

# ENGLISH AND THE NCEA: THE IMPACT OF AN ASSESSMENT REGIME ON CURRICULUM AND PRACTICE

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***ABSTRACT** The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) will enter the first year of implementation for Year 11 students in 2002. A number of educators have raised concerns in relation to the NCEA in respect of such issues as validity, reliability, moderation, the lack of uniformity in respect of re-testing policy and manageability. This article argues that attention also needs to be directed at ways in which the NCEA constructs curriculum, assessment and pedagogical practice. Using English as an example, it does just that by examining the English matrix, a specific achievement standard and examples of assessment tasks. It argues that the pervasiveness of summative assessment and the provision of centrally designed materials will legitimise some versions of the subject and certain teaching practices over others. It suggests that this form of legitimating control undermines teacher professionalism and subject innovation.*

The National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), described by the Ministry of Education as a qualification and by Smithers (Education Forum, 2000) as a qualifications framework, is due to take effect in 2002 when New Zealand's Year 11 cohort will have their performances in a range of secondary school subjects (the NCEA canon of "conventional" subjects) measured in terms of a radically new assessment regime. In terms of this regime:

- Canonical subjects have had their content delineated by a range of "achievement standards" (between five and nine per subject). The traditional equation of a subject with a course has been rendered redundant in that the new system allows students to select some but not necessarily all achievement standards (or unit standards) from a particular subject level in planning their programmes of study (NZQA, 2001).
- Achievement standards have been developed at three levels, corresponding roughly with Year 11 (Level 1), Year 12 (Level 2) and Year 13 (Level 3). Scholarship Level 4 is currently a problematic area.
- Some achievement standards are to be assessed internally and some (at least 50%) externally.
- Students sitting achievement standards receive either credit at three different grades (credit, merit and excellent) or no credit.
- Each achievement standard has a credit weighting, with a notional year's work in a subject allowing for the possible achievement of 24 credits. Credits are accumulated over a range of subjects with a total of 80 credits (including 60 at the award level) required for a National Certificate to be awarded at a particular level.
- Mark percentages, where this is feasible, are now to be calculated for individual subjects.

- Achievement standards are assessed according to a system of standards-based assessment, with each standard being divided into "elements" and "descriptors" for credit, merit and excellence grades written for each element.

The NCEA as a qualifications framework has had virtually no trialling and has no parallel elsewhere in the world (Black, 2000; Donnelly, 2000; Irwin, 1999). Serious questions in respect of the proposed assessment regime have been raised in relation to validity, reliability, moderation, the lack of uniformity in respect of re-testing policy and manageability (Black, 2000; Elley, 2000; Hall, 2000; Irwin, 2000; Locke, 1999a, 2000a). However, despite lukewarm support from the secondary teachers' union and deep disquiet in a number of schools, the first phase of implementation at Level 1 (Year 11 of schooling) appears set to proceed in 2002.

While this article will touch on issues of validity, its central aim is to detail the conceivable impact of a radically new, continuous summative assessment regime on the construction of curriculum and teaching practice in relation to English, particularly at Year 11.

The approach being taken here is conceptual. It asks such questions as: What constructions of English as a subject are implicit in the NCEA documentation currently being used in the nationwide "jumbo" training days for teachers and available on Ministry and NZQA websites? What constructions of English are marginalised in or absent from this documentation? What teaching practices appear to be encouraged by this documentation? What sorts of teaching practice appear to be discouraged?

## CONSTRUCTING ENGLISH

All official curriculum documents and syllabi construct a version of worthwhile knowledge in terms of understandings (knowledge about: content), skills (knowing how: competencies) and attitudes (dispositions to knowledge). Like other curriculum documents developed as a result of the National Party's Achievement Initiative (Ministry of Education, 1991), *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (ENZC) delineated English in terms of a series of major strands (written, oral and visual language) further subdivided into minor strands (for example, close reading, poetic writing, thinking critically), each of which had "achievement objectives" written for it at eight or four levels (Ministry of Education, 1994).

