Chapter 1 The context for NCEA: A brief overview

In the first decade of the 21st century New Zealand introduced a new standards-based qualification system for secondary schools. One important component of this system was a new school-exit qualification called the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). NCEA has now been in place for just over a decade. The time seems right to look back over its chequered introduction and the subsequent trajectory of its development. We initially called this book *NCEA in Context* because we could not examine NCEA itself in isolation from its many social and educational influences.

The book explores many key questions about NCEA. We discuss why it was introduced, how it was implemented, and the challenges and opportunities that have emerged as this qualification system has evolved since implementation began in 2002. NCEA saw a seismic shift in assessment for qualifications. This shift took us away from the norm-referenced assessment model that shaped the way secondary schools operated during the second half of the 20th century, under which predetermined proportions of students passed and failed. We moved to a standards-referenced model, under which students are assessed against specific criteria. Students are now required

to demonstrate competence against specific learning goals, in units of assessment called *standards.* These standards can be assessed either internally (by schools) or externally (usually by public examination).

Alongside the change to assessment, a new school curriculum was introduced—*The New Zealand Curriculum* (*NZC*) (Ministry of Education, 2007). *NZC* complements NCEA in many respects, including its framing of achievement objectives. However it was not published until several years after the full implementation of NCEA had been completed. Enacting the sweeping changes called for by NCEA and *NZC* has required a significant shift in thinking about the purpose of secondary school assessment and a major reorientation for students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders involved in secondary school qualifications.

In the second section of the book we develop the argument that, contrary to what is implied by many NCEA critics, there was no golden age before NCEA, when all was well with assessment and learning in the senior secondary school. In any case, NCEA was not a brand-new concept. Rather, it was a compromise that combined elements of previous assessment models (e.g., external examinations) with more innovative approaches (e.g., the splitting of assessment into small components). It was an outcome of many a number of attempts to introduce alternative assessment models during the previous 40 years, with the aim of accommodating the changing nature of secondary schooling. Thus the time before NCEA, with all its growing pressures for change, is an important contextual element that we have woven into our analysis throughout the subsequent chapters.

NCEA was welcomed by many in the education sector when it was introduced, but those familiar with its development will be aware that there were initial implementation problems. We include a frank discussion of these—they too, are part of the NCEA context. While many of these problems have now been addressed, NCEA regularly continues to generate new controversies as it continues to evolve. In part this is because innovation in any field has a tendency to generate controversy. This is especially true of innovation that explicitly seeks to overturn entrenched practices and hierarchies, as NCEA does. A related consideration is that secondary school qualifications carry high stakes for students, parents, and teachers. All these groups are sensitive to (and

concerned about) any changes to assessment in the schooling sector that they perceive to be potentially detrimental, either to students' learning or to schools' reputations.

We think there is also another really important, but less obvious, dimension to the NCEA question that we would like to see attain greater prominence in the public debate. For us, curriculum thinking is a key contextual frame for critique of NCEA. It is an educational truism that assessment drives curriculum. In this book we explore the manner in which NCEA has impacted on students' and their teachers' approaches to, and experiences of, the senior secondary curriculum, for better and for worse. Towards the end of the book we make some suggestions about ways in which sophisticated approaches to the use of NCEA can support the existing potential of the curriculum to develop rich learning experiences that motivate students and deepen their educational experience. Our examples are drawn from current practice—some teachers and schools are already using NCEA in innovative ways that bring real benefit for their students' learning.

NCEA was set up as a flexible standards-based model that aimed to be inclusive of all students. This included those who have previously been excluded from gaining qualifications simply on the basis of their position in a rank-ordering of assessment results, and for whom the schooling process was typically an alienating, negative experience. Judged superficially on the twin bases of improvement in the proportions of young people achieving qualifications, and of senior secondary school retention, NCEA appears to have been highly successful. Young people are motivated to stay at school for longer than they ever have before, and the proportions of them who achieve qualifications are increasing. The increase includes students who would typically have left school without any qualifications under the previous assessment system. On closer inspection, however, it is not altogether clear whether the increase in qualifications attainment always represents an improvement in the learning of what we might call "knowledge that matters" or "powerful knowledge". One of the important questions that we address in this book is posed by a book edited by British educationalists Michael Young and David Lambert: what do increasing qualifications mean if they don't result in a more well informed and knowledgeable population? (Young & Lambert, 2014).

