

**Discourses in Qualifications Policy Adoption in New  
Zealand,  
1996-2000:  
Identifying Power Imbalances in a Transformative  
Process**

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## **Introduction**

This paper is based on research conducted for a Doctor of Education thesis. The thesis is a critical analysis of the adoption of policy for a National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). The overarching thesis question is “what delayed the legislation of policy for standards-based national secondary certificates in secondary education until 1998-2000 and implementation until 2002, despite the initial registration of a National Certificate of Educational Achievement qualification on the NZQA framework in November 1996?”. The thesis seeks to examine and explain the length of the policy adoption phase and the reasons for changes in the policy, through analysis of the debates and events that affected its progress. The underlying policy issue is identified as being whether to frame the purpose of senior secondary education as the selection of high-achieving students or as the progression of all students. The focus in this paper is on the discourses relating to the purpose of senior secondary education that were in tension during the policy adoption phase.

## **Background**

In the early 1990s the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) planned to introduce into secondary education a National Certificate using standards-based assessment. This brought to the fore a shift in the long and historical debate over norm-referenced or standards-based assessment, which had continued over the previous two decades amongst educators, politicians and interest groups. The debate has involved differences of opinion over the suitability of national, norm-referenced external examinations as the main type of assessment in the national system for certification and represents the most significant shift in secondary education policy for fifty years.

Until 2001 there were three main qualifications in the senior secondary school, one in each of the last three years. School Certificate, in year 11 (15-16-year-olds), generally involved a two and a half to three hour external (national) examination, with additional internal assessment in some subjects; Sixth Form Certificate, in year 12 (16-17-year-olds), was fully internally assessed at school level, but moderated by the previous year's School Certificate results; and the University Bursaries examination, in year 13 (17-18-year-olds), involved a three-hour external (national) examination in most subjects. School Certificate and University Bursaries were, for many years, norm-referenced and statistically scaled at a national level.

The shift in thinking that was occurring in New Zealand is reflected in the work of Young & Spours (1998), who identified three challenges to raising participation and achievement in 14-19 education and training in England and Wales in the late 1990s. The first relates to engaging young people who are non-participants in education and training in “developing their learning capacities”, rather than simply moving them through basic ‘getting into work’ schemes that are often temporary solutions. The second is about raising expectations of success, particularly of ‘average’ students. Three key strategies identified are: ‘new pedagogic strategies’ to support better learning; giving incentives to schools and colleges encouraging them to support these students more; and shifting the purpose of national qualifications for young people from a “predominant focus on selection to a focus on progression”. The third challenge Young & Spours suggest is financial, and identifies the need to increase funding, as “none of these goals can be achieved on existing resources allocations” (Young & Spours, 1998, p. 3). All of these challenges have been present in New Zealand during this shift in framing the purpose of senior secondary education from the selection of high-achieving students to the progression of all students.

The new NCEA qualification comprises three separate certificates at levels one, two and three on the National Qualifications Framework that was established as part of the education reforms of the early 1990s. All three qualifications are configured in a similar way, making it easier for students to understand the system. The ‘guaranteed failure rate’ associated with a norm-referenced qualification is no longer part of the qualifications landscape, making it possible for all students to work towards qualification rather than failure. This may involve students achieving a level one qualification in year 13, if applicable to the student’s ability and motivation.

## **Policy adoption**

In his policy development framework Levin (2001) theorises that between policy origins and policy legislation, “policy proposal” and “policy adoption” occur. All of these can be understood as ‘phases’, each of which has a certain function. Levin defines policy adoption, as “the process of moving from an initial policy proposal to its final form in an approved piece of legislation, regulation or other vehicle” (2001, p. 115).

Ten years is a long time to spend debating the adoption of any new policy, let alone one as central and critical to the education of young New Zealanders, and over this time the NCEA policy went through a number of changes before becoming fully adopted. Had a more fully developed plan for the NCEA policy been available in 1991, it seems possible that debate would have been settled much more quickly. Of interest to this research is the considerable and heated debate about attempts to decide which form of assessment and type of qualification is acceptable to all interest groups concerned with New Zealand senior secondary education. The support for and opposition to the NCEA policy has not been straightforward, and has been complicated over more than a decade by many factors seemingly external to the policy adoption debates, for example: professional-industrial secondary teachers’ issues; administrative reforms contributing

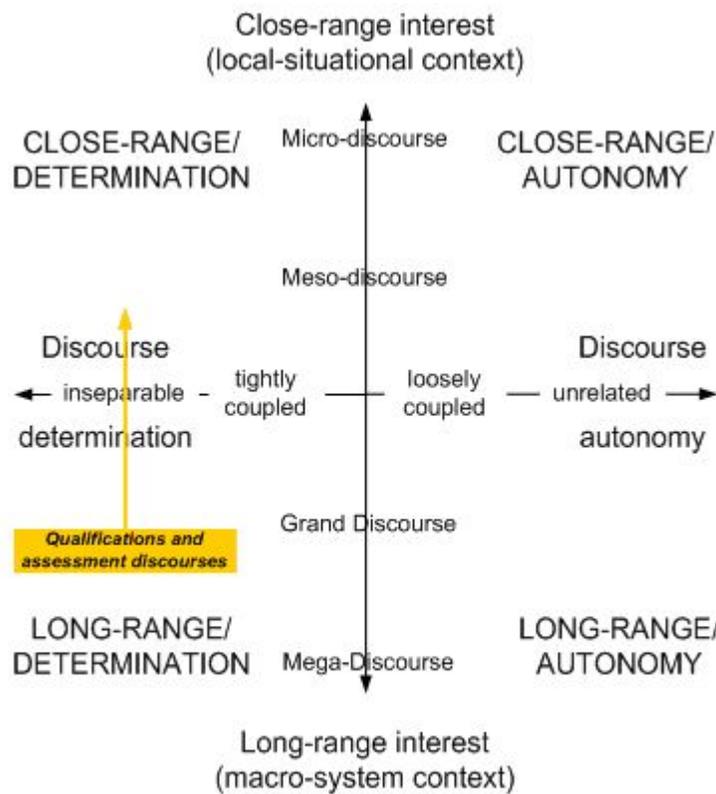
to increased workloads for secondary schools; uncertainty over the sustainability and future of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA); lack of direction at times over whether Ministry of Education or NZQA was responsible for ‘driving’ the senior secondary assessment and curriculum reforms; and problems relating to the relationship between the National Qualifications Framework and tertiary education.

