

Chapter 12

Challenges, Tensions and Possibilities: An Analysis of Assessment Policy and Practice in New Zealand

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Abstract This chapter draws on insights from education policy sociology to explore the dynamics between international, national, and institutional arenas of assessment and assessment systems. It interrogates the interactions between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment and explores the enabling constraints at different levels of the assessment system. Attention is drawn to the ways in which tensions offer spaces for creative action in relation to current policies and practices in New Zealand.

Keywords Equity • Enabling constraints • Policy • Curriculum • Pedagogy • Formative assessment • Standards • Assessment literacy

12.1 Introduction

This chapter describes and discusses assessment policy and practice in primary and secondary education in New Zealand with a particular emphasis on the synergies and tensions in assessment within and across the various levels and aspects of the assessment system. The formative potential of assessment has long been accorded priority in policy (Ministerial Working Party on Assessment for Better Learning, 1990; Ministry of Education, 1994), professional development provision (Crooks, 2011; Gilmore, 2002), and practice (Bell & Cowie, 2001). From 2002 secondary student exit qualifications have been standards based, with credits awarded via a

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combination of externally set and supervised and teacher designed and administered assessment tasks. There was no mandated national assessment for primary students until 2009 when national standards in reading, writing, and mathematics were introduced. Importantly, student achievement relative to the standards is assessed based on an ‘overall teacher judgment’. For this teachers draw on and apply a range of evidence (observation, conversation, formal assessment tools) to make a judgment about whether a student is *above*, at, *below*, and *well-below the expected standard*. Overall, by international standards, accountability pressures on New Zealand teachers and schools are comparatively minor (Crooks, 2011) although these are on the rise. As in many Western countries, teacher professionalism is sometimes called into question through political and media commentary and schools are increasingly being subject to accountability pressures. In this chapter we explore the dynamics within and between the arenas of classroom, school, and national assessment to interrogate the interactions between assessment, curriculum, pedagogy and learning. Our focus is on how any constraints felt amidst various policy initiatives, and between aspects of policy and practice, might also be construed as enabling. Attention is thus drawn to the ways in which tensions offer spaces for creative action in relation to current policies and practices in New Zealand. Necessarily we first provide an overview of the New Zealand context.

12.2 The New Zealand Curriculum, Assessment and Pedagogy Policy Context

Since the administrative restructuring of the *Tomorrow’s Schools* reforms in 1988 (Minister of Education, 1988), the management of individual schools has been devolved to Boards of Trustees. These are constituted of members elected from within the school community. Boards of Trustees, together with the school principal and teachers, are responsible for developing and implementing the curriculum as set out in the *New Zealand curriculum* document (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2007) in a manner that is responsive to local needs, interests and circumstances. The *New Zealand Curriculum*, hereafter referred to as NZC, sets out achievement objectives for eight learning areas and defines five ‘key competencies’. The competencies were introduced for the first time in the 2007 curriculum and are described as the skills and attributes that “are critical to sustained learning and effective participation in society and that underline the emphasis on lifelong learning” (MOE, 2007, p. 4). The NZC includes a list of principles to guide curriculum decision making: high expectations, Treaty of Waitangi, cultural diversity, inclusion, learning to learn, community engagement, coherence and future focus (MOE, 2007, p. 11). Of these the Treaty of Waitangi principle is distinctive. It accords a central role to the principles of partnership between the crown and Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) that are detailed in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The Treaty established the bicultural foundations of Aotearoa New Zealand. Other principles emphasise that all students need access to opportunities to learn that are appropriate to them, and to their communities.

The NZC describes effective teaching as a process of inquiry in which assessment plays a pivotal role. In relation to assessment, the NZC states that: “the primary purpose of assessment is to improve students’ learning and teachers’ teaching as both student and teacher respond to the information that it provides” (p. 42). This emphasis can be seen across various government policy documents preceding and following publication of the NZC (e.g. Department of Education, 1989; Ministry of Education, 2011). Assessment for the purpose of improving student learning is described as best understood as an ongoing process that arises out of the interaction between teachers and students and involving the generation, interpretation, and action on multiple sources of information about student learning and progress. Other purposes for and forms of assessment detailed in NZC include school-wide assessment and assessment for qualifications. School-wide assessment information allows schools to monitor the impact of their programmes on student learning with the information to be used to inform changes to policies and/or programmes and/or teaching practices as well as to report to school Boards of Trustees, parents, and the Ministry of Education.