Just to be clear, we think that NCEA is producing many well-educated young scholars, across a range of domains of study, who are well-prepared for either tertiary or vocational pathways. However, some students appear to be gaining their NCEA qualifications by accumulating credits in a more haphazard manner. They may be gaining NCEA qualifications, but they are not necessarily gaining knowledge that provides them with either a clear vocational direction, or with sound understanding of established fields of inquiry. Beyond the somewhat facile and anachronistic divide between "vocational" and "academic" learning, we believe that a capacity for *critical thinking* is an essential component of education in a healthy democracy. However, despite claims to the contrary, it is not clear to us that all students participating in NCEA are experiencing the kinds of rich learning that develops the capacity to think critically and to make reasoned and evidence-based judgements. We agree with theorists who claim that these qualities lie at the heart of what it means to be educated. They are "as important for the brain surgeon and the Airbus pilot they are for the beauty therapist and the car mechanic" (Biesta, 2014, p. 32). To return to our point about there never having been a golden age in education, we hasten to add that students who are not being well served by NCEA would probably not have been successful under the previous assessment regime either. But NCEA is still a work in progress, and we think we can all do better.

What is NCEA and how does it work?

The following is a brief introduction for those unfamiliar with the structure of NCEA awards and the processes that allow students to achieve these qualifications. Readers who are familiar with NCEA may want to skip straight to the next chapter at this point. This is a bare bones outline. Many of the points are discussed in more detail in the various chapters of Section 2.

NCEA is one of the most complicated school qualification systems in the world. Since its initial implementation in 2002 it has evolved formally, through the introduction of initiatives such as endorsements, and informally, in terms of the way in which it is used by teachers and schools. In this initial overview of NCEA, we will focus

on its present state. The ways in which it has evolved are described in detail in the chapters that follow.

The qualification comprises three levels, with one level typically approached in each of the final 3 years of secondary school: in Year 11, students usually work towards a Level 1 certificate; in Year 12, towards a Level 2 certificate; and in Year 13, a Level 3 certificate. However, students can and do vary from this pattern, with some students attaining a level of NCEA ahead of the typical year and many taking more than one year to gain a given level.

To gain NCEA, students accumulate credits from assessment units called *standards*. These units are much finer-grained than the subject level at which most formal assessment took place under the previous assessment system. The assessment programme for a typical year-long secondary course might carry around 18–20 credits of assessment across about five or six standards. Thus most standards carry 3–5 credits, although a few carry substantially more than this. A typical secondary student (if there is any such person) enters for between about 90 and 110 credits in a given year.

The standards used for NCEA, as well as the qualifications themselves, are all registered at one of ten levels of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF), which comprises a great many tertiary-level qualifications as well as NCEA. Most (but not all) of the standards that are typically used to contribute to NCEA come from the first three levels of the NZQF.

Standards come in two broad kinds. Achievement standards, of which there are some 800, and which are linked to *NZC*, almost solely contribute to NCEA. Very few, if any, achievement standards can contribute to other qualifications. Unit standards, which are not curriculum linked, mostly contribute to tertiary qualifications. There are thousands of unit standards registered on the NZQF and only a relatively small subset are typically used by secondary school students working towards NCEA, although in theory all could be. There are externally and internally assessed achievement standards, but unit standards are always internally assessed (i.e., close to the point of the learning). Moderation processes are used to manage variability between assessors of internally assessed achievements. Depending on each school's policy, students might be granted one further

opportunity[1] to be reassessed for, or resubmit revised work for, some internally assessed standards.