The NCEA policy has been described by education officials in government agencies as ‘evolutionary’. Evolutionary theory in policy-making is clearly described by Fischer when he says that “as the policy goal proves to be a moving target, the question of whose interpretation of the goals and objectives to take as the actual public policy problematically remains open” (Fischer, 2003, p. 8). Fischer explains that a clearly articulated policy may easily be derailed by problems of implementation, but the alternative is a rather ‘muddy’, contested approach. There was no conclusive policy ‘set in concrete’ for the NCEA, so as Fischer suggests, the development towards implementation was likely to be a contested situation. The evolutionary aspect of the policy contributed to the existence of intense public and government agency debate, yet this was not necessarily detrimental over time to the policy that was eventually adopted and implemented.

## **Discourses**

Ozga argues that education policy researchers need to “bring together structural, macro-level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro-level investigation, especially that which takes account of people’s perception and experiences” (Ozga, 1990, p. 359). Discourse plays an important role here. As Fairclough explains, “the level of discourse is an intermediate level, a mediating level between the text *per se* and its social context (social events, social practise, social structures)” (Fairclough, 2003, p.37).

Discourse is described by Alvesson and Karreman (2000) as ranging from ‘close-range or micro, to long-range or macro-interest’ and from discourse ‘determination to autonomy’, forming two core dimensions of a matrix. ‘Determination’ refers to the way in which discourse can be said to drive the way in which we think of and define our subjective selves and includes the notion of the structuration of society, institutions and individuals by discursive practices (Thompson, Ricoeur, & Habermas, 1981).



Elaboration of core dimensions and summary of positions in discourse studies - Alvesson & Karreman, 2000

Figure 1. Elaboration of core dimensions and summary of positions in discourse studies (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1135)

In commenting on the policy process, Keeley and Scoones argue for a broad “structuration argument, where discourses and interests are seen as shaping each other, and where both are additionally influenced by the actions of actor-networks” (Keeley & Scoones, 1999, p.

1). On the other hand, ‘autonomy’ refers to discourse definitions that accept that how we talk and write about an issue or in a particular context can influence meaning, and hence understanding and actions (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000).

Of the resulting four quadrants in the matrix, the discourses that relate to qualifications and assessment policy are defined as being in the ‘long-range determination’ quadrant (see Figure 1). Macro-ideologies, explained in the next section, contribute to the structuration of these ‘grand Discourses’, which in turn influence meso and micro-levels of social interaction and conversation. As Alvesson & Karreman explain, in this quadrant it is assumed “that discourse, subjectivity and practice are densely interwoven, and that discourse is primary to subjectivity/practice through it constituting or framing powers” (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000, p. 1138).

Van Dijk contends that there are certain requirements to be satisfied in order to describe discourse analysis as ‘critical’. It must address social problems and issues of a political nature; it must try to explain discourse structures “in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure [and it] focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of *power* and *dominance* in society” (Dijk, 2001, p. 353). A significant aspect of discourse lies in its ability to affect power relations through social interaction. In the NCEA policy adoption context there have been numerous levels of interaction from agency to individual, and from public and media debate through sector debate, to more closed-door policy-making and the NCEA policy debates have been strongly situated within each of four different macro-ideologies and associated discourses. Agencies, policy coalitions and policy actors have cited information and arguments which have suited as justification for their

perspectives in order to challenge and affect influence, and thus alter relations of power and domination.

## **Macro-ideologies and Qualifications and assessment discourses**

Given that qualifications can be considered scarce resources, and are described in the literature as ‘positional assets’ (Brown, 2000), it is valid to analyse assessment and qualifications policy development from a class and ideological perspective. Progression rather than selection is the tension underpinning the contestation over qualifications and assessment policy. A colloquial analogy would be the provision of a series of stepping stones rather than a set of sorting gates, and the ‘stepping stones’ or progression idea does not serve well the desire to gain possession of scarce resources.

The beliefs and values that groups/individuals hold about assessment and qualifications will in part depend on their perception of their own power relations to others in society. On this perception is built their definitions of notions such as assessment and qualifications, and the legitimacy to which they ascribe these definitions. When the legitimacy of these definitions is challenged by other groups/individuals, tension, disputes and conflict may arise.

Four qualifications and assessment discourses based on different class-located ideologies, theories of assessment policy notions (Broadfoot, 2001) and senior secondary system types (Howieson, Raffe, & Tinklin, 2001) were identified as being in tension during the adoption of NCEA policy. This involved the potential to establish a new power relationship replacing the previous imbalance of power between the argumentative discourses: ‘fulfilment’, ‘usefulness’, ‘recognition’ and ‘excellence’.

