

## **Lost possibilities: Reflecting on New Zealand's NCEA qualifications experiment**

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*ABSTRACT: This narrative is an account of one English HOD's experience of reforms in secondary education in New Zealand over the last fifteen years. In particular, the narrative focuses on changes in assessment and qualifications. Special attention is given to the recent implementation of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), which has now become the major qualification in the senior secondary school. This narrative argues that the implementation of the NCEA is changing the culture of English teaching, and cites a number of concerns: inflexible pedagogies, a lack of debate over issues central to what it means to be an English teacher, a climate of compliance and technicist approaches to lesson planning.*

*KEYWORDS: English, assessment, National Certificate of Educational Achievement, curriculum. teaching culture.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When I look back and evaluate progress made in the New Zealand English classroom over the last thirty years, I cannot help feeling more than a little bit sad. It is just that things could have been so much better. Our students could have had a much richer experience of learning had a less narrowly ideological and autocratic management model for education been adopted over the last fifteen years.

When I started teaching in the 1970s, there was a fresh sense of high idealism, adventure and enthusiasm among English teachers. I think now that we were so successful because we were able to infect our students with that same enthusiasm. Of course, equally idealistic, adventurous and enthusiastic young teachers arrive among us today. However, it is sad to see those good qualities quickly knocked out of them by grinding workloads and a system that imposes a never-ending race to meet deadlines imposed either by assessment or by the omnipresent demands of administration.

Not that we were perfect way back in the 70s. Our idealism lacked substance and our teaching style would hardly suit in the much harder social climate of today. Back then I remember a student coming up to me and asking, "How can I improve this essay?" I was flummoxed! I was in my fourth year of teaching and I had no idea how to answer the question. All I knew about assessment was that a work was worth a 5, or an 8, or whatever.

We have come a long way since then, but we have lost much that was good too.

Prior to the upheaval of the mid-Eighties, we had a Department of Education that maintained a close communication with teachers through a system of regionally based inspectors who mediated change by facilitating the flow of information and who encouraged active debate on curriculum, learning theory and teaching methodology.

The system was centred on the growth needs of the student, was respectful of classroom teachers, their needs and opinions, and was driven by full and intelligent curriculum documents. The system was inclusive. Principals, middle managers, talented teachers were systematically co-opted into the Department to learn, to plan and to lead change. There was a great deal of inter-school, inter-teacher communication, and grass roots teacher organisations flourished.

From the “people” point of view, the old Department of Education was magnificent. However, it was rather bureaucratic in the ways that it handled school management and resources, and it did not seem to be able to make much headway with assessment and curriculum issues once the old consensus started to fragment into ideological camps and groups that wanted to serve their own self-interest. An example of the latter would be the fierce opposition by a group of privileged schools to any change in an exam system that passed or failed students in English on the basis of a statistically normal curve where students ranked below fifty percent were deemed as failures. This debate tore teaching apart and a great deal of mutual demonising went on among teachers. Sadly, division made teachers incapable of acting together to modify the changes that deluged upon them when a New Right Government restructured Education during the mid eighties.

I would describe the new administration of Education in New Zealand as the reverse of my description of the old Department of Education: Excellent with managing resources, money, buildings; so obsessed with management systems that you would have to give it a pass for trying so hard: and appalling in the way it relates to people.

To restructure education the Government carved education into three parts: The Ministry of Education that supports the day-to-day operation of schools, among other things having a very vestigial role in curriculum development; The Education Review Office, initially for reviewing school compliance on mainly policy matters, but now beginning to be useful by conducting classroom reviews with officers who have subject specific knowledge; and finally, the darling of the new trinity, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority<sup>1</sup> which was given the task of developing the new qualification which we now call the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). This is the organisation that has had the most to do with changing our teaching culture.