In the international arena, New Zealand participates in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Findings from these studies have consistently indicated that a substantial proportion of New Zealand students are performing to a high standard but that there are significant differentials in achievement across student groups, with Māori and Pasifika students over-represented in the lower performing group in all subjects and both studies. As has been the case elsewhere, the results of these studies have invoked considerable concern and influenced the allocation of resources and priorities. Further useful insights into trends in educational achievement have been generated from a National Educational Monitoring Programme [NEMP]. From 1995 to 2010 this provided a national ‘snapshot’ at the system level of students’ knowledge, skills, and attitudes across the curriculum learning areas. The different curriculum areas were assessed in 4-year cycles through a randomly selected sample of around 3000 students in school years 4 and 8 using a combination of one-to-one interviews, team, ‘hands on’, and independent assessment tasks. These were administered and marked by teachers recruited and trained by the NEMP team. A new system for national monitoring (National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement), also based on light sampling, was implemented for the first time in 2013. This has a focus on the identification of trends in educational performance, factors that influence achievement, and the provision of robust information to policy makers, curriculum specialists, educators, and the public. Thus, New Zealand is actively complementing the data generated from international assessment systems to inform national assessment policy and practice.

From 2002 assessment for student exit qualifications has been undertaken via achievement and/or unit standards registered on the National Qualifications Framework. Students accumulate credits towards a “National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA)” at Levels 1, 2, or 3 and other national certificates that schools may choose to offer to their students in school years 11–13 (at which time students are aged 15–18 years). From 2010, primary aged students have been

assessed against National Standards in reading, writing, and mathematics. As explained above, these assessments are based on an overall teacher judgment of a student's progress and achievement. This information is reported annually to the Board of Trustees and the Ministry of Education, and, since 2012 school-level information has been made available to the public via the Ministry website.

In the sections that follow we set out our theoretical framework and discuss some of the tensions, challenges, and opportunities that have emerged within the assessment system in New Zealand.

12.2.1 A Focus on a Balanced, Coherent and Responsive System

Our chapter is underpinned by a view of assessment as a complex, multifaceted, and multilayered system that, ideally, balances the need for assessment to monitor student learning with a concern to improve student learning (Clarke, 2012; UNESCO, 2007). This requires consideration of the full range of assessment purposes and uses, and needs of users at the classroom, programme, institutional, and policy levels (MOE, 2011; Stiggins, 2008). We also recognise the central influence of the dynamic relationships between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment (Hay & Penney, 2013). As Bernstein (1971, 1990) articulated, curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation constitute three powerful and inter-related “message systems” of schooling that serve to shape and frame students' experiences of schooling and of themselves as learners and active members of society. Simultaneously, they shape teacher priorities, and societal expectations of schooling. The message system of evaluation can be seen as encompassing assessment systems, requirements, approaches and data. As others have argued (Hay & Penney, 2013), alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment is critical to the coherence of education systems. We reaffirm the need for such alignment together with the need for assessment to value and validate the full breadth of learning outcomes that are desired. In the chapter we use the notion of enabling constraints to consider how the multiple and potentially contradictory agendas of different stakeholders and the various demands of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment interact and might play out. As Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000, p. 193) explain, “Enabling constraints are not prescriptive; they don't dictate what **MUST** be done, rather they are expansive, indicating what **MIGHT** be done” (emphasis in original). This notion allows us to consider how tensions and contradictions within and across different levels of the assessment system might offer spaces for productive local engagement with curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy (Penney & Cowie, 2014).

12.3 Examining Assessment Challenges, Tensions and Possibilities

12.3.1 *Assessment for and Within a Flexible and Responsive Curriculum*

The NZC provides a flexible framework within which schools are expected to design and implement a curriculum that meets local needs and builds on local strengths (MOE, 2007). School and teacher response to NZC has been largely positive with school implementation processes tending to begin with a focus on re-constructing the school vision and/or developing a local interpretation of the key competencies (Cowie et al., 2009). The imperative towards a local response has prompted schools to look more closely at how they are interacting with families and communities in relation to curriculum design and implementation, and also to analyse and revise their reporting on student achievement. Principals, often with the active support of Boards of Trustees, have surveyed and held meetings with parents to elicit their vision for their child's education. What the key competencies might 'look, sound and feel like' in a particular community has been a subject of discussion by teacher groups and school communities. These activities have opened up productive spaces and foci for communication and partnership across the curriculum and assessment interface.