Due to the macro-level at which the ideologies used in this paper exist, each having many variants, they are referred to as ‘macro-ideologies’. Michael Freeden, Director of the Centre for

Political Ideologies at Oxford University, discusses liberalism, conservatism and socialism in his book *Ideologies and Political Theory* (Freeden, 1996). He places feminism and green ideology in a further chapter, indicating that they are important ‘new’ ideologies, yet different from others which he sees as major ideologies.

There are three important points to introduce the macro-ideologies. Firstly, for the purpose of this paper the macro-ideologies will be defined more by ways in which each differs from the other, than by any singular definition of each. Secondly, Freeden’s use of liberalism as a major ‘macro-ideology’ is accurate in my opinion, however it presents problems in that a great deal of explanation and discussion would be needed to identify the way in which it is most useful to this paper; indeed Freeden refers to ‘mistaken identities and other anomalies’ when discussing liberalism. Given the importance of neo-liberalism, a type of libertarianism, to the global scene in Western democracies over the last two decades, particularly in economic terms, I will refer to ‘libertarianism’ as the macro-ideology in the model that is associated with the business middle class and economic capital. Thirdly, I add ‘humanism’ as a fourth macro-ideology. I considered this direction initially because when looking at ideologies and perspectives of educators, it was difficult to locate myself and other educators in the ideologies that I identified. This was particularly so when considering the neo-liberal aspect of ‘liberalism’ (which was the closest fit at that point) and the way in which it has been heavily critiqued by so many education and social science academics in recent years.

In particular, on consideration of patterns in ideology, I theorised that in examining the ways in which macro-ideologies differ from each other, there needed to be two continuums in the model I was constructing. Socialism and conservatism have an emphasis on control at the level of society, socialism on the one hand fostering equality and social cohesion and conservatism on the

other believing in inequality and preservation of social order. Humanism and libertarianism emphasise control by the individual. Humanism believes in equality and highlights the importance of individual potential whereas libertarianism accepts inequality and highlights the importance of individual freedom. Thus there are two continuums; individual – society, and equality – inequality. The resulting model is shown in Figure 2. In identifying humanism as the fourth macro-ideology, not only did I consider that I and many other educators would identify with the beliefs and values, but also the model or concept map itself gained a semblance of order and balance. Further to this, it may be possible that Freeden’s use of feminism and green ideology have a space in this part of the model.

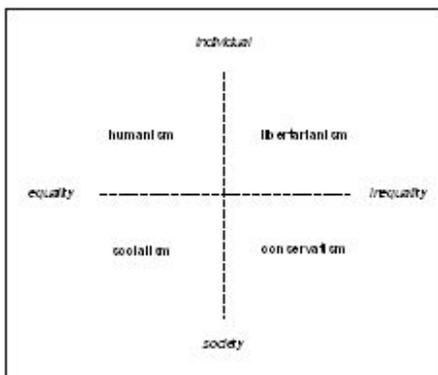


Figure 2. Model of macro-ideologies

Why is achievement important?	Assessment policy notion?	Senior secondary system type?	Discourse used as justification?
leadership	certification	tracked	excellence
function	performativity	linked	usefulness
growth	empowerment	unified	fulfilment
enhancement	opportunity	unified	recognition

Figure 3. Overview of four variables in the qualifications and assessment discourses