To attain the credits for a standard, a student must meet achievement criteria, as specified in the documentation for that standard. Unit standards specify a single set of criteria, and when they are all met, a student receives the credits for that standard with a grade of Achieved. A few unit standards carry higher grades, but this is atypical. Achievement standards specify three-graded criteria, all of which carry the same number of credits, but which designate increasing levels of quality-of-attainment. Meeting the most straightforward of these criteria results in a grade of Achieved, the next, a grade of Merit, and the most advanced achievement is awarded a grade of Excellence. Both unit and achievement standards, when used to assess school students, result in grades of Not Achieved being recorded if assessment for a standard is attempted but the criteria are not met.

NCEA certificates are gained by accumulating a requisite numbers of credits at each level. To attain NCEA Level 1, a student must gain at least 80 credits registered at NZQF Level 1 or higher. To attain NCEA Level 2, at least 60 credits must be attained at Level 2 or higher, with an additional 20 credits from any level (including Level 1). Similarly, NCEA Level 3 requires 60 credits at Level 3 or higher, and an additional 20 at Level 2 or higher. The only additional requirements include specific literacy and numeracy requirements, which are the same for all three levels: 10 credits must be attained from approved literacy-related standards, and 10 from approved numeracy-related standards.

Credits can be counted towards multiple NCEA levels, so that a student attaining NCEA Level 3 automatically attains Levels 1 and 2 as well, if they have not already done so. Certificates attained with at least 50 Merit credits at or above the level of the certificate attract an endorsement of the certificate at Merit level. Similarly, 50 Excellence credits at or above the level of the certificate attract an Excellence endorsement. Any mix of standards at all, provided it meets the level requirements described above, results in the award of a level of NCEA. This means

1 http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/assessment-and-moderation/assessment-of-standards/generic-resources/gathering-evidence-of-achievement/assessment-opportunities-in-schools/

that the concept of a course or subject is in no way captured by the certificate itself. However, schools can use a course code that allows NZQA to recognise which combination of standards is being used to assess that particular course. If a student is attested by the school as participating in a course and attains at least 14 credits declared against that course with Merit or Excellence, they receive a course endorsement at the appropriate level.[2]

We should mention two adjuncts to NCEA which are not formally part of the qualification. One is University Entrance (UE), which entitles a student to enrol in any New Zealand university (although not necessarily in any specific degree programme). To attain UE, a student must gain NCEA Level 3 with at least 42 credits coming from three approved subjects, with at least 14 credits from each, and a literacy requirement that is somewhat more stringent than basic NCEA literacy. The other adjunct is New Zealand Scholarship, which is examined entirely at the subject level, with a largely traditional assessment approach; most Scholarship subjects are assessed by 3-hour examination, although a few—all arts subjects—are assessed by portfolio. Scholarship is undertaken by relatively few students and is designed to recognise high achievement, with a successful result being awarded to just 3 percent of the NCEA Level 3 cohort in each subject.

A note about our use of terminology

Researchers in the field of knowledge use the term *powerful knowledge* to describe knowledge that can help us explain and understand the world (Young 2008; Muller, 2012). Such knowledge is typically generated in subjects that are informed by academic disciplines. These, in turn, are shaped by distinctive methods of inquiry, methodological approaches, theoretical perspectives, and core concepts. It is this sort of knowledge that we have in mind when we use the word *knowledge*. It is important to be clear that we do not simply mean curriculum content. Disciplinary thinking requires a comprehensive understanding of the observational and cognitive procedures that lead to knowledge production and, more than this, experience and practice in the use of

2 At least one standard contributing to a course endorsement must be internally assessed, and at least one, externally assessed.

these procedures. For example, concepts of historical thinking and of scientific practices used for theory testing are powerful because they provide insights into the processes of knowledge production in these disciplines. The field of philosophical inquiry into how disciplinary knowledge is created is called *epistemology*. We debated long and hard about whether to use this more technical term in the book (and the associated adjective, *epistemological*). In the end we decided we should because we saw a risk that what we hoped to convey might be misinterpreted if a specific aspect of the discussion was understood as being about curriculum content per se.