Peters and Marshall (1996), among others, have commented critically on the shift in New Zealand towards a general articulation of curriculum objectives in terms of skills or competencies. Like Ball, Kenny and Gardiner (1990), writing about the situation in England, they make a connection between a curriculum emphasis on skills and the demands of a market economy, especially one dominated by an ideology of economic rationalism.

While some commentators see ENZC as reflecting a personal growth version of English (Brown, 1998), others (Locke, 2000b) would see it as drawing on a number of versions of English in its content – personal growth, skills acquisition, cultural heritage – but as having its structure framed by a version of English as skills-based and lending itself to a primary emphasis “. . . upon competitive individuals acquiring skills and competencies required by the market and the economy” (Ball, Kenny & Gardiner, 1990, p. 77). The major gap in ENZC's version of English is an emphasis on critical literacy (Locke, 2000b).

In considering the way in which a curriculum or syllabus constructs knowledge, it is useful to distinguish between a vertical dimension (progression) and a horizontal dimension (partition). I have used the term *progression* to refer to that aspect of a curriculum that constructs knowledge and learning in terms of ages and stages and is clearly affected by models and discourses of cognitive and social development. I have used the term *partition* to refer to that aspect of curriculum that delineates a field of learning into topics or aspects, irrespective of stage or whether the emphasis is on knowledge as content or knowledge as skills.

### **Progression**

Progression has been a thorny issue in respect of English as a subject (Muller, 1967; Dixon, 1975; Locke, 2000). The language aims and objectives of the immediate predecessor of the current English curriculum, *English: Forms 3-5: Statement of Aims*, ignored progression. So did its senior secondary counterpart (Ministry of Education, 1992).

As far as English is concerned, the Achievement Initiative's determination to constrain 1990s curriculum developers to write clear achievement objectives at eight levels of schooling posed a problem that has never been satisfactorily resolved. There is, in fact, widespread agreement that the model of progression arrived at is flawed in a number of aspects and contains an inherent risk of encouraging teaching practices that "dumb down" learning (Duthie, 1994; Elley, 1996; Locke, 1996).

The dumbing down pressure can be seen as a direct consequence of the move to construct curriculum in term of competencies. In respect of ENZC, it is seen most clearly in the close reading sub-strand which has students at Levels 1-5 "responding to" and then "discussing" meanings and ideas in texts, students at Level 6 "discussing and analysing", students at Level 7 "analysing critically" and students at Level 8 "analysing, interpreting and responding". Regardless of the logical flaws in these discriminations, there is clearly a construction of literacy here which restricts higher-level critical and analytical skills to students in the upper secondary school.

Such a construction flies in the face of evidence that children are capable of being critical readers at both early and fluent stages. As Elley (1996) has argued,

Difficulty in reading or listening is more a function of the characteristics of the text – its structure, its complexity, its vocabulary load, and the match between the interests of the student and the content of the text, than it is a function of the particular skills defined in these levels. A skill-based level structure may operate successfully in athletics or woodwork, but not in receptive language modes. The inherent progression in language is not captured by these level statements (p. 14).

The developers of both the unit standard and achievement standard matrices for the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the NCEA respectively were both required to adopt ENZC as their starting point. Such a requirement meant that flaws in the construction of English and literacy resulting from the progressive aspect of ENZC had the potential to become embedded in both matrices.

Table 1 shows the NCEA matrix for English as it stands as of May, 2001.<sup>1</sup> As a whole, it adumbrates a curriculum in both its progressive and partitive aspects. It is clearly couched in the language of competencies. Like ENZC, it constructs a progression through age/stage levels. In respect of writing, Level 1 students "produce", Level 2 students "produce and develop", while Level 3 students "produce extended writing in a selected style". In respect of reading, Level 1 students "read and understand", Level 2 students "read and analyse", while Level 3 students "respond critically".