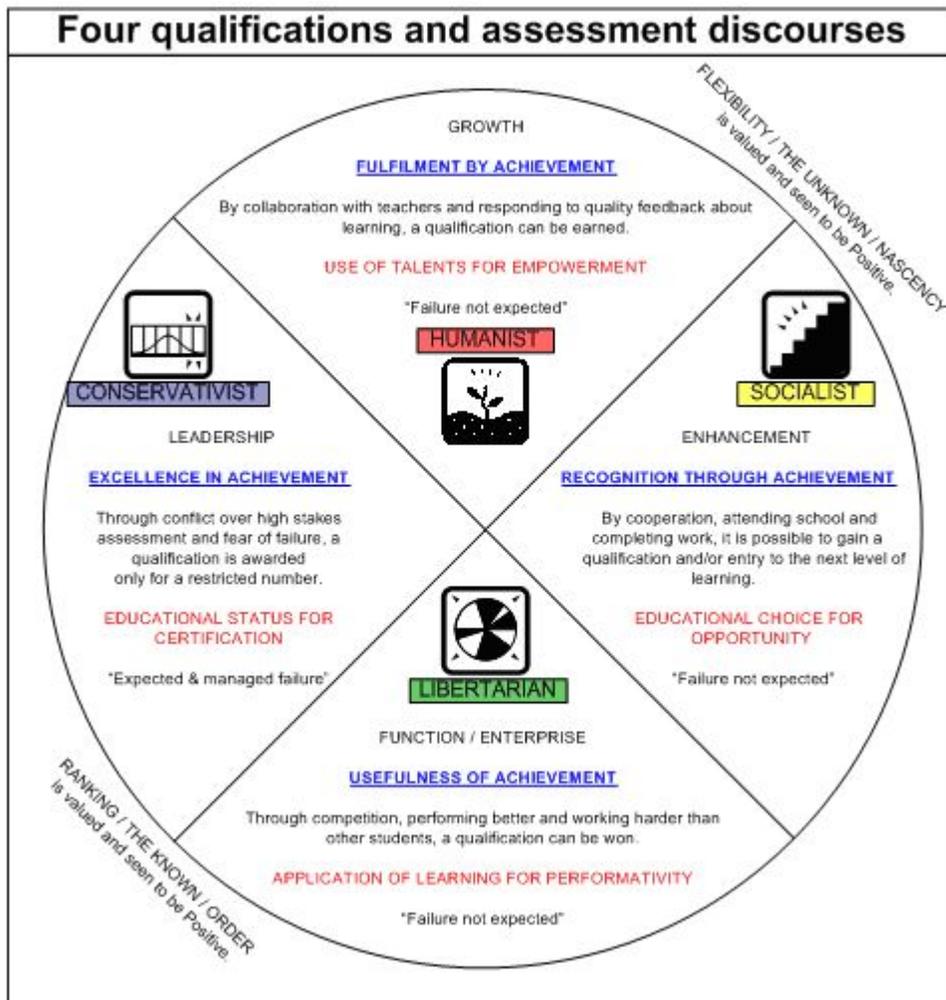


Figure 4. Model of macro-ideologies and four qualifications and assessment discourses

Norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessments are an underpinning issue in this research. They constitute the two main ways of basing assessment judgement – either against other students or against clearly stated criteria. Norm-related referencing is “the comparison of individuals with their peers [which] can be used for selective purposes...but gives little information about the actual abilities of the candidates” (McAlpine, 2002, n.p.). ‘Classic’ norm-referencing involves the use of testing a representative sample of students, then using the norms developed from the results with which to grade further groups of students. Though designed to be a way of maintaining similar standards over time, this is problematic when either the nature of the

students, or the curriculum content changes sufficiently to be no longer reliable. Criterion referencing is uses pre-defined criteria against which to compare the knowledge, skills and attitudes of students. It is much more accessible to use for formative as well as summative purposes, “both highlighting areas of weakness and determining whether candidates have achieved an acceptable level in the areas they are expected to know about” (McAlpine, 2002, n.p.). Criterion referencing uses “performance against learning objectives” as its criteria for success, whereas norm-referencing uses “performance against other students” (McAlpine, 2002, n.p.).

In an educational environment where selection has greater priority, as is the case with the excellence discourse, norm-referenced assessment is the more appropriate assessment type to determine the relative success of all students. Students are ranked in order of merit, and statistical measures such as means, medians, standard deviation and scaling are appropriate and useful. In an educational environment where progression has greater priority, as is most often the case with the other three discourses, criterion-referencing is becoming more widely used; even in such diverse educational institutions as universities and the military.

Biggs (1999) suggests that norm- and criterion-referenced assessment has implications for student expectations. With norm-referenced assessment students view assessment as competitive, whereas in criterion-referenced assessment students approach the situation as a ‘learning experience’. Students have different expectations about high grades. In norm-referenced vs criterion-referenced assessment they respectively need to “beat other students, which puts a premium on the importance of relative ability as determining the outcome [vs needing to]...know the goals and learn how to get there, with a premium on...effort, study skill and knowing the right procedures” (Biggs, 1999, p. 57).

Biggs explains that in norm-referenced assessment the outcome, such as a student's grade, depends on other students' ability, which is beyond the control of the students; whereas with criterion-referenced assessment the student has responsibility for learning the necessary material in order to pass the assessment.

The term 'standards-based' is used interchangeably, in most instances, with criterion-referenced assessment. As Peddie explains, standards-based is "used when the measurement or outcome is assessed, in other words "analysed", against some fixed criterion or level of achievement known as a "standard"." (Peddie, 1992, p. 23). There are two main forms of standards-based assessment; firstly competency-based assessment (CBA), which generally relies on one level of competency but may identify a merit level also, and secondly achievement-based assessment (ABA), which may determine several levels of standards or criteria.

## **Methods**

Twenty-four key policy actors were interviewed and transcripts analysed using four sets of four variables (see Figure 4) to identify the presence of key discourses. A graph was constructed by identifying and revealing the presence of arguments and justifications from the four sets of discourse variables which originated from the macro-ideologies and discourses identified in Figure 3. As Wilson explains, "the text which is being analyzed has already being delimited as a specific political type. [In the two examples he cites, he says that] in both cases, social and political judgments have been made before analysis commences" (Wilson, 2001, p. 411).

The key policy actors interviewed included secondary school principals; the NCEA policy writers; senior staff who had worked in NZQA; the Secretary for Education (the most senior position after the Minister of Education); senior Ministry of Education staff; senior officials in

the secondary teachers' union, the NZ Post-Primary Teachers' Association; and the policy analyst for a right-wing group called the Business Roundtable.

Primary and secondary documents and events were analysed to identify the overall pattern of the policy progress during 1996-2000. This indicated points at which the policy was more or less highly contested, as well as indicating which key policy actors and policy coalitions were involved in the progress or stalling of the policy. Primary documents included the 'Green Paper' *Future qualifications policy for New Zealand: a plan for the National Qualifications Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1997e), the 'White Paper' *The National Qualifications Framework of the Future* (Ministry of Education, 1999), the 'Cabinet' paper *Qualifications for young people aged 16 to 19 years* (Ministry of Education & New Zealand Qualifications Authority, 1998). Secondary documents included reviews of the standards-based assessment trials in schools during 1995; *Te Tiro Hou* (the Report of the NZPPTA Qualifications Framework Inquiry) (Allen, Crooks, Hearn, & Irwin, 1997) and academic critique of the education reforms of the 1990s in New Zealand. Events included changes of government, senior personnel changes in sector groups, significant periods of debate in the media and key dates in the development of the policy - such as its initial registration on the National Qualifications Framework in November 1996.