Now, at the end of 2004, after fifteen years of going up dead-end trails, back-tracking, and bitter dissension among teachers, the qualification is “complete” in the sense that the first cohort of purely NCEA students have just graduated.<sup>2</sup> The NCEA has the following features:

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<sup>1</sup> In New Zealand, the Education Amendment Act of July, 1990 provided the legislative basis for the creation of a new agency, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). Prior to this date, post-compulsory secondary school qualifications were designed and managed by the University Grants Committee, a standing committee of the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee.

<sup>2</sup> The qualification was announced under the title “Achievement 2001”. However, the first year of implementation (for Year 11 students) took place in 2002. The first year of NCEA for Year 12 was 2003, and for Year 13, 2004. In successive years, the old qualifications – School Certificate for Year 11, Sixth-Form Certificate for Year 12, and Bursary for Year 13 were replaced by the NCEA.

- Canonical subjects have had their content delineated by a range of “achievement standards” (between five and nine per subject). The traditional equation of a subject with a course has been rendered redundant in that the regime allows students to select some but not necessarily all achievement standards (or unit standards<sup>3</sup>, which have been retained as optional assessment components) from a particular subject level in planning their programmes of study;
- Achievement standards have been developed at three levels, corresponding roughly with year 11 (level 1), year 12 (level 2) and year 13 (level 3). There is also a Scholarship level 4 for more able Year 13 students.
- Some achievement standards are assessed internally and some (at least 50%) externally;
- Students sitting achievement standards receive either credit at three different grades (achieved, merit or excellence) or no credit at all;
- Each achievement and unit standards has a credit weighting, with a notional year's work in a subject allowing for the possible achievement of 24 credits. Credits are accumulated over a range of subjects with a total of 80 credits (including 60 at the award level) required for a National Certificate to be awarded at a particular level;
- Grade point averages are calculated for each “subject” but these don't have the same meaning as traditional percentages;
- Achievement standards are assessed according to a system of standards-based assessment, with each standard being divided into “elements” and “descriptors” for achieved, merit and excellence grades written for each element.

The NCEA as a qualifications framework has had virtually no trialling and has no parallel elsewhere in the world

As classroom teachers our job has been to make sense of each development and make it work in the classroom. There was very little trialling of developments prior to implementation, and the level of resourcing and training that we have been given to do the task has been laughable. We have had to make an awkwardly complex system work while trying to minimise harmful effects on the students that sit in front of us.

During the 1990s, teachers had to sit on the sideline and watch a number of debates rage: What shape should the new Curriculum Framework take? What subjects are to be taught and what components are in those subjects? What are the Essential Skills that students need to learn? (Eight Curriculum levels were invented which covered what learning would be done, step by step from an infant's entry to school to a young adult's leaving school.) How much internal assessment should be done? Norm referencing was to be rejected but what was to take its place? In the late 1980s, standards-based assessment in the form of achievement-based assessment was widely

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<sup>3</sup> Non-New Zealand readers unfamiliar with the term need to realise that “unit standards” – and more recently, “achievement standards” as developed for NZQA are used for assessment for national qualifications. They describe both *outcomes* which students need to perform in order to achieve credit on the National Qualifications Framework (e.g. English 8812 reads “produce transactional written text in simple forms”) and the *standard* (in the performance criteria) of performance required to meet the outcome. (The English unit standard 8812 has four separate criteria expressed as competences: writing develops idea(s); ideas are logically sequenced and supported by relevant details and/or examples; conventions of chosen form are observed and appropriate to purpose; final product is crafted to publication standard.)

triallyed and well received, but in the 1990s, this form was replaced by forms of competence-based assessment.

The “Standards” that we were asked to teach were at times very intrusive. For example, a Research Unit Standard we still have requires students to formulate three key questions, collect information from three different sources using three different technologies and record the process. Now, for many adolescents, the organisation to do this multi-faceted task of planning and action is like rocket science. They may be very keen about finding their way to the fridge, but they see little relevance in demonstrating the use of skills in the way that a monkey performs tricks in a circus. Many students simply put their feet up and do not try in these sorts of activities.

