smaller than the soon to be defunct Board of Studies, and its members would be appointed by the Authority's Board as individuals. The union explains why this will be unsatisfactory:

> Appointees selected in this way lack accountability to an electorate. In addition we must sound the warning that if teachers have not been consulted and involved in curriculum or assessment changes, such changes are unlikely to work in practice. (p.17)

The Report also warns that in a devolved environment, the new Qualifications Authority will be unable to ensure its policies are implemented and properly resourced in schools, and also that the needs of tertiary might dominate the Authority.

Cautious support

Despite the hostile climate, the union sought to seize the initiative by holding a Curriculum Conference in May 1991, where the big topics of the day were assessment, curriculum, and school-industry links (Capper, 1991). A subsequent paper to Annual Conference later that year (NZPPTA, 1991) seems to support in principle the Qualifications Framework, by endorsing "a flexible, modular approach to learning … within a coordinated framework" and "the development of standards-based assessment leading to a single national award available to students in Forms Six and Seven" (pp.3-5).

The union's response to NZQA's early consultation documents (NZQA 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c, 1991d) was cautious:

> The NZQA document 'The Framework' [probably *Designing the Framework*, NZQA, 1991a] was both exciting and daunting for teachers. In many ways it contains the potential for underpinning the radical restructuring of senior secondary schooling which is so obviously necessary. But it is a highly ambitious proposition and the demands that would be made of teachers in its implementation are a particular cause of apprehension at a time when teachers feel under pressure from all directions. The experience of teachers over the past decade is that spectacular, glossy books introducing exciting and radical new curriculum and assessment policies emanate from central agencies with monotonous regularity but are rarely supported with realistic practical plans for their implementation in schools. When the inevitable failure ensues, teachers are blamed for their conservatism.
>
> (NZPPTA, 1992, pp.11-12)

In a new 'Jagged Edge' paper, Capper (1992) warned that while the debate about his first 'Jagged Edge' paper (see above) had been swamped by the union's response to the government's push on administrative and industrial reform from 1987, the emergence of the new curriculum and qualifications frameworks meant that the union could not afford to shift its attention from such developments again. He accurately predicted:

> The next decade will see the gradual modularization of the senior secondary curriculum, a shift to standards based assessment using a wide range of assessment techniques ... the withering away of Bursary and Scholarship examinations ... (p.4)

PPTA, however, was in conflict with the government over attempts to impose bulk funding of teacher salaries, and negotiations in successive employment contract rounds became increasingly bitter as government attempted to claw back conditions at the same time as offering minimal pay increases. In 1992, as a way of stating teachers' opposition to salaries bulk funding and as an expression of a loss of goodwill over the educational 'reforms' of the National government, PPTA members voted overwhelmingly for a moratorium on work on the Curriculum and Qualifications Frameworks. This moratorium remained in place until April 1993.

Despite this, a paper to the 1993 Annual Conference (NZPPTA, 1993) supported the concept of a National Certificate on the Qualifications Framework replacing the existing qualifications, and wrestled with the challenges of 'seamlessness': possible loss of students to other educational institutions, demand for a wider range of subjects, increased school-industry links, and increasingly complex pathways.

Conflict builds

In May 1995, government consulted on a proposal to shift a modified School Certificate to Year 10, as an alternative to abolishing it when the National Certificate was in place from Year 11. The union firmly rejected the proposal on the grounds that School Certificate had long ceased to have a role as a "drafting mechanism", and that a "norm-referenced externally imposed pen-and-paper exercise" could not provide students with certification that described actual achievement. "In the nineties … School Certificate has moved from being an anachronism to being a nuisance, a serious impediment to schools' ability to genuinely cater for the needs of their student groups" (NZPPTA, 1995c, p.2).

By the August 1995 Annual Conference, however, in a context of continued conflict over industrial and staffing issues, membership concerns about the Framework were at a high level. These concerns centred on the educational validity of the method of assessment, teachers having now seen it being applied to two conventional subjects (Maths and Geography), and also about resourcing.