## **Analysis and discussion**

The results of the interview data analysis show that a pattern is formed in Figure 5 where there is a balance of sorts between the four discourses when viewed across the seven groups/sectors. Groupings of discourses are shown between excellence and usefulness and between fulfilment and recognition. The more conservative group is in the top left part of the graph, and the government agency that needs to ensure that all students across society participate in compulsory education is located in the bottom right of the graph.

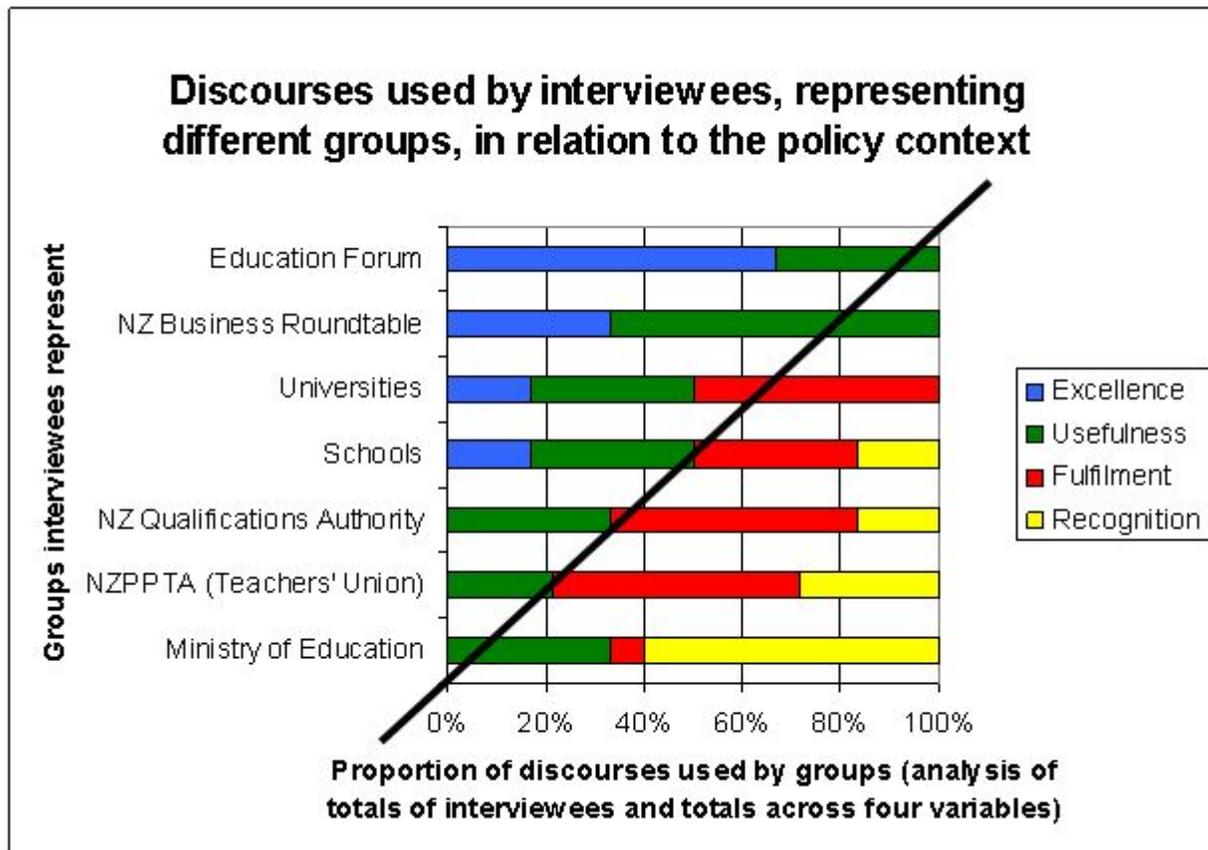


Figure 5. Discourses used by interviewees

‘Power imbalances’ in the quantity and quality of information received by individuals in particular contexts can affect decision-making, in this case policy adoption. Capper (1997) reflects this in saying that educational qualifications are related to commodities or possessions that can be exchanged for status and wealth, and that the “National Qualifications Framework is a fundamentally new way of doing this, and the tensions associated with its introduction are more about the profound changes in the allocation of power and status than they are to do with technical problems” (Capper, 1997, p. 3).

Hood suggests that the old system of assessment suited some schools so well that, “as one chairman of the board of a private school confided to me, schools like his would fight against the

[National Qualifications] Framework as it represents a serious threat to their status and reputation” (Hood, 1998, p. 106). This conservative hegemony is illustrated in Figure 6, with arrows indicating contestation and hegemony resulting in Labour Class secondary education failure historically. The small diagram at the top left represents the same process superimposed on the ‘discourses of interviewees’ graph.