Such a construction is susceptible to the same critique as the ENZC levels. It constructs a progression that simply does not reflect what reasonably able students can do given appropriate texts and appropriate teaching. More seriously, it appears to construct analysis and critique as beyond Level 1 students and to encourage teaching practices that support such a construction.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1: NCEA Achievement Standard Matrix: English

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
<b>Write in a range of genres</b>	1.1. Produce creative writing Internal 3 credits	2.1. Produce crafted and developed creative writing Internal 3 credits	3.1. Produce an extended piece of writing in a selected style  Internal 4 credits
	1.2. Produce formal writing External 3 credits	2.2. Produce crafted and developed formal transactional writing Internal 3 credits	
<b>Explore the language of and think critically about a variety of oral, written and visual texts</b>	1.3. Read, study and understand an extended written text External 2 credits	2.3. Read and analyse extended written text (studied) External 3 credits	3.2. Respond critically to written text (studied) External 4 credits
	1.4. Read, study and understand a number of short written texts External 2 credits	2.4. Read and analyse short written texts (studied) External 3 credits	3.3. Respond critically to Shakespearean drama (studied) External 4 credits
	1.5. View/listen to, study and understand a visual or oral text External 2 credits	2.5. Analyse oral or visual text (studied) External 3 credits	3.5. Respond critically to unfamiliar prose and poetry texts External 2 credits
	1.6. Read and understand unfamiliar texts External 3 credits	2.6. Read unfamiliar text(s) and analyse the ideas and language features External 3 credits	3.6. Respond critically to unfamiliar text which is characteristic of the language of a particular user group External 2 credits
<b>Speak with confidence</b>	1.7. Deliver a speech in a formal situation Internal 3 credits	2.7. Deliver a presentation using oral and visual language techniques  Internal 3 credits	3.7. Construct and deliver an oral presentation based on independent research of a language or literature topic
<b>Media or drama production</b>	1.8. Produce a media or dramatic presentation Internal 3 credits		
<b>Conduct research</b>	1.9. Research and present information Internal 3 credits	2.8. Investigate a language or literature topic Internal 3 credits	

## Partition

The history of English as a subject has been characterised by its lack of a defining rationale. Instead, there have been versions or traditions of English which manifest themselves in various ways in the concrete teaching practices of English teachers (Andrews, 1994; Ball, Kenny & Gardiner, 1990; Morgan, 1997; Thomson, 1998).

Needless to say, different versions of the subject partition the subject in different ways. A cultural heritage model of the subject would tend to partition the subject along the lines of traditional literary genres: the novel, poetry, stage drama and so on. The New Zealand 1983 *Statement of Aims* partitioned English in terms of eight language "modes": speaking, listening, reading, writing, moving, watching, shaping and viewing. The 1992 *Draft Syllabus for Schools: English Forms 6 and 7* partitioned English into a mix of modes and topics: writing, speaking and listening, literature, language and media literacy. ENZC (1994) partitioned English into three major strands, subdivided these into "function" sub-strands and "process" sub-strands, and then subdivided the sub-strands even further obtaining a total of 20 sub-strands. The cat can clearly be skinned in a multitude of ways.

What makes the 1990s curriculum implementation special, however, is the extent to which the state assumed a central role in mandating and legitimating in a very detailed way the version of English (arguably a model based around skills or competencies) which is now legal tender and subject to official surveillance (through the Education Review Office). In such a climate, professional autonomy, as manifested in the construction of expert knowledge and the selection of pedagogical practices, is severely constrained (Locke, 2000c).

The NCEA English developers were asked to come up with five to eight achievement standards. As Table 1 shows, they have recently exceeded their brief and decided on nine achievement standards at Level 1. Should the achievement standard matrix be seen as an articulation of ENZC or a curriculum construction of English in its own right? An answer to such a question can be found by examining the differences between the matrix and ENZC.

Such an examination reveals significant differences including: the subsuming of all "critical thinking" and "exploring language" process strands into broad reception or production competencies; the replacement of the problematical terms "poetic" and "transactional" (as writing categories) by the equally problematical distinction between "creative" and "formal"; the prescribed weightings of the language modes (written, spoken and visual); the conflation of the "using texts" and "presenting" sub-strands; and the omission of the sub-strands "interpersonal listening", "expressive writing" and "personal reading".