The Conference paper (NZPPTA, 1995b), while arguing that PPTA policy should lead the union to support the Framework, raises concerns about "the validity of assessment and credibility of moderation processes, the complexity of the task of incorporating unit standard assessment in school programmes and the resourcing and timeline issues attached to implementing the Framework" (p.5). The workload and resourcing issues that had dogged internal assessment trials in the 1980's persisted: "Teachers assisting in the developments, for example those currently involved in the trial of Mathematics and Geography unit standards and those few who are members of NZQA's advisory groups, are doing so largely at their own cost" (p.5). The extra costs to schools were also not being met by government: "Costs of attaining accreditation and purchasing unit standards are considerable" (p.5).

Debate on this paper was heated, inflamed by membership anger about a recent reduction in staffing in over 100 secondary schools, and resolutions included a moratorium on further implementation of the Framework until adequate resourcing was provided, a demand for representation on all relevant NZQA advisory groups, and a boycott threat should a proposal to move School

Certificate to Form Four (Year 10) be implemented. At the same time, though, the Conference called for the union to establish "an expert panel of professionals … to undertake a process of review and audit of the Qualifications Framework during 1996" (NZPPTA, 1995a). This expert panel (see below) was unable to begin work, however, until this second moratorium was lifted in September 1996.

A deep divide was opening up over the Framework, and Capper's 1982 warning (see above) that the Executive should heed members' actual school behaviour as well as what they say at PPTA meetings proved highly prescient. Despite the moratorium, by late 1995 nearly half the country's secondary schools had volunteered to enter school-based trials of unit standards (O'Neill, 2001, p.68); on the other hand, the 1996 Annual Conference, while agreeing to negotiate a transition from the moratorium, resolved to 'review' the union's policy on both the Qualifications and Curriculum Frameworks, reflecting membership concerns about resourcing, workload, implementation processes and pedagogical issues. In the meantime, members were instructed not to do new work on the Frameworks unless resourcing that met union guidelines was made available (NZPPTA, 1996a). The neo-liberal 'purchasing model' was blamed for the exclusion of teachers' representatives from decision-making, and for having "created the powerful impression of bureaucratic imposition on schools and teachers" as well as leading to developments "which are increasingly less satisfactory to schools and teachers" (NZPPTA, 1996b).

Expert panel

In late 1996 the expert panel, a mix of academics and practitioners, began work. The academics were Terry Crooks, an assessment expert from Otago University and Kath Irwin of Victoria University, an expert on Maori education. Practitioners were Peter Allen, a principal and former President of the Association and Shona Hearn (now Smith), another former President, who in 1995-1996 had studied standards-based assessment at the University of London.

The panel presented its findings at a PPTA Curriculum Conference in July 1997. Launching the report (Allen et al., 1997, p.4), Shona Hearn acknowledged the divisions in the profession:

> It doesn't seem to me so long ago that there was a real consensus amongst secondary teachers built up over a long period that the old status quo in secondary school qualifications needed to go and be replaced by something better. But once we got into the implementation of the changes, the consensus has fallen apart. In a way we should have expected it – it's always easier to agree on what we don't want than to sort out what should take its place.
>
> (Hearn, 1997)

A further reason for the breakdown of the consensus on qualifications was alluded to by the PPTA President, Martin Cooney, in his address to the same conference:

> We now live in the most right-wing state in the world – the capitalist equivalent of Cuba. Superannuation is about to be privatised … the Salvation Army is tipped to take over Social Welfare; private police operate in Howick and Remuera; health and education face continual moves towards privatisation … This is the context for our debate. Forget fairness as a goal of Government policy.
>
> (Cooney, 1997)

The union, under his leadership, was moving into a highly defensive mode because of the scale of the swing towards neo-liberal policies during the 1990's.