Now we have “Achievement Standards”, a fairly successful combination of good tasks, clearly stated standards and exemplars. And we’ve been given training on how to use them (no such training is provided for the large number of teachers arriving from other countries in the years following the training though; we have to train them on site). Finally, the NCEA is working because teachers have made it work.

So. Can we relax now that we have completed the grand project? I think not. Remember the bitter war that I mentioned about norm referencing before. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority adopted a four-level achievement system. Students can only only “Not Achieved”, “Achieved”, “Merit”, or “Excellence”. Base four cannot be turned into marks out of five, or ten, or turned into percentages. Clever. This beats norm referencing but it creates multiple pages of results. Do parents or prospective employers like looking through the resulting pages to see how well a student has done? They may not. A recent survey found that over fifty percent of New Zealanders do not have faith in the NCEA qualification. What is NZQA’s response? It is going to “educate” employers about the qualification

One could write volumes about what has happened, and what is presently unfolding with our assessment focussed system. Increasingly officials are hinting that the qualification as it is now will not be the same in the future. So it goes on. We now have a massive assessment structure that assesses our students over three “levels” for the last three years of their school careers, with each year in each subject loaded with multiple internal assessment tasks as well as full exams at the end of the year. Poor young people!

## **A DAMAGING CULTURE FOR TEACHERS**

What makes me sad is that the development of the new assessment regime has so dominated teaching over the recent years that the very culture of our teaching profession has been severely damaged. I liken it to the arrival of the vast alien space ship arriving in the movie *Independence Day* and the way it blocked out the sun with its bulk. The development that has eventuated as the NCEA has had a very similar effect.

I lead a department of seventeen English teachers in one of the schools that has survived best through all the changes. We are blessed by the leadership of competent, practical, “hands-on” principal who is informed, who thinks through change, who

consults in all directions, and who works with his staff. The school's reputation attracts good teachers.

To my mind, the process of NCEA implementation has had a number of serious consequences. High school teaching has become a career that young New Zealanders do not want to take up. They have observed the agonies of frustration that their own teachers have gone through at close hand and do not want a jot of it. Many of the young teachers who do take up the job leave after a couple of years. Staffing has become a major headache. As a HOD, I find more of my time, and the time of my experienced teachers, used up in training teachers who have not come from countries that share the same ideas about pedagogy that we have. I have had to create very prescriptive programmes for teachers to follow. Basically, I have got to have courses designed for someone who has just flown into the country, who has a teaching qualification and who has to start straight away in front of a full timetable of classes – and this with an absolute requirement that the students have a fair go at assessment tasks, and that they are assessed fairly. I feel a very heavy weight of responsibility.

It is what teachers have become that hurts me most. The flow of new ideas into teaching has been stopped and there is a whole generation of younger teachers in the classroom now who have not experienced debate over the major educational issues that have taken place elsewhere in the world. Developments in teaching styles, learning methods, critical thinking, multi-literacies, language learning – all these have by-passed contemporary, New Zealand, English teachers.

Teachers have become the conscientious deliverers of assessment modules designed in the capital city. Lesson planning is very much a matter of managing a class through the hoops, being careful to maintain comparable standards and procedures to other classes, keeping track of time, and bringing the completed material in by deadline. Then there is the marking!

They have no framework in terms of which they might question what they do. If they had a quality curriculum to work, from instead of the one that was written to support an assessment system based on eight levels, they might be able to break into some creative teaching. They are too busy to enquire anyway.

In addition, they have learned to fear the consequences of stepping out of line. In the current climate, dissent attracts challenges about the validity of one's assessments, and rebukes that can range from comments by fellow teachers to exposure in the form of yet another educational scandal in the press. I myself have at times been very unpopular with people in the New Zealand Qualifications Authority camp (and it is a Byzantine insider – outsider situation) by challenging aspects of reform that should be challenged as a matter of course, as part of a systematic testing of things to see if they are worthy of implementation. Teachers are supposed to be educated people after all. On one occasion the person introducing a new Achievement Standard refused to report my very substantial reservations about a national exemplar. I, and other very experienced teachers in the room, thought that it would mislead teachers on the nature of the task that they were meant to do. Constructive comment is neither sought nor appreciated.