A number of debates and tensions have emerged to do with whether and/or how to formally assess and monitor the development of the key competencies. Specific issues include the breadth of assessment strategies, tasks, and occasions needed to generate a trustworthy representation of these complex learning outcomes (Hipkins, 2008) and the appropriate unit of analysis for assessment – should the focus be on individual students and their development, should it be on the student in context, and/or on students as a group or whole class? (Cowie & Carr, *forthcoming*). Teacher, principal, and parent groups, together with researchers, have variously raised matters to do with the potential for assessments to make visible and validate achievement and/or to limit and even narrow what is valued and seen as possible (Hipkins, Cowie, Boyd, Keown, & McGee, 2011). Teachers who were early adopters of NZC have expressed a desire to foster key competency development with a life-long and life-wide emphasis. They were interested in how competency might develop and be expressed, assessed, and supported in the classroom, in the school grounds, and in the community. As teachers have continued to discuss and implement the curriculum their attention has turned to consider how the key competency outcomes interface with and may be integral to conventional learning areas (Hipkins et al., 2011). At this time, the challenge of how to assess and communicate complex outcomes in a manner that supports the NZC vision is a substantial project in which researchers and teachers are beginning to collaborate (see *Teachers and Curriculum*, Volume X, 2013).

Illustrative Example 1 As part of a project aiming to develop rich examples of ways to embed the key competencies into the curriculum learning areas, Hipkins, Cowie, McDowell, and Carr (2013) came to appreciate that there were some deep layers to aspects of each key competency that could be expressed in different ways in the different learning areas, and that often several competencies were needed in combination to meet a specific type of learning challenge. The research team, in collaboration with a group of teachers, developed examples to illustrate how the key competencies were both end and means for learning (MOE, 2007, p. 38). The project generated a set of self-audit questions and illustrative classroom examples to assist teachers to identify the competencies and their development (see <http://www.keycompetencies.tki.org.nz/Key-competencies-and-effective-pedagogy>).

The principles for curriculum design in the NZC emphasise that curriculum design and practice should begin with the premise that all students can learn and succeed (the high expectations principle) and recognise and respect students' diverse identities, languages, abilities, and talents (the cultural diversity and inclusion principle). The implication of these principles, and other policies (Ministry of Education, 2008) is that school and teacher assessment practices need to be responsive to the curriculum learning needs of *all* students and, furthermore, students' wider sense of who they are and might become, and of students' links with their families/whānau and communities. In *Ka Hikitia – Managing for success 2008–2012* (MOE, 2008) this notion is discussed as helping Māori students succeed as Māori, and as citizens of the world. The prospective tension here is that when a teacher's assessment converges on the goals of the curriculum (Torrance & Pryor, 1998), the ideas, experiences, and value positions that students actually have in relation to an idea, event, or phenomena may be overlooked. On the other hand, assessment that is responsive to the diversity of students' knowledge, experiences, values, and worldviews holds out the prospect that this diversity will serve as a resource for learning. Studies by Glyn, Cowie, and Otrell-Cass (Glynn, Cowie, Otrell-Cass, & MacFarlane, 2010; Cowie, Otrell-Cass, et al. 2011) have demonstrated the value of teachers accessing and inviting student funds of knowledge and experience (González & Moll, 2002) into the curriculum as a resource for individual and collective learning. Their work has also demonstrated the value of providing students with multiple modes, media, and audiences as part of both formative and summative assessment (Cowie & Otrell-Cass, 2011). Somewhat problematically, their work also indicates assessment practice with an equity and culturally responsive agenda places considerable demands on teacher content, pedagogical, and pedagogical content knowledge (Cowie, Moreland, & Otrell-Cass, 2013). Culturally responsive pedagogy and assessment places substantial demands on teacher cultural knowledge and relationships with people in the local school community who could be approached to contribute to the curriculum and to engage with students in formative dialogue (Cowie & Glynn, 2012). The work of Mahuika, Berryman, and Bishop (2011) highlights the extent that culture influences how we interpret information, the importance we attach to different types of information, and also what outcomes we value (see also Gipps & Murphy, 1994). They note, "compatibility between the home and school environments will better facilitate effective learning and

