

Will the new planning and reporting requirements improve student achievement in New Zealand schools?

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The planning and reporting requirements promulgated in the New Zealand Education Standards Act 2001 are designed to help schools achieve continuous improvements in education outcomes for students (Ministry of Education (MOE), 2002a). I do not believe that the act will achieve this and I suggest that the consequences of the act may even be to encourage teaching practices that are, at worst, detrimental to learning and achievement.

At best, schools will continue as they are now. Prior to the Act, the National Administration Guidelines (MOE, 1999) required schools to a) have a strategic plan which included plans and programmes for curriculum, assessment and staff development, b) have an on-going programme of self-review including evaluation of student achievement and c) report annually to their communities on the achievement of students as a whole and of groups against the school's plans and targets (MOE, 1999). The Education Review Office (ERO) performed an accountability function by evaluating each school's self-review process and assisting to improve the quality of education (ERO, 2002). These requirements are still in force.

The NZ Standards Act 2001 (MOE, 2001b) establishes an additional requirement that each school have an annual planning section in their charter. This section must set out the school's short-term priorities and measurable targets related to intended student outcomes. It is also to contain details of how the board of trustees intends to achieve the outcomes. I suggest that this section is comparable to a) above. A report on the analysis of the progress made towards the target must be submitted to the MOE annually (MOE, 2001a). I contend that there is little difference between the old and the new requirements, with the significant change being that from 2003 the planning and reporting must be submitted to the MOE. The discourse from the MOE supports this, stating, that "In many cases the only addition to this paperwork will be for the school to bring together its current Charter, strategic plan and budget" (MOE 2002a, p8). Therefore the act will not improve student achievement because it does not change what happens inside classrooms.

The research tells us that it is what happens inside the classroom that does make a difference to student learning outcomes (Black & Wiliam, 1998). It is the interaction between the teacher and the student that is important and to raise achievement it is these interactions that must be enhanced (Hattie, 1999; McMahan, 2000). Schools' strategic planning, goal setting and staff development may well improve student achievement but this is a case of business as usual and it will not be the Standards Act that is responsible for any improvements.

At worst, schools will make changes that will be detrimental to student achievement for the following four reasons. Firstly, Sutton (1998) found that "the context of national or local requirements for certification and accountability exert a powerful influence on practice" (cited in Hill, 1998, para. 33). Research also informs us that best classroom practices are learner centred where teachers use information about their pupils' progress and difficulties to adapt their work and meet their pupils' needs (Black & Wiliam, 1998). But in schools that "implement data-driven self review, appraisal and performance management policies that focus on setting targets and reporting outcomes, classroom practices tend to be management rather than learner focused" (Hill, 2002, p8). Examples of the ways schools are implementing planning for the Act suggest that this is happening. For instance, school-wide timetabling of literacy and numeracy, a school-wide learning model and school-wide units of work are mentioned (Education Gazette, 2002). School wide units of work must be

management focused. I suggest that a management focus tends to prevent a learner focus because it focuses on coverage of the curriculum rather than on the needs of the students and thus is often detrimental to raising achievement.

Secondly, the fact that the new act focuses on reporting summative assessment will preclude an increase in student achievement. The MOE requires the targets that are set to be specific, measurable, appropriate, challenging but achievable and time-bound (NZSTA, 2000). The data are to be analysed and reported annually to the MOE. Although not mandatory, the discourse in MOE documents promotes externally referenced assessment tools such as *The Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading*, *Progressive Achievement Tests*, and *Essential Skills Tests* which lend themselves more to summative than formative assessment (MOE, 2001a, 2002b). The emphasis is not on using assessment to inform teaching while teaching but on using it to monitor and report progress. Yet Black and Wiliam (1998) and Hattie, (1999) state that research shows, and the MOE rhetoric supports this (MOE, 2001b), that it is specific, constructive feedback about learning as it is occurring that is the most powerful influence on student achievement, and that it is teachers' knowledge about learners and learning that is a key factor in improving teaching and learning. Formative, pupil-referenced assessment is what needs to be emphasised for student achievement, not the criterion referenced summative assessment that the Act requires. Experience shows that summative assessment tends to take precedence and overshadows formative assessment (Harlen, 1998). If this change occurs, it will likely be detrimental to learning.

Thirdly, one of the aims of the act is to ensure accountability (McMahon, 2000), and assessment for accountability is high stakes assessment that tends to take precedence over learning. Teaching to the test, short term memorising and learning to cope with test situations will distort the learning process (Nisbet, 1992). Elley (1996) states that high stakes assessment gives "ample reason for teachers to show good results to show that much value is added" and that schools can manipulate results by coaching students before a test and encouraging the absence of lower achieving students. Because schools are able to set their own targets it is possible that they may select easily achievable ones. Test scores can be raised at the expense of the quality of education (Eisner, 1998). While teaching to the test may make schools look good, there is the danger that the curriculum/learning experiences will be narrow and shallow because too great an emphasis is placed on that which is assessed at the expense of other learning areas (Harlen, 1998). It is in these ways that the accountability of the Act will work not for but against student learning.

Fourthly, the targets must be written as outcomes. Some examples that have been given are; "By the end of year 7, at least 60% of boys will be reading at or above the reading level for their age" (MOE, 2002c, p2) and "70% of year 7 and 70% of year 8 students solving algorithms in multiplication with 3x3 digits" (Jones, 2002). These both appear to aim to raise the bottom group of students but this will not promote achievement of the most able learners. Outcomes written in this way run into the same criticisms that are directed at criterion referenced assessment of all kinds. What about the children who are already performing well? These targets could lead to all the emphasis being placed on the students who may otherwise not meet the targets at the expense of those who comfortably will but who with equal input could achieve exceptionally. Raising the standards means raising them for all and as Riley (2001) puts it "we mustn't close the gap by simply raising the floor or by lowering the ceiling"(no page). To raise the lower group at the expense of the top, as could happen with the outcome based targets that the MOE suggests meet requirements of the Act, will not enhance student learning and may disadvantage the top achievers.

In conclusion, I do not believe that the Education Standards Act 2001 will improve student achievement because the changes it makes are only to do with reporting information to the MOE. Many schools will continue whatever work they are doing already to raise student achievement but this will not be attributable to the Act. Because of



the accountability function, other schools will be encouraged by the Act to make changes to their practice such as becoming management rather than learner focused, focusing on summative assessment at the expense of formative, teaching a narrower, shallower curriculum and teaching to the test in order to appear to meet the target, and concentrating on the students less likely to achieve the outcomes at the expense of the high achievers. Research shows us that changes such as these, rather than improving student learning, will be detrimental to it. High stakes assessment tends to take precedence over learning (Nisbet, 1992).

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