Collective Memory Loss: secondary teachers and school qualifications in New Zealand

JUDIE ALISON

ABSTRACT This article draws on research among very experienced secondary teachers in New Zealand to show that a prolonged period of neo-liberal education policies can have a lasting effect on teachers' memories of their own radical past. Despite the existence in the 1970s and 1980s of an emerging consensus among secondary teachers that the traditional norm-referenced qualifications system needed radical reform, by 2004 a sample of teachers who had taught through all or most of that period failed to recall the profession's advocacy for change. Change, including qualifications reforms that the profession had been first to advocate, was typified by them as externally imposed. This poses a major challenge to those who seek to reclaim and revoice teaching's radical past.

The need to 'reclaim and revoice' teacher memory of 'narratives of our radical past' (Fielding, 2005, p.62) resonates strongly in the New Zealand context. Extreme neo-liberal education policies of the 1990s (see, for example, Fiske & Ladd, 2000) are on the wane here. However, they are currently evolving into policies that centre on a 'quality teacher/quality teaching' discourse, which in the wrong hands can be just a more subtle version of the neo-liberal stratagems to control and de-professionalise teachers that we saw in the 1990s.

My research on the struggle over school qualifications in New Zealand (Alison, n.d.) suggests that one consequence of neo-liberal policies has been a collective loss of memory by the teaching profession of the radicalism of earlier years. This raises questions about how such memory loss happens, and how the radicalism of the past can be reclaimed.

The Union's Role in Change

The secondary teacher union in New Zealand, the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), with strong support from its rank and file, was opposing, as

early as 1965, the traditional norm-referenced exam-based qualifications. The union rejected competition and ranking of students, arguing that they should be encouraged to improve on their own previous achievements, not compete with each other, and that assessment should be done by teachers rather than by external exams. While such terms were not well known when the union first talked about these things, this was essentially what came to be known as 'criterion-referenced' or 'standards-based' assessment. The union continued to advocate for qualifications change throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Annual membership conferences established radical positions on qualifications, and these were conveyed to government through the union's representatives on examination boards, through direct lobbying of government, and even through industrial action.

The motivation for the union's push for change was a strong commitment to equity for students. Teachers recognised that the qualification system was entrenching widespread failure, impacting inequitably Maori, female, and working-class students. It also enforced a hierarchy of subjects and kinds of knowledge, so that learning that could not be assessed in a pen-and-paper exam was not valued. Increasing school retention rates because of rising youth unemployment made the need for change even more obvious to teachers.

Yet in my interviews with a sample of very experienced teachers, whose median year of starting teaching was 1973, only one recalled this history of the union's pressure for change. This strikes me as a clear case of collective loss of memory. Given that the PPTA has always had union membership well above 90% of teachers, and a tradition of highly democratic processes with each school site as the core organising unit, it is reasonable to assume that all or most of these teachers would have been aware, in the past, of their union's positions on qualifications reform.

It is ironical that, arguably, secondary teachers in New Zealand now have, in their current school qualifications system, something very close to the profession's own original vision, yet most secondary teachers do not recognise its origins within their own union, and nearly two-thirds of them are either ambivalent about or downright opposed to the system (Alison, 2005).

So why do such losses of memory by teachers happen? We cannot effectively 'reclaim and revoice' these memories in order to return to the radicalism of the past unless we understand what causes such 'professional amnesia'.

I contend that this loss of teacher memory has come about as a result of some 20 years of neo-liberal policies in New Zealand that mean that policy-makers and teachers have been 'talking past each other'.

Neo-liberal Qualifications Reforms

Change in New Zealand from norm-referenced to standards-based assessment finally began to happen in the early 1990s, but by this time neo-liberalism was in full swing in New Zealand.

A Qualifications Authority was established as a result of the division of the previous policy-and-implementation Department of Education into a policy-only Ministry, alongside a number of stand-alone agencies to deliver services such as school inspection, special education, and qualifications. Unlike the Department of Education, the new Qualifications Authority had no history of partnership with the teaching profession, and the neo-liberal anxiety to avoid 'provider capture' led to deliberate exclusion, at least in a formal way, of teacher voices. The Authority set up advisory committees, but they comprised individuals selected for their 'expertise', rather than nominated representatives of teachers (as with union representatives on all previous examination boards and other departmental advisory groups).

Analysis of the early publications of the Qualifications Authority shows an unremitting neo-liberal discourse. Education is to grow the economy, by developing 'human capital': 'Tapping the potential of all New Zealanders is the key to growth in a world in which economic and social development depend on harnessing the human resources of a nation' (NZQA, 1990, p.1). The framework of standards-based qualifications being developed is described in technicist terms such as 'building blocks', 'barriers that have impeded flexible movement' and the like. The emphasis is on skills, not knowledge or understanding. Education for self-awareness, for citizenship, or for living in a multi-cultural society is absent.

Equity discourses appear, but the arguments underpinning these are about full usage of human capital and elimination of welfare dependence rather than moral arguments: 'The challenge we face is to create a world-class education system which will engender a new spirit of enterprise and initiative ... We must break the cycle of failure that condemns so many young people to dependence on the state, so that they can fulfill their potential and make their contribution to our nation's future' (NZQA, 1991a, p. 2).

The managerialist structure of the new qualifications framework is clear: 'It will involve setting simple and clearly identified targets and expectations of delivery' (NZQA, 1991b, p. 2). Units of learning are to be defined as 'learning outcomes'.