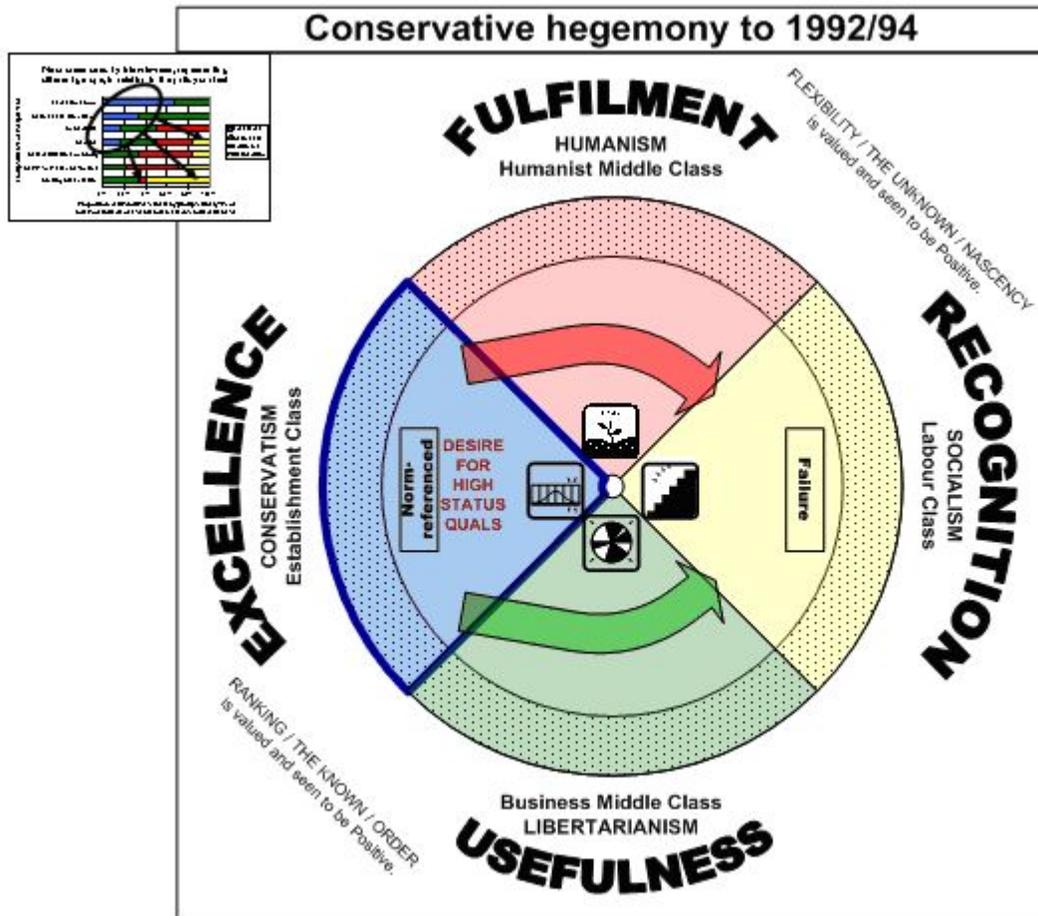


Figure 6. Conservative hegemony to 1992/94

NZPPTA and Ministry of Education were both alienated from NZQA’s development of qualifications and assessment for senior secondary education through at least 1993-1996, so their influence in NCEA policy development was not as strong – this is illustrated by the grey shading. By 1996, a stalemate had occurred in a lengthy struggle between the excellence and usefulness

discourse groups. 1996 was then a year involving a great deal of 'taking stock', and this also proceeded into early 1997 with the conclusion of NZQA's *Assessment Stocktake Project Report* (Bowen-Clewley & Strachan, 1997) in May 1997. The struggle and concluding stalemate occurred between supporters of the excellence discourse, a selective system that included the notion that 'some will fail'; and supporters of NCEA policy, as a system encouraging progression of all students, or the notion that 'failure should not be expected'. A pattern formed that involved hegemony; firstly hegemony of the excellence discourse over the fulfilment discourse, and secondly hegemony of the usefulness discourse over the recognition discourse. The small diagrams at the top left and the bottom right represents these processes superimposed on the 'discourses of interviewees' graph. This struggle was a key theme for NCEA policy adoption.