assessment” (p. 185) but caution that Māori students are by no means a homogenous group. The wider implication here is that both formative and summative assessment need to be responsive to diversity amongst learners and, even more importantly in the New Zealand context, it needs to find effective ways of assisting educators at all levels of the system to address the disparities in achievement amongst different student subgroups, especially Māori and Pasifica. For this to become possible, all those involved need to develop assessment literacy and capability.

12.3.2 The Need for All Participants and Audiences to Be Assessment Literate/Capable

The devolution of the New Zealand education system means that individuals and groups at all levels of the system need to be assessment capable/literate (Crooks, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2011; Nusche, Laveault, MacBeath, & Santiago, 2012). Given their responsibilities for school governance, Board of Trustee members need to be able to make sense of student assessment data to ensure their resourcing decisions are well informed and judged. Principals and teachers need to be able to design their own assessment processes and to use data generated through nationally provided assessment tools to inform their teaching and student learning. They need to know when it is reasonable and how to collate and combine information on student learning and learning progress from a range of sources in order to reach an “overall teacher judgment” on what a student has achieved. They need to be able to report on student learning to Board of Trustee members, family/whānau, and students in ways that support the willingness and ability of each of these groups to take informed and productive action.

New Zealand curriculum and assessment policy establishes parents, families/whānau as key stakeholders and partners in the process of improving learning, as the following statement in the Ministry assessment policy position paper (MOE, 2011) indicates:

The key contributors to learning classrooms are teachers, students, and parents and whānau. These contributors need to maintain close dialogue, share information, and work together if students are to be fully supported in their learning. The interactions students have with their peers, teachers, and families and whānau are important in the process of improved learning. Teachers have a key role in shaping these interactions and in encouraging reciprocal conversations with parents and whānau. (p. 29)

This statement reminds us that parents and whānau are legitimate audiences for the demonstration of knowing and sources of valid feedback on student learning, both throughout and at the end of a period of learning work. However, as might be expected, parents have been found to vary in their confidence and capacity to partner with teachers in their children’s learning (Cowie et al., 2009) with some parents, and especially those who have English as a second language and/or were educated in a different country, finding this situation challenging (Thrupp, in preparation).

In the New Zealand setting *Tātaiako: Cultural competencies for teachers of Māori learners* (MOE, 2011) positions ako or teachers taking responsibility for their own learning and that of Māori learners as a pedagogical competency.

The Ministry position paper on assessment describes ako or the collaborative exchange of information as important in responsive assessment as follows:

Effective assessment is not only concerned with high-quality technical processes in the collection and interpretation of assessment information. It also requires a high level of responsiveness to unique learning and learner contexts. It includes collaborative exchanges of information between participants in a process of reciprocal learning or ako. (p. 4)

Key aspects of ako include: (i) language, identity, and culture counts, and so it is important to know where students come from and build on what they bring with them, and (ii) productive partnerships where Māori students, whānau, and educators share knowledge and experiences with each other to produce better outcomes (MOE, 2008). This construct, along with that of “tuakana-teina” (the more informed and more skilled teaching the less-informed and less skilled), provides a distinct context for the demonstration of expertise through sharing as reciprocal learning. Studies working with this orientation have demonstrated the value of teachers making available multiple media, modes, and audiences for student learning, including engaging parents early on in teaching, learning, and assessment, as the next example illustrates.

Illustrative Example 2 Jude invited families into class to talk about the upcoming science unit on Matariki (astronomy) so they knew what learning was planned and could support their child at home. During this event parents shared and checked out what of their experiences might be relevant. Subsequently, Jude used a class website and individual student ‘home learning’ books to support two-way communication between home and school about what students were doing and learning. The unit concluded with a class presentation to families on what students’ had learned. The families at this event expressed their appreciation at having been told about what their children would be learning; they considered that with this knowledge they were more able to support their child’s learning.