The expert panel developed a set of eight criteria by which to judge an educationally valid qualifications system, that it should be fair, inclusive, cumulative, clear, motivating, coherent, constructive and manageable (Allen et al., 1997, pp. 95-100). They supported standards-based assessment:

> While well aware that standards-based assessment is not a panacea, and cannot be applied with great precision in some cases, **the Inquiry has accepted that standards-based assessment is more desirable on educational grounds than norm-based assessment**. The Inquiry therefore believes that New Zealand's qualifications system should place prime emphasis on assessment against standards: standards which are defined as clearly as possible.
>
> (Allen et al., 1997, pp.101-2, emphasis in original)

They were, however, concerned that developments in that direction were unravelling, and recommended a series of modifications that would enable the Framework to meet the criteria they had set and the concerns of teachers. These were largely technical modifications such as reporting three levels of achievement where appropriate, increasing the size of standards and making them less specific, finding ways to reduce re-assessment and improving the moderation system. In addition, they recommended a clear and realistic timeframe for change and proper support and resourcing so teachers could implement the changes effectively (Allen et al., 1997, pp.114-118).

President Martin Cooney (1997) chose to disagree publicly with the position of the expert panel, arguing that the existing qualifications system separated schools from other institutions and thus served to keep the threat of EFTS funding, a logical consequence of 'seamless' qualifications, away from the senior secondary school. His logic was firmly rejected by Hearn (1997) as "a short-sighted attempt at protecting our patch" that would be "expediency at its worst" (Hearn, 1997). This was a significant debate, demonstrating the interaction between qualifications policies and wider political considerations.

The union never adopted the panel's whole report as policy. Annual Conference 1997 adopted some of its recommendations, including the criteria for judging the validity of a qualifications system and recommended modifications to the unit standards model. The criterion on which most of the debate at the 1997 Annual Conference centred was the last, manageability. However educationally valid any proposed system was, it had to be manageable for teachers and students, according to speakers at the conference. While the eight criteria were adopted as a statement of principle, a

recommendation that came from the floor of the conference perhaps better sums up the way PPTA members were feeling: “The qualification system must be seen to be credible, fair and workable by students, teachers and the community; teachers are not to be used as guinea pigs for any under-resourced, untested qualifications systems” (NZPPTA, 1997).

Achievement 2001

The panel’s report was one of the triggers for the development of the Achievement 2001 policy that created the new secondary school qualification, the NCEA, yet despite this, the new proposal did not meet with unequivocal support from teachers. PPTA had been largely left out of the concept development. Although the President and a PPTA staff member had been secretly consulted about the compromise proposal, no official or wider consultation with PPTA occurred in the lead-up to the Cabinet paper (Office of Minister of Education, 1998). A special presentation of the proposal was given in November 1998 to a group of PPTA representatives the day after the official announcement to a wider sector group, but this was seen as post-facto communication, not consultation (personal recollection). An advisory group was established but while it included two PPTA activists, the terms of their appointments were that they were there as individuals, not as PPTA representatives. A Conference paper (NZPPTA, 1999a) criticised this lack of inclusion of the union:

> PPTA was not consulted about the overall structure of Achievement 2001 nor has it been consulted adequately about the elements of its implementation. The lessons of the past are that unless the profession has ownership of the changes they will not work. That’s a matter of record. For the future full, adequate, genuine consultation which includes PPTA is absolutely essential for the success of Achievement 2001. (p.32)

The paper evaluates the Achievement 2001 initiative against the principles established by the 1997 conference. While the provision for merit and excellence is applauded, concern is expressed about the level of achievement expected for credit leading to high failure rates, and about re-assessment, moderation, the implementation timeline and resourcing, especially in terms of their potential impacts on teacher workloads.

By the time Conference occurred, however, a supplementary paper had appeared (NZPPTA, 1999b) reporting on significant new developments in consultation processes and implementation details. In terms of consultation, three changes had happened: the Ministry of Education had invited PPTA to nominate representatives to the subject panels, a larger consultation body than the Joint Advisory Group (known as the Secondary Schools Sector Forum) with significant PPTA representation had been established and met once, and agreement had been reached for a national consultation exercise facilitated jointly by PPTA and the Ministry. (A letter had been sent out, under the two organisations’ logos and signed by Graeme Macann as PPTA President and Howard Fancy as Secretary for Education, inviting schools to send representatives to forums run by the union and the Ministry together.) The other

area of perceived progress was in the details of the qualification, however it was noted that in a number of respects the Forum had been restricted in its discussions by the decisions in the Cabinet Paper on which only a few Forum members had had any influence.