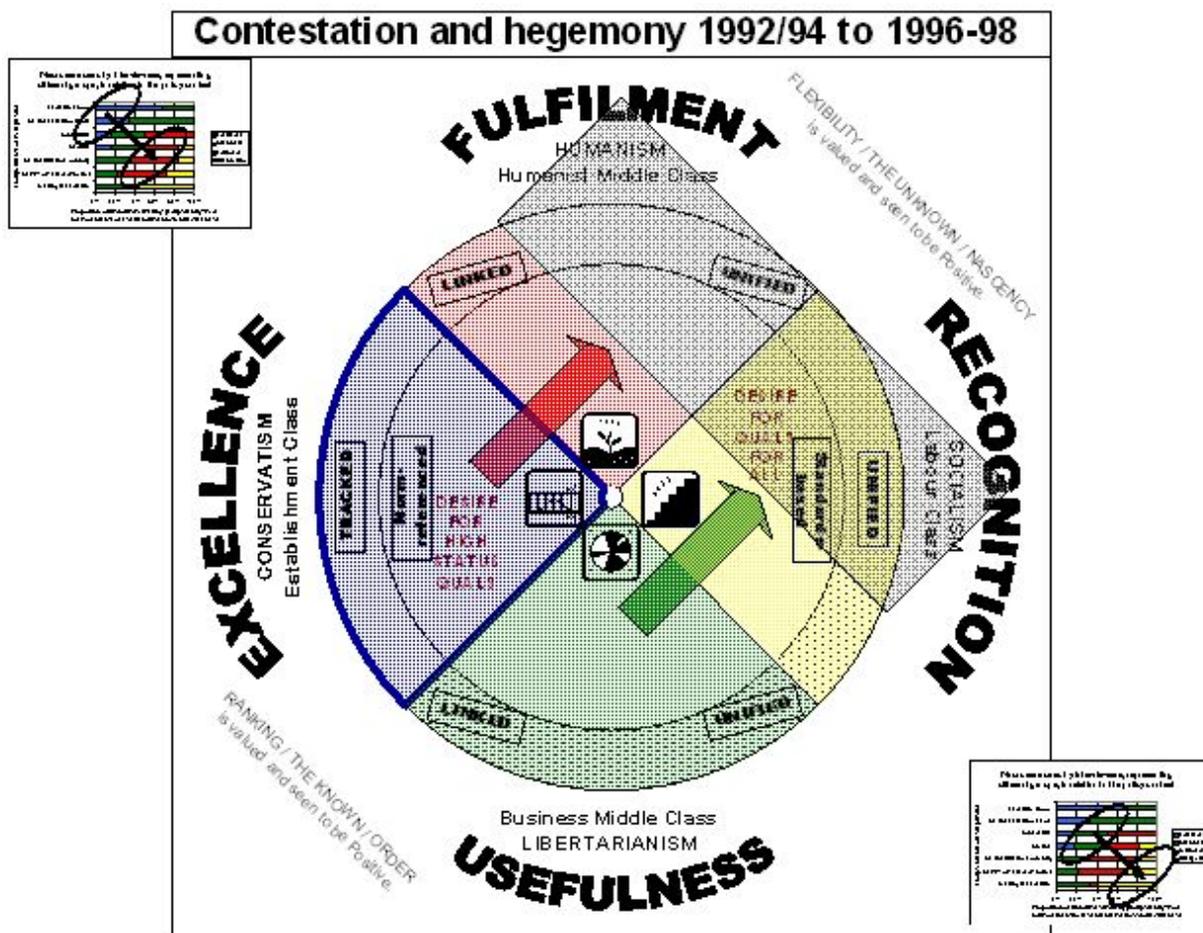


Figure 7. Contestation and hegemony 1992/94 to 1996/98

A new version of the NCEA began with a unification discourse in the development of the broad architecture of the qualification. This was a long process, where those policy actors and coalitions who supported the NCEA policy development mostly drew on the fulfilment and recognition discourses. Some also drew on the excellence and usefulness discourses in a positive way. Most based their justifications on a possible system that would work for the benefit of the whole of society. The ideologies that were used as rationale together operated through the mode of unification.

The productive ability of communicative power was a process of moving diverse opinions towards a new, unification discourse. There were two distinct aspects of the first stage of ‘coming

together’; a compromise between ideas of a more unified and a more linked system; and the gradual coming together from around October 1997 of policy papers being separately developed by Ministry of Education and NZQA (along with the NZPPTA report) in what had been started by NZQA as the Schools Qualifications Development Project. In December 1997, under Wyatt Creech as Minister of Education, the NCEA policy began to be handed back to the Ministry of Education. This started the progress towards the new NCEA (Ministry of Education official, March 2004). The new unification discourse, ‘Achievement 2001’ contributed to the broad architecture of the NCEA policy, which was complete by November 1998.

This first stage of the process involved officials in NZQA then also officials from Ministry of Education; comprising policy actors who were part of the policy coalitions supporting a more unified and more linked senior secondary system. There was limited involvement of key policy actor(s) from the policy coalition supporting a more tracked senior secondary system.

Achievement 2001 was announced in November 1998 and involved the demise of Unit Standards as the only NCEA credit units for conventional school subjects.

This meant that rather than solely comprising internally assessed credit / no credit unit standards, the new National Certificate would comprise a mix of unit standards and new ‘Achievement Standards’ that related to conventional school subjects (a category of subject defined as being funded by Ministry of Education). The new Achievement Standards would allow for credit (later ‘achieved’) / merit / excellence passes, and some of the standards in most subjects would be assessed as part of an end-of-year examination, while others would remain as internal assessment in schools.

The conservative lobby group saw this as a better solution than just unit standards. Students would be able to attain excellence grades, and examinations were retained.

Minutes of the NZQA Strategic Policy and Planning Co-ordination Committee, 10 November 1998, note under the heading 'Achievement 2001' that "public reactions had been very favourable" (NZQA Strategic Policy and Planning Co-ordination Committee, 1998b, p. 3).

The second stage of 'coming together' was the development of the implementation design framework of the NCEA policy, in the continued compromise between a more unified and a more linked system and was complete by March 2000.

This second stage of the process included the policy actors who contributed to the secondary sector forums September 1999 – August 2000 (and the groups which led to them) who showed a benetopian alignment in discourses/macro-ideologies. The ideologies that were used as rationale together operated through the mode of unification.

As Frances Kelly explains:

When the policy was announced towards the end of 1998 it very much was announced as a settlement, as bringing together issues from across the board, and initially if you look at the initial feedback from a wide range of sector groups, there was a high level of acceptance that that was what it was doing and that we would now move on from here...[for the forums] it was very deliberately decided to invite people who had been known to be associated strongly with opposition to previous moves, opposition to units standards, opposition to internal assessment, along with people who were strongly supportive of exactly those moves, along with some nominees from the PPTA.

(F. Kelly, personal communication, August 21, 2000)

Fischer describes a critical approach through a Habermasian focus, where "discursive understanding of power and political struggles...holds open the possibility of moving beyond the traditional negative connotations associated with ideology and power" (Fischer, 2003, p. 81).