Ako or reciprocal learning is necessary at all levels of the assessment system: “It has a role to play in classroom practice, professional dialogue, school review, and the development of school-based policy and practices, system monitoring and evaluation and review, and development of system-wide policy and practices” (MOE, 2011, p. 4). Policy makers and government officials along with politicians need to be assessment literate for them to be able to effectively guide assessment policy and practice development and to take assessment informed action on national and international assessment data. We would add that the media also needs these assessment capabilities to ensure reporting of data contributes to, and does not undermine, the goals of education for a better society. Even more importantly, as the Ministry position paper states, students need to be at the centre of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices (see also the NZC); a position that is generally supported by the teaching profession (McGee et al., 2004). The implication of this is that students need high levels of assessment literacy: student capacity and inclination to monitor and assess their own learning progress and outcomes is central to the development of students as “confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners” (MOE, 2007, p. 8). Arguably it is not possible to leverage the full potential for lifelong or lifewide (Hay & Penney, 2013) learning, in the absence of a strategic awareness of how to

develop, access and activate resources and practices that support learning (Hipkins & Cowie, 2014). The students that Cowie (2005) spoke to were very clear about the different purposes and consequences of classroom assessment for their learning, their self-esteem and their standing with their peers. Their comments endorsed the need for teacher feedback to move beyond praise and affirmation to the provision of information they could use to move their learning forward. More recently, Harris and Brown (2013), also researching with New Zealand students, documented differences in teacher and student perspectives of, and purposes for, peer and student self-assessment. Their data indicated that both teachers and students need a deep understanding of how to use peer and self-assessment for improvement and self-regulation purposes. Hence, while support for student agency and authority within learning and assessment are policy goals and have the espoused support of teachers, there is still much to be done to realise this in practice.

In considering opportunities for educators to develop assessment literacy, it is notable that since 1995 the New Zealand Ministry of Education has allocated substantial resources to assessment-focused professional development programmes for teachers. These usually involve 2 years of professional development support, the main focus of which has been the development of individual teacher assessment *for* learning practices. Over the same period the government, amongst other organisations, has produced and made available a range of assessment tools for teachers to use, some of which come with marking and analysis support. The challenge for teachers remains, however, how to construct their own assessments from these resources to meet their own and their students' needs and interests. It seems that teacher capacity to design and select assessment tasks is variable (Poskitt & Taylor, 2008), something that is cause for concern given the extensive range of assessment tasks New Zealand teachers access and use (McGee et al., 2004). Moreover, despite the sustained focus on formative assessment, it seems New Zealand teachers hold conceptions of the purposes of assessment ranging from improvement of teaching and learning to school accountability or student accountability and, in a few cases, view assessment as irrelevant (Harris & Brown, 2009a). More recently, Harris and Brown (2013) have documented differences in teacher and student perspectives of and purposes for peer- and student self-assessment. Their data indicated teachers and students need a deep understanding of how to use peer- and self-assessment for improvement and self-regulation purposes. Dixon, Hawe, and Parr (2011) have reported that even teachers who articulate similar beliefs with regard to the importance of developing student autonomy and who had described similar practices to develop self-monitoring behaviour engage in very different classroom assessment practices. These studies indicate, as others have (James & Pedder, 2006), that there is a need to attend to the interaction of teacher beliefs and national and local policy and practices, alerting us to the challenge of coherence between these aspects.

Returning to the point about the need to build commitment at all levels of the system, Timperley and Parr (2009) provide evidence of the collaborative use of assessment data by clusters of teachers or by all staff at a school. The Ministry has recently begun funding assessment-focused professional development for school leaders. The work of McKinley and colleagues illustrates the possible impact of this approach.

Illustrative Example 3 Starpath, an extended research and development study driven by a concern that low-income, Māori and Pacific students did not have an equal opportunity to enter and succeed in tertiary education, which provides evidence of the value of a school-wide focus on data generation and use. Working with Year 11–13 students, their project has demonstrated the benefits of systematic whole-school data utilisation; of regular academic counselling, target setting and progress reviews by students in conversation with a trained teacher, and of student-parent-teacher conferences that provide opportunities for evidence-based discussion on progress and plans with parents/whānau (Madjar & McKinley, 2010).