Conference delegates were still unwilling to endorse the new qualification, however, and resolved instead: "That PPTA continue to withhold final approval of the proposed NCEA until the concerns identified in this report have been resolved and that such approval be granted only by national ballot" (NZPPTA, 1999c).

In November 1999, the National Government was defeated, and the new Minister of Education, Trevor Mallard, immediately faced the question of the timeline for implementation. The consultative forums had revealed a sector split on whether the 2001 start was achievable and the Secondary Schools Sector Forum's support was conditional: "Forum members believed that the transition to the new system would be manageable as long as there is provision of: quality assessment materials; teacher professional development; and excellent on-going communications" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p.2). In March 2000 the Minister announced (Minister of Education, 2000) a year's delay, to 2002. Speaking to the Forum, he expressed support for the NCEA, but justified the delay on the grounds that sufficient support was not yet available for teachers to implement it successfully. He acknowledged that concerns continued to be expressed about administration, consistency and manageability, emphasised that the judgements teachers were going to have to make against standards were not simple and support was needed, and announced a significant increase in the amount of time the government would provide for professional development.

This message about professional judgement was one that was heard increasingly as the development work proceeded. In a letter written at the end of December 2000 to expert panel members, Tim McMahon, the Ministry official managing the Qualifications Development Group, developed this same theme:

> One of the significant issues made clear by our experience so far is that many teachers hold a false expectation that the publication of standards will eliminate decision-making problems for them. We need to do much more with those teachers to show them that the standards, and the exemplars of student work, are a *guide* to their professional judgement, *not* a replacement for it. The new system requires teachers to use knowledge and skills they already have, in the context of qualifications assessment.
>
> (2000, italics in original)

Nevertheless, despite significant involvement of teachers in development work, and considerable expenditure on communications and on professional development, the NCEA has still been a highly controversial innovation. Its first year of implementation was marked by PPTA ordering partial boycotts in pursuit of a Collective Agreement. It is ironical, given the history described above, that the implementation of the NCEA was adopted by the union as a target for industrial action in the 2001-2002 Collective Agreement round. This was a bitter round in which the executive of the union twice recommended ratification proposals to members, only to have them rejected. This was a very unusual

experience in the union's negotiating history. It was hard at the time, and is even harder in retrospect, to assess how much of members' anger was about the details of the settlement proposals, and how much was a reaction to a qualifications reform that most believed was under-resourced and some believed was ill-conceived.

While the settlement in mid-2002 of the Collective Agreement and consequent removal of the union's ban on implementation of Level 2 were followed by most schools and teachers opting into Level 2, conflict was again evident in 2003. Resourcing concerns continued to surface, and the union argued that the Bursaries examination should be available alongside Level 3 in 2004. This position was dropped, however, after a referendum of members in June 2003 supported rescinding the policy. Full-scale introduction involving all four levels (including Scholarship at Level 4) proceeded in 2004, and yet it cannot be argued that this was with the full support of the majority of teachers (Alison, 2005; NZPPTA, 2006).

Arguably, teachers' ambivalence about the merits of the new qualification has also been fuelled by constant attacks on the NCEA through the news media. These continue, almost unabated, into 2009. In the main, these attacks have come from the leadership of schools that consider themselves 'elite', and for whom the NCEA has been altogether too much of a social levelling device, in that it gives recognition to a much wider range of domains of achievement, and is predicated on the assumption that success should be available to all students. It appears that for the largely neo-conservative enemies of the NCEA, a school qualifications system should operate, as the previous system did, as a drafting gate that just happens to largely replicate socio-economic and ethnic divisions in society.

