

Mind the Gap! Policy change in practice. School qualifications reform in New Zealand, 1980-2002

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'Policy gaps' in education mean that the visions of policy-makers frequently fail to materialise fully, or at all, in teacher practice. My thesis explores the shift from norm-referenced to standards-based assessment for school qualifications in New Zealand between 1980 and 2002, as an example of a policy gap in action.

For this study I drew on four major sources of information: interviews with 13 teachers who had begun their careers before 1980 (with a median starting year of 1973); interviews with people who had held, at different times during the period studied, significant policy-making or policy-influencing roles in relation to school qualifications; a selection of relevant government documents from the early 1970s onward; and a selection of relevant PPTA documents from 1965 onward. This range of sources meant that multiple perspectives were able to be included.

The theoretical framework of the thesis is critical discourse analysis, which focuses on the struggle for power between the adherents of conflicting ideologies through the discourses evident in the ways they write or talk about issues (language), or the actions that they take (social practices). Discourses have the power to influence people's thinking and their actions, and we can say that a discourse has become 'hegemonic' when it has come to be seen as the natural or normal way to communicate about something and to behave. However discourses rarely become hegemonic, because they are always interacting with other discourses in a constant struggle for power.

In the thesis, I argue that a significant cause of the large policy gap between teachers and government during the 1990's was that while government was pursuing neo-liberal policies and using neo-liberal discourses to advocate for them, the teaching profession and its union representatives continued to advocate social democratic policies and use social democratic discourses to advocate for them. This resulted in the two groups 'talking past each other', and this was very evident as government sought to replace the traditional school qualifications with a competency-based unit standards-style assessment system. This was despite the fact that the qualifications reforms might have been expected to be generally welcomed by the profession, as a government response to calls from the profession over many decades for replacement of norm-referenced assessment with some form of standards-based system. Instead, they were rejected by the majority of teachers.

I also argue that it was not simply the changing government discourse that caused the 'policy gap', but also the ideological notion of 'provider capture' that was part of that discourse. To avoid 'provider capture', neo-liberal ideology contends that people who provide services should not be allowed to be part of key decisions about how those services operate, because their advice would be tainted by their self-interest. In other words, "Don't ask teachers about education issues or nurses about health issues, because their advice will not be based on the altruism that is core to professionalism, but on their own interests as workers." This led to a

situation where teachers, and especially their union representatives, were shut out of important opportunities to influence policy, exacerbating the policy gap. 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.

A shift away from this drive to avoid provider capture was evident in the policy development processes for the NCEA, which were much more inclusive of the profession including the union, and may be one of the major reasons why the NCEA implementation went somewhat more smoothly than the earlier attempts to introduce unit standards did. Furthermore, the NCEA in many ways harked back to the achievement-based assessment that teachers had been experimenting with in the late 1980's and early 1990's, which may be a reason why it was somewhat more readily accepted by teachers. Nevertheless, it 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.

Sadly, the combination of factors described in the thesis appears to have succeeded in largely expunging from the memories of teachers whose careers span the period of the thesis, 1980-2002, the long history of advocacy by the profession, through its union, for standards-based assessment for school qualifications. A very significant finding was that only one of the 13 highly experienced teachers interviewed identified as a possible force of change in qualifications the union's advocacy for a move away from norm-referenced assessment. He said, "All right, the push came, certainly PPTA were pushing for it, because PPTA as a group were quite anti norm referenced assessment ... we're talking about the 70s, the late 70s" (see p.159). No other teacher participant recalled this, and the overwhelming consensus was that the school qualifications reforms, like other changes, were entirely externally imposed on teachers.

The thesis also argues that teachers and policy-makers look at the world through different 'lenses', and that this exacerbates policy gaps. Teachers tend to use what I have called a 'close-up lens' that focuses on their students in their school, rather than on wider political or systemic issues. Policy-makers, in contrast, tend to use a 'wide-angle lens' which focuses on the wider political and systemic issues, but may lack insight into the day-to-day realities of teachers.

Because of these findings I assert, as one of my final conclusions, that while 'policy gaps' are probably unavoidable in education, a goal of policy-makers should be to minimise rather than maximise such gaps, and that "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." I further argue that these practising teachers must be representative of the profession, not selected individuals, "with clear lines of communication from and to their colleagues that will give their advice credibility" (p.254).

I conclude with these words:

Only teachers can turn a policy-maker's vision into a classroom reality for students. We need to know how those policy-makers' visions can be better fitted to classroom realities so that they become shared visions, and how those classroom realities can be changed to enable shared visions to become actualities. This requires a climate of respect for teachers as responsible professionals who are committed to the well-being of their students, not a climate in which teachers' compliance is sought through accountability regimes that communicate distrust of their professionalism (p.254).