McKinley has been clear, however, that school change is challenging, time-consuming and requires commitment. Taken together, these New Zealand policies and studies suggest constraints and enablers arise from many sources, including the teaching resources that teachers have access to and/or are familiar with, and teachers' personal values and interests. This suggests the need to move beyond a focus on assessment in interaction with curriculum and pedagogy as an individual teacher or even individual school concern. He endorses the need for a systems view of assessment and the provision of space for greater cross stakeholder collaboration and development.

12.4 Assessment and Accountability: To Whom and for What

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, there has been an increase in assessment discourses to do with accountability. Hay and Penney (2013) note that the intersection of assessment and accountability can be understood in a number of ways. Assessment can be seen to provide a means for students to develop an account of their learning progress and to take account of how *they* best learn. In one sense, being able to account for what and how one learns is central to the development of learning capacity and so this form of accountability can be seen to be productive and broadly aligned with assessment *for* lifelong learning (formative assessment). Developing an account of learning can also have a quite different orientation and prime purpose, broadly aligning with assessment *of* learning and summative assessment, and focusing on the communication of what has been accomplished. The extent to which systems, schools, teachers, and students are held to account for fixed and predetermined outcomes is critical here. Where there is tight prescription, the teacher and student orientation to assessment can become one of performativity (Ball, 2003) and criteria compliance (Torrance, 2007) rather than learning. The tensions between these various functions of accountability in and through assessment are discussed next in relation to the challenges and potentials associated with the use of nationally prescribed standards for student learning and achievement as part of the National Standards regime in schooling years 1–8 and NCEA in schooling years 11–13.

In relation to accountability in schooling Years 1–8, the introduction of the National Standards programme of assessment has been hotly contested, in part because it represents a break from longstanding practices where the focus has been on formative assessment and in part because of limited teacher and principal consultation during its preparation (Thrupp, 2010). On the other hand, advocates for its

introduction argue that the use of standards, rather than a national test, and the way teachers are expected to combine multiple sources of information in making Overall Teacher Judgments (OTJs) against National Standards avoids the problem of “teaching to the test”. It was also proposed that schools reporting against the standards in ‘plain language’ would lead to more consistent and comprehensible reporting to parents. An indepth school-based study by Thrupp and Easter (2013) found that schools have responded to the Standards in very different and incremental ways, strongly related to school-specific contextual factors. These include long-term and situated thinking about how assessment and reporting should be done in and for the particular school community and the personal preferences of the principal/ influential staff member. Some parents are reporting they do not understand National Standards-based reporting, others are concerned that their children are being labelled as below standard from an early age (Thrupp, 2013).

The introduction of National Standards has highlighted the challenge of collecting comprehensive data on complex outcomes as well as the role and importance of moderation, both within and between schools (Ward & Thomas, 2012). Moderation is a process whereby teachers share interpretations and implementation of criteria and standards to assure consistency and comparability in teacher evidence-based judgments on student achievement (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2010). Consistency and moderation within and between schools has not traditionally featured as a concern for teachers because of the independence accorded schools by Tomorrow’s Schools and, more recently, the emphasis on local interpretation of the NZC. Schools have developed their own policies and practices around curriculum, assessment and reporting. Whether or not the tensions inherent in the need to assess against prescribed standards within a flexible curriculum will drive greater collaboration and networking aimed at overall improvement in teaching, learning and assessment or whether they will foster competition that limits the sharing of effective practice and diminishes the exercise of collective responsibility for the learning of all students is yet to be seen. Just as problematically, anecdotal evidence suggests that school and teacher curriculum design response to the Standards has been to direct increased curriculum time to reading, writing, and mathematics (the focus of the Standards) at the expense of other curriculum areas. Here again future developments could be generative, with curriculum planning focused on leveraging and enriching students’ capacities in these aspects through learning in other curriculum areas, or the curriculum could narrow further on to these three aspects. Encouragingly, there have been some reports of teachers coming together as a whole staff to consider student achievement data and plan for individual and joint action, with student learning moving from an individual to a collective responsibility (Hipkins et al., 2013). Such an approach opens the door to shared learning amidst what can be construed as a constraining mechanism.