Unfortunately, successive government failure to adequately fund the NCEA has worked in favour of these critics, in that limited access to professional development and high quality assessment resources, a moderation system that until recently has been highly demoralising for teachers, and limited capacity at Ministry of Education and NZQA to troubleshoot problems as they have materialised, has meant that design and implementation issues have gone unaddressed for far too long. The current Standards Review is an opportunity, finally, to address at least some of these issues.

CONCLUSIONS

There can be no doubt that the union, on behalf of the approximately 95% of secondary teachers it represented, took a leading role during the 1960's to 1980's in advocating for qualifications reform that would abolish norm-referenced assessment and replace it with some form of standards-based assessment. It can be argued that the NCEA reflects the achievement of that goal.

So why is it that secondary teachers appear not to see the NCEA as a triumph of union advocacy?

I have argued elsewhere (Alison, 2006a, 2006b) that teachers appear not to retain a strong memory of their union's past positions. Only one of the thirteen long-serving teachers I interviewed for my PhD research demonstrated any inkling that the shift to standards-based assessment for qualifications might

have been instigated by the union. All the others assumed that it was the brainchild of politicians or government policy-makers. It may well be that if a policy turns out to be problematic to implement, it is natural for teachers to assume that it cannot have been their idea! If only one of these long-serving teachers recalled the union history, then it is likely that few newer teachers know much about it either.

This would suggest that the union has an education task to do, to ensure that its members, new and longer-serving, know their own union's history.

But there must be other reasons for teachers' perception that the NCEA is not long-held hopes fulfilled. I argued in my PhD thesis (Alison, 2007) that the fact that teachers were locked out of policy development during the 1990-1998 period helps to explain teachers' lack of a sense of ownership of the NCEA. Although eventually the union was invited to provide representatives for development and promotion roles, and although hundreds of teachers worked on writing achievement standards and sample assessment tools and delivering professional development, the legacy of eight years of exclusion persisted.

It also needs to be conceded that the union never presented a fully-developed model for the kind of standards-based assessment it favoured. It is likely that teachers' subsequent experience of the NCEA has stimulated valid doubts about whether it is the ideal model, but this does not necessarily reflect an outright rejection of standards-based assessment for school qualifications. There are some different examples of the use of standards-based assessment for school qualifications in other countries, and it may be that insufficient attention has been paid to these. In my PhD thesis, I suggested that the NCEA was a political compromise "to break out of the impasse that had developed with the school sector, which was largely refusing to implement the unit standards model for 'academic' subjects" (Alison, 2007, p.150). That is not an ideal context within which to conceive the perfect qualifications system.

It is also probably the case that most teachers do not think about policy processes and the wider forces that lead to major policy shifts which eventually impact on the individual teacher's work. In my thesis (Alison, 2007) I used a camera metaphor of the wide-angle lens of the policy-maker and the close-up lens of the teacher to suggest that there is a real risk that policy-makers and teachers will 'talk past each other' if they do not work together to develop and disseminate policy.

And finally, what seems like a really good idea, even if it is teachers' own idea, may still pose problems when teachers try to put it into practice. The NCEA, while it has opened up pathways to success for a much wider range of students, has been an enormous task to implement. The workload requirements of internal assessment, such as writing assessment tasks, marking, conducting internal moderation, and assembling samples for external moderation, have exhausted teachers (Alison, 2005). Furthermore, the search for really robust but teacher-friendly moderation, an issue confronted as early as the 1970's, continues (Alison, 2005), although the appointment from 2008 of full-time moderators is a step in the right direction. There are credibility issues arising from the very broad scope of standards currently able to be credited to an NCEA, a problem that will be partially solved by the new requirement that all Level 1 achievement standards be referenced to Level 6 of the NZ Curriculum from 2011 on.

Whether all this is a problem, as long as there is constant refinement in the areas of design of the qualification and implementation supports, is debatable. For the teacher at the sharp end of the policy, 'refinement' never comes fast enough, and it is hardly surprising if they blame others for their predicament. Telling them that it was their idea in the first place is unlikely to pacify a tired teacher!

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