Fischer explains that rather than a negative understanding using reference to "domination, manipulation, and control", we can access "the more positive understanding of discourse" (Fischer, 2003, p. 81).

The concept of communicative power, Habermas argues, provides for ‘new consenses’ and thus new alternatives, allowing for an understanding of ‘discursive power’ as ‘productive power’ (Fischer, 2003). This understanding of ‘productive power’ is important as it provides the opportunity to interpret tensions in policy-making as arising from potentially equitable discourses and macro-ideologies allowing for positive results, rather than being constrained in critique to an approach limited to only a domination / oppression interpretation. This is evidenced in the discourses in tension in the development of national education policy: a point may be reached where the discourses may operate in conjunction rather than in tension.

This is shown clearly in Figure 8 below, that the four discourses did give rise to a new, unified discourse – the NCEA. This does not preclude the underpinning tensions continuing to exist, but rather the tensions may be on the outer edges of the policy-making and implementation activities as illustrated by the dotted areas and arrows indicating contestation.

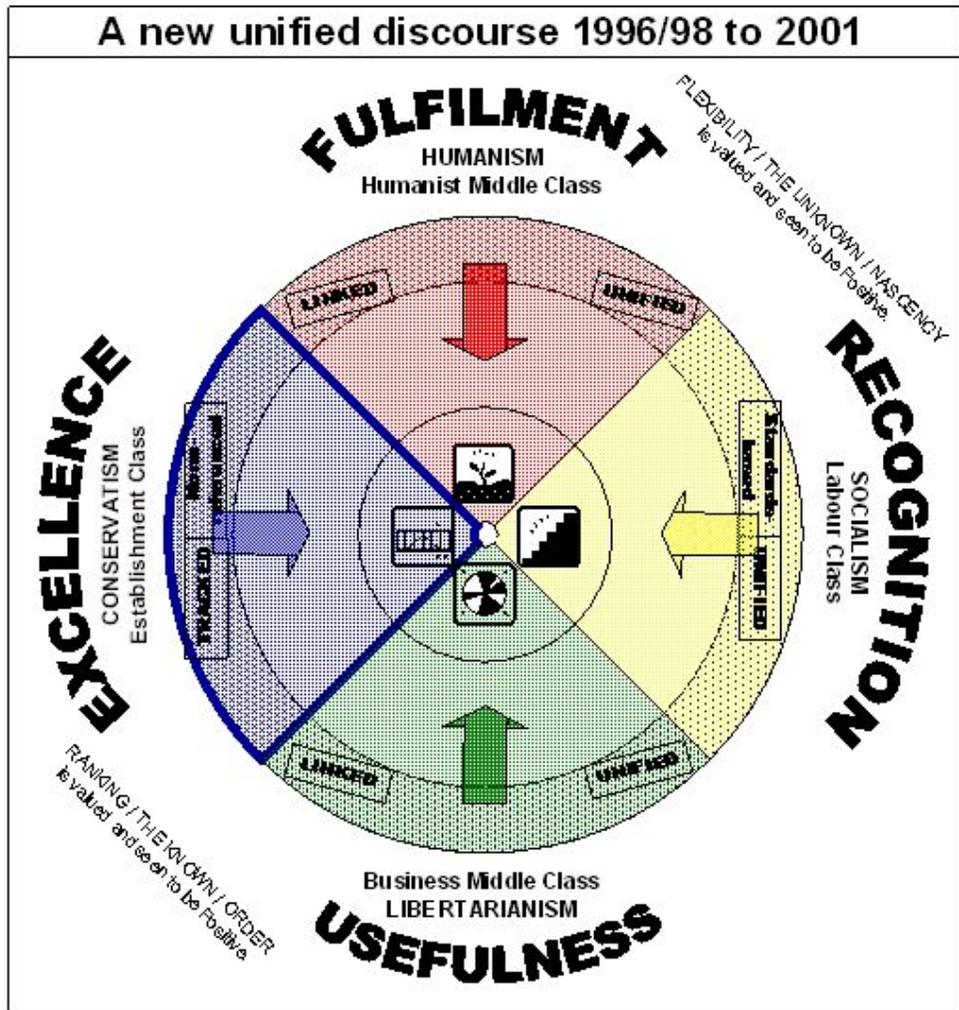


Figure 8. A new unified discourse 1996/98 to 2001

## Conclusion

The research question addresses the lengthy period during which the adoption of the NCEA policy occurred. Information that is believed to be democratised at the source, instead often contains discourses capable of affecting different individuals and groups in multiple ways. The public and secondary teachers were puzzled about why the policy was taking so long to become reality and they assumed that there was fair discussion over the educational reasons for the old and proposed qualifications and assessment systems. However, rather than being a

democratised process that allowed for broad public and sector participation, the policy adoption period included a great amount of contestation that was grounded in political ideology.

The transformation of perspective from ‘society should not fulfil all of its secondary students, some will fail’ to ‘society should fulfil all of its secondary students in some way – expectation of failure should be avoided’ is underway in New Zealand and underpins the development of standards-based national secondary certification. This new discourse arising from cooperation of the four original discourses has been successfully identified and implemented, but issues continue to be debated. Critical discourse analysis can contribute to an understanding of power relations in the process of policy adoption, and can explain in particular the issues that have been, and yet in 2005 continue to be, so deeply contested in a New Zealand secondary education context.

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