Internationally it is recognised that exit qualifications are frequently where discourses of accountability and standardisation can be seen to come to the fore, and where it is sometimes a challenge to ensure that discourses of equity and inclusion are not marginalised. In New Zealand the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) is intended to provide pathways towards appropriate qualification for students with very different interests and capabilities. Established and

vocational secondary school subjects are subdivided into several (usually 5–8) Achievement Standards, each of which has a ‘failing or not achieved level’ and three passing levels (achieved, merit, and excellence), and a specified number of ‘credits’ (usually 3–6). Students are assessed through a combination of internal and external assessment tasks. In addition, there are Unit Standards, most of which are assessed on a pass/fail (not achieved/achieved) basis. For the ‘internally assessed’ credits teachers may choose to use or adapt existing assessment tasks that are available in various banks of tasks. They need to follow national specifications for the assessment processes, criteria, and performance levels. Students are allowed to re-sit some tasks. Most schools require teachers to engage in some form of internal moderation to help ensure consistency across different teachers and classes. A national external moderation process monitors at least 10 % of internally assessed standards each year. This national moderation includes checks on the suitability of the assessment task or tasks, as well as the application of the marking criteria and standards. Most externally assessed Achievement Standards are assessed through written national examinations. In a few cases, such as art works, musical compositions, dance or drama performances, external standards are used for work accumulated into portfolios during the school year. There is some evidence that students and teachers view and experience the internally and externally assessed standards differently. External standards are accorded greater status and seen as harder to achieve but teachers and students collaborate to support student achievement. The potential for conflict between assessment *of* and assessment *for* learning and the teacher roles as judges of and supporters for student learning are considerable when students are being prepared and assessed for internally assessed Achievement Standards or Unit Standards. Indeed, there is some evidence that student preparation for internally assessed tasks might undermine the validity of any summative grade they are awarded (Hume & Coll, 2009), which poses a challenge to the trustworthiness of the NCEA system and to the proposal that the NCEA system might support quality formative and summative assessment. On the other hand, Sheehan’s (2013) research examining the contribution of internally assessed NCEA course work indicates that it has made a substantial contribution to students’ motivation and learning to think historically, to adjudicate between competing versions of historical authenticity, and to understand how second order concepts operate in the discipline. Teacher understanding of the discipline of history was crucial in their providing specific feedback to students and assisting students to think critically about the past, all the more so because developing the ability to think historically is counter-intuitive. Students especially valued the personal autonomy of course work and they committed to the substantial workload required to investigate historical questions that were of personal interest.

In NCEA, accountability operates at three levels: students, teachers, and schools. Students are held to direct account for their results on individual standards and on accumulation of credits towards an NCEA certificate as they progress to higher level qualifications. New Zealand does not have a system of high school graduation and so students’ educational standing when they leave school depends largely on what NCEA qualifications they have gained. The results for all secondary schools

are publicly available, and schools and teachers can develop reputations based on how well their students do in the NCEA. Crooks (2011) points out student decisions about which Standards they work on can have a major influence on their future learning and employment. Research in the Starpath Project at the University of Auckland (Madyar, McKinley, Jensen, & van der Merwe, 2009) has shown that school-guided choices of subjects and Standards often significantly constrain future academic options for students, and this can perpetuate existing disadvantages and stereotypes for particular ethnic or socio-economic subgroups in the school population.

A notable recent development in New Zealand is a major project to align NCEA with the NZC. This process is intended to ensure that whatever their qualification goals, all senior secondary students can benefit from the flexible pathways that NCEA offers. This initiative provides for the intent of the NZC to be expressed in senior secondary curriculum although the relationship between the NZC and NCEA is evolving, as understandings in both areas are evolving. As Hipkins and Spiller (2012) have recognised, the flexibility that both the NZC and NCEA promote in relation to assessment, and the move to alignment, can be constructively exploited to support innovative developments that address individual student learning needs, challenges, and potential. Yet, it is also the case that such innovation is far from assured in all schools and classrooms.

The National Standards and NCEA, as two accountability mechanisms, embody the ever-present tension between formative and summative assessment and they highlight issues around externally and internally designed tasks and teacher assessment task design capacity. Teacher responses indicate National Standards provide a high stakes arena where teachers face the dilemma of balancing what they “feel is best for their students versus what is deemed necessary for school accountability” (Harris & Brown, 2009b, p. 365).

