

A critical view of the standardised assessment scheme in the name of National Standards in New Zealand

Update: A few months after this post was published the Government has announced that National Standards and Ngā Whanaketanga Rumaki Māori will be removed from 2018.¹

Background:

The National Education Goals, a component part of the National Education Guidelines² defined by the Education Act, establish goals, set a purpose and a common direction for state education. National Education Goals together with National Standards³ and the highly appraised New Zealand Curriculum⁴ with its cornerstone key competencies intend to transform traditional outcomes and give great flexibility to schools to define and prioritise learning areas and teaching methodologies depending on the academic and development needs of the students. The concept is sound and all the goals and the overall intentions are laudable.

How do standardised assessments fit in with National Education Goals?

One of the ten goals of National Education Goals⁵ mentions “monitoring” only as part of the overall achievement objective as follows: “Excellence achieved through the establishment of clear learning objectives, monitoring student performance against those objectives, and programmes to meet individual need.” Clearly “assessment” and “monitoring” are related and build an integral part of effective teaching, but they do not necessarily translate to an overarching standardized strategy as an outcomes-focused model throughout the compulsory education.

Downloaded from Context Education Commons (<https://contexteducation.org>)

Rights: Unless otherwise noted this content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

The logical question to ask here is, in what way, if at all, do the main goals of our education system (like those mentioned in the National Education Goals) support the assessment strategies currently in place and how do they coincide with accepted pedagogical values and principles?

What does the research say?

There is an overwhelming agreement on the need and positive effects of achievement monitoring in general and formative types of assessments. However there is no consensus in the research community whether summative standardised assessment (the prevalent practice in schools today) has any positive effect on teaching and learning. While there are a few position papers⁶ and some disparate research papers⁷ on the subject there is no solid evidence to support the type of assessment strategy we now have accepted as norm in our schools.

There is an overwhelming amount of research on this subject in recent years. Most research findings suggest that standardised summative assessment practices, over-emphasis and obsession with numbers (test results) are an impediment to real learning.

Since neither research nor practice⁸ support standardised assessments, are other factors, perhaps tacit assumptions about student agency or teacher professionalism or even suspicion of their evaluative capability at work here? Or are there other, even more subtle reasons?

What are the key impacts?

It is widely accepted that acquiring academic knowledge is only part of a well-rounded education. Metacognitive abilities and what the New Zealand Curriculum refers to as “key competencies” are also vital in the learning process. In practice, however, there is an overt emphasis on academic achievement, broadly referred to as “achievement” which is measured with a rigorous assessment regime, a dichotomy that leaves little room for teachers to incorporate the so-called key competencies nor for students to acquire and put in practice these abilities on their own accord. The inevitable outcome is that “teaching the test” and “studying to pass” takes over real teaching and learning. Knowledge that can be measured in numbers is not authentic and most definitely not enduring because it is often devoid of contextual meaning.

How did we get here and why?

National Standards were originally developed, and rightly so, to be used as a guideline for teachers to develop their own curriculum and in a sense also to serve as a yard stick (setting standards) for teachers to measure their depth and breadth of their own curriculum (year 1-8). At secondary level they also ensure that our education outcomes are aligned with nationally and internationally recognised qualifications systems. The national assessment scheme (to use a collective term for standardised assessment), is an initiative, an add-on and an oddity in the mix of all other well-thought guidelines and policies. It purports to be a natural and logical extension to National Standards (and NZ Curriculum) but in reality has a summative purpose and so stands in stark contrast to the intents and purposes of the stated goals (National Education Goals) as well as the highly appraised NZ Curriculum. This can be verified by an over-emphasis on “achievement” or “competency” which by definition neglects meta-cognitive aspects of learning.

~~—————This reductive approach to education creates theoretical and methodological challenges which exert pervasive negative—————~~

Downloaded from Context Education Commons (<https://contexteducation.org>)

Rights: Unless otherwise noted this content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

influence on all aspects of teaching and learning. For teachers it hampers creativity in teaching, spontaneous response to the dynamics of the classroom and autonomous teaching including, subject innovation and liberty to stress depth of learning when called for. For students it restrains the motivation to learn freely, deeply and contextually and gravely hinders their purposeful development.

The history of adoption of national assessment strategy (often incorrectly equated with National Standards) is not without controversy. Initially it was fast tracked through the system without proper consultation with stakeholders, but eventually normalised in schools without much resistance as proponents gained the ideological support from those in power. There are many factors that have led to the adoption of the assessment strategies; some can be traced to pressures from institutions of higher education for better accountability of achievement results. Other factors include influences of Global Education Reform Movement and worries about international ranking and obsession with league tables in an education system which openly proclaims to be market-driven. There are also less obvious drivers which are found only in the context of the surrounding debates and also between the lines in the reports that originally supported the implementation of assessment regimes. These are based on tacit assumptions about teacher professionalism (lack of trust of teacher judgement and professionalism to be exact) and theories of how students learn and how teaching should be conducted. Whatever the reasons, the matters are considered *fait accompli* for now until and unless the wide-ranging negative effects for teachers and students from such implementation are brought back for further scrutiny by the education community, the public and the research community.

Footnotes:

1. <http://education.govt.nz/news/national-standards-removed/>
2. Other components are Foundation Curriculum Policy Statements, National Curriculum Statements, National Standards and
Downloaded from Context Education Commons (<https://contexteducation.org>)

Rights: Unless otherwise noted this content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

National Administration Guidelines. see:

<http://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/legislation/the-national-education-guidelines/>

3. <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards>

4. <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/The-New-Zealand-Curriculum>

5. <http://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/legislation/negs/>

6. <http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Assessment-in-the-classroom/Assessment-position-papers>

7. <http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Research-and-readings/Research-behind-DANZ>

8. make your rounds and ask teachers for their candid view - it is surprising to see that the majority of teachers object to standardised testing but go along with it nevertheless