The teachers I work with are indeed very good. But, when I attempt to engage with them, I find they are tired out and inclined to be resistant to professional development that is not to do with assessment. To survive you have to prioritise, and assessment comes first.

As Head of Department I have increasingly come to feel the experience that I have to contribute to teaching counts for little. I have been replaced by the management culture which sets targets, locks teachers into appraisal objectives which must be met, and gives out contracts for “educationists” to come and lecture us about them. For example, we have a Government inspired Literacy programme. People have been employed to train teachers on how to improve their students’ literacy levels. But there is no resourcing. Much of the programme is regurgitated from language-teaching programmes from the past – without the vital learning theories that once accompanied it. Increasingly, I am having to keep my mouth shut. However, there come a point where an old teacher *does* become disruptive.

I am particularly disturbed by the constant battle I have to fight with teachers who channel classroom activities into a narrow, tightly controlled test situations. I sometimes have to intervene, in situations where extra “rules” have been made up which exclude students on quite unfair and invalid grounds. An obsession with “valid” assessment, which leads to narrow, dull tasks and lack of student choice is a problem. Likewise is the absolute and damaging obsession with authenticity.

I can tell a story that does not show myself in the best of lights. I was doing a top-level, creative writing Achievement Standard with a very good academic class. The class had a high proportion of immigrants and I utilised the idea of Third World literature by providing models for inspiration. One girl got some very impressive sentences from an Anita Desai novel that I had not read and skilfully woven them into her own work. I was very impressed. I thought it should be published in our school magazine. A teacher who had read the novel spotted the plagiarism. Now, the girl had been found out. I had shown the work around; the plagiarism was discovered. But the situation rebounded on me. I found myself pulling rank. No. Creative writing is too important to be brought down to a three or four-period test. Students need to process. I committed the heresy of saying, “OK. So, once in a while a student might beat us on authenticity issues, in spite of all the precautions we have taken. So, should we ruin the educational experience of all the hundreds of other students because of this?” If this had happened to a junior teacher, the teacher would have been crushed under the weight of condemnation. I feel we must fight against a spirit of growing meanness in education.

In the current climate, much less time is being spent on lesson preparation. Pre-prepared teaching units and text books are the flavour of the day. My Department photocopying bill has increased six fold. There is quite a lot of photocopying of low quality lesson material of a “fill-in-the-gaps” nature and there are many more lessons of a one-period duration nature being delivered. But materials preparation comes well down on the priority list. Four years ago, I had a TV/video station to be shared between every two rooms. Now I have one for every room. But I am not sure that they are being used well all of the time. In terms of curriculum delivery, we have gone back thirty years, and teachers have run out of bounce.

## CONCLUSION

Somehow we need to get the individual student back into the centre of our thoughts. Our young people deserve better. I believe that we humans are learning animals, that we have a natural curiosity and that we have a love of ideas and language. We are the “language animal”, after all. English classes should reflect this.

If you look at the rich popular culture that teenagers share through the media, through the internet and through their very vibrant social lives, you can see a life that is missing in our classrooms. These young people have a right to be taught by teachers who are in control of their teaching, who are not tired or filled with fear, who enjoy teaching.

To achieve this we need to include all teachers at the planning level for teaching programmes. Students should be offered choice and asked to make real commitments to what they do. Activities should be highly attuned to who the students are. More than anything, we need time – time to think, time to rediscover all those pedagogical issues that we used to grapple with.

There are causes for hope, however. The high quality of the people still coming into teaching never ceases to surprise me. Next year I intend to continue to be a nuisance. I’m going to walk around saying “How can we do this in a way that can give our students a good learning experience?”

However, what I have just been saying is really just a load of rhetoric in the present climate. No earthquake is going to shake the assessment fanatics from the positions of power that they have gained over the last two decades. The National Certificate of Educational Achievement will continue to dominate the classroom for years to come. The institutional inertia is too heavy to be shaken.