12.5 Implications and Conclusion

In this chapter we have scoped out some of the challenges, tensions, and possibilities that arise for the various stakeholders (children/youth and their families, teachers, schools, policy makers) in the New Zealand education system. The system is one in which traditionally, significant responsibility for curriculum programme planning, pedagogy, assessment, and reporting has been devolved to schools but where there is currently notable policy and political pressure for schools to engage with more prescriptive assessment regimes. The clear challenge in responding to such pressures is to ensure that the rhetoric of improved educational outcomes for all students becomes a meaningful discourse that is integral to discourses of assessment for learning. Embedding notions of quality, authentic and equitable assessment into the ongoing implementation of NZC, NCEA, and National Standards, remains a significant challenge for teachers throughout the education system in New Zealand. Like their international colleagues, they feel policy tensions in a very real sense as

they seek to enact a set of policy requirements and initiatives that speak to a complex mix of discourses. Arguably, aspects of both the history and culture of education in New Zealand position teachers well in terms of their capacity to generate innovative and inclusive assessment practices amidst what has been described as a “policy soup” (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010). We would argue that they are operating in a policy and practice soup – national policies, historical practices and many aspects of individual school and community contexts all variously inform local policies and practices. School community aspirations for *their* students rightly shape and frame the planned and enacted curriculum and the nature of the assessment practices deemed most appropriate and possible within that school context albeit curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are also influenced by national imperatives. As is indicated in recent scholarship on assessment (Stiggins, 2008), coherence across these systems is important. In New Zealand as elsewhere, current policies present the scope for this coherency to be advanced amidst interpretation and implementation, or in contrast, jeopardised.

The implications of the New Zealand experience for policy makers as leaders of reform include the need to consider carefully how new policies will interface and interact with prior policies and resourcing (materials and professional development), and the local policy and practices that schools have developed to enact earlier policies within their setting. There is strong evidence that local policies and practices tend to be slow to change, all the more so if new policies are contradictory and/or their deeper implications are not clear (Thrupp & Easter, 2013). As Brown (2012) points out: “New Zealand has prioritised formative assessment and committed resources to enabling teachers to implement the policy, kept consequences for schools and teachers relatively low, and safe-guarded the professionalism of its teachers” (n.p.). This approach comes with substantial challenges to teacher content and pedagogical content knowledge as well as to their assessment literacy including how to design robust assessment tasks and make quality judgments. Within any future developments it will therefore be important for policy makers to continue to provide the support schools and teachers need to enable them to enact and use assessment to ameliorate disparity and enhance equity of opportunity and outcomes for *all* students. At this time there is a distinct lack of assessment resources for Māori-medium education and of resources that allow teachers to take the diversity in student linguistic, cultural and special educational needs into account.

The implication for school leaders, and teachers – as leaders of learning in classrooms – is that there is value in clearly articulating their own policies, principles, and practices and in focusing on the spaces for change and innovation offered by new policies and associated support materials and programmes. Studies of innovative schools (Cowie et al., 2009) indicate that there would be value in schools sharing the practices they have found to be effective; and, as was the case when schools were first working to integrate the use of laptops (Cowie, Jones, & Harlow, 2006), in small schools sharing resources and expertise (see also the recommendations from Nusche et al., 2012). The imperative to place students at the centre of their own assessment (MOE, 2011) has implications for teachers’ understanding of their professional role and responsibilities, with ample evidence that for teachers the

reconceptualisation of their role is a challenge (James & Pedder, 2006). If teachers and schools are to explore this shift, there will need to be societal and school community support for the exploration and risk taking by teachers and students. The variability in teacher assessment and moderation practices (Wylie & Hodgen, 2010) indicates a need for teacher development to ensure overall teacher judgments are reliable and nationally comparable. This development comes with the potential to develop teacher understanding of learning goals, assessment criteria (National Standards), and formative responses and strategies.

The New Zealand context is one of possibilities and constraints. We have illustrated here that there is merit in viewing any potential constraint as an enabling constraint – while it delimits possibilities it does not completely close these off. However, we also acknowledge that the possibilities that are open for any individual to leverage are not the same and are influenced by many factors. Leaders at all levels of the system need to be proactive in collaborative endeavours to optimise the spaces for action that the policy and practice context presents.

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