This kind of discourse was markedly absent in the language of the experienced teachers whom I interviewed. For them, qualifications change was about motivating students through providing through new opportunities for success, about recognising the full range of abilities that students brought to their learning, about broadening the subject choices, and about assessing in ways that assisted student learning by providing clearer guidance about their progress and future goals. Some explicitly rejected the idea that schools should assess students to provide information for the labour market, although they recognised that there was an increasing pressure on schools to do so.

The exclusion of teachers from partnership with policy-makers also contributed to the Qualifications Authority, under pressure from industry, settling on a mode of standards-based assessment which was not supported by teachers for school assessment in 'conventional' subjects. In the late 1980s, the

union had been strongly supportive of trials of 'achievement-based assessment', a form of criterion-referenced assessment with four or five levels of achievement identified, all described in positive terms. However, NZQA, in 1993, adopted a pass-fail 'competency' form of assessment for the whole framework, regardless of whether the assessment was of work skills in industry or a senior subject like history. The level of conflict over reform continued to rise, until eventually, in 1998, a compromise was found in the present system: the NCEA (National Certificate of Educational Achievement) which provides for criterion-referenced assessment at four levels (Not Yet Achieved, Achieved, Merit and Excellence) for school assessments of 'conventional' subjects.

I would argue that if teacher representatives had been a key part of the decision-making processes at the Qualifications Authority, the attempt to impose competency-based assessment on traditional school subjects would never have happened. Furthermore, an inclusive and genuine consultation process would have ensured that teachers felt that their voices were being heard, leading to greater teacher ownership of the final shape of the qualifications system.

Deprofessionalisation of Teachers

An interesting feature of my interviews with very experienced teachers was their perceptions about the forces of change that had led to qualifications reform. Firstly, they generally found it difficult to identify forces for change at all, and demonstrated vividly the teacher 'lens' that is focused on their students in their current context (McLaughlin, 1993). Secondly, overwhelmingly their perception was that the forces for change were from outside the teaching profession: politicians, public servants, employers. Cynicism was high: 'I really don't know why they did, change for change's sake ... I don't know, maybe, why do politicians do anything? It's vote-catching, it's change again' (Brian).

The damage done by excluding teachers does not miraculously disappear when policy-making processes change and teachers are once again invited to be part of change. New Zealand's current school qualification system, the NCEA, was a compromise aimed at ending the years of conflict over NZQA's original competence-based model. It was developed from 1999 with the involvement of large numbers of teachers serving on panels as standards-writers and materials developers and providing professional development, and the union was a key member of all consultative groups. This involvement continues today.

However, this does not mean that teachers now see the qualifications reforms as owned by the profession. There is still a strong 'them and us' view expressed by many teachers (Alison, 2005).

This returns me to where I started, with the question, how do we 'reclaim and revoice narratives of our radical past' (Fielding, 2005, p. 62)? It would appear that it is much easier to lose these narratives than it is to regain them. De-professionalisation of teachers, on the scale that we have seen in recent times in many countries, means that the level of debate about educational issues has

moved from higher level principles to issues of implementation. In our union, debates on qualifications invariably centre around teacher workload and resourcing, not around the fundamental purposes and principles of assessment. Teachers ask for pre-packaged assessment resources that they can download and use without change, rather than demanding professional space to prepare their own resources with their particular students' needs in mind. Intensification of teacher workloads means that, increasingly, branches, conference delegates, and even union executive members fail to find the time to thoroughly read and ponder policy material provided by the union.

The neo-liberal 'tight-loose-tight' model of managerialism (Hall, n.d.) exacerbates this, because it imposes extensive compliance measurements but relatively little guidance on how to meet the 'outcomes' demanded, leaving teachers wanting just to be told what to do: 'I remember switching off when it [competence-based assessment] was mentioned because it was yet another thing, you know, we'd had this, we'd had that, present it to me and I'm afraid this is the attitude I've had for a long time, you present it to me with everything in order, with suitable assessments and then I'll think about it, but get it sorted out first' (Pauline).

Reclaiming Teacher Radicalism

The goal of revitalising teacher radicalism is worthy, but from where I stand, reaching it seems far away. The intensification of teacher workloads stands in the way of the kind of reflection and collaboration that could revitalise teacher radicalism. On the other hand, the PPTA has been successful in recent years in negotiating substantial increases in teachers' guaranteed minimum non-contact time, to the tune of an hour a day for classroom teachers and more for those with extra responsibilities. This may help, over time.

But while unions like my own may make strenuous efforts to encourage teachers to lift their heads above the immediate and to engage with the fundamental questions of education, we are but one influence on teachers' lives. In devolved systems like New Zealand's, the stronger influences are individual school cultures and leadership, and the big stick of compliance waved by the agencies to which schools are accountable.

Nevertheless, we must not give up. The stakes are too high.

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JUDIE ALISON is a policy adviser at New Zealand's secondary teacher union, the PPTA, with special responsibility for professional issues including curriculum, qualifications and teacher education. She joined the union's staff in 2002, after 27 years as a secondary teacher of English and media studies, during which she taught almost entirely in schools in low socio-economic areas. Throughout her career she had been a union activist, serving on the union's national executive from 1994 to 2000 inclusive. *Correspondence:* Judie Alison, Advisory Officer, NZPPTA, PO Box 2119, Wellington, New Zealand (jalison@ppta.org.nz).

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