The prescription of weightings is a major difference since it flatly contradicts the spirit of ENZC which states that: "The needs of the learner will invariably be a starting point for planning and will also suggest the relative emphasis to be placed on the strands" (Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 22). Such a change is a clear instance of a summative assessment device (weighting) rather than the interests of students having a direct bearing on the classroom programme.

The disappearance of "personal reading" is also noteworthy. This aspect figured in the April 1999 matrix as part of a broad partition entitled "read widely". The respective Level 1 achievement standard read "Read and respond to a range of written texts" and was accorded two credits. Wide reading was still part of the picture in June 1999, but disappeared from the February 2000 version. It was dropped because of assessment and moderation problems, but it is worth

reflecting on the consequences of its loss in status as an assessed item in an environment where English teachers generally acknowledge the need to encourage precisely this kind of reading.

Such differences are sufficient, I would argue, to support the case that the achievement standard matrix has become a *de facto* curriculum and therefore will have a powerful influence in shaping the way English as a subject is constructed in classrooms.<sup>3</sup> At Level 1 it is clearly a skills-based construction of English which appears to draw little on other traditions of English (cultural heritage, personal growth, critical literacy). Even in its own terms, as noted above, there are gaps. Given its power as a closely monitored, curriculum and summative assessment regime rolled into one, it is hard not to imagine aspects and versions of English and of English teaching expertise becoming marginalised in the aftermath of its implementation.

### Segregation, Integration and Fragmentation

For all its partitioning zeal, ENZC was at pains to construct English as an ideally integrated subject. "Although the strands of English are presented here in isolation, they will in practice be integrated in a language-rich environment" (Ministry of Education, 1994, p. 22). If, as I have argued, the achievement standard matrix becomes a *de facto* curriculum, then there are added implications for the construction of English as a subject.

The first of these relates to what I will be terming the *segregation* of assessment items, in terms of which each achievement standard relating to a particular level of a school subject is assessed separately, either internally (continuous summative assessment) or externally (by external examination or some other method).

While such segregation does not necessarily destroy the notion of programme and subject integrity, it must be viewed as a threat to both of these. By way of example, English achievement standard 2.1 is entitled "Produce crafted and developed creative writing". The instructions for a draft English assessment activity begin: "During Term 1 we will be doing a study of narrative techniques." It is explained that students will study a range of narratives and all will end up writing a single short story (no other options are offered) as their summative assessment task.

Why has the topic of writing been assigned to the first term, when English teachers will tell you that writing is enhanced when integrated with the reading of quality imaginative texts? It would appear that what's occurring here is an impetus to get through writing early in the year before the pressure exerted by the final proposed examination begins to bite. Writing is assessed internally. However, all four reading-related achievement standards are assessed via external examination. Naturally, the temptation will be to teach to the latter towards the *end* of the Year so that students' knowledge of the material will be fresh, i.e. they will be able to cram more successfully.

In this instance, it would appear that the segregation of achievement standards into internally and externally assessed items has produced a temptation to assign different standards to different times of the year rather than integrate them in the classroom programme. In this case, segregation has led to the disintegration of programme coherence.

There is, moreover, a second aspect of this segregation of assessment items which has huge implications, not only for the construction of English (and other subjects) but for the very notion of "subject" itself. An overhead transparency from the third NCEA Workshop addresses a "question from last year": "Do achievement standards mean we have to change our teaching programmes?" One of the bullets states that, "In *most* conventional school subjects, a package of achievement standards describes criteria for assessing all of the commonly expected outcomes of the subject" (Ministry of Education, 2001).

I want to call into question the frequent Government claim that the NCEA is very much a case of "business as usual" in respect of classroom programmes, the construction of subjects and pedagogy. The claim reported in the last paragraph glosses over the principle of dis-aggregation that is central to the NCEA design. Potentially this design allows students – or more likely school programme managers – to compose customised courses from the array of both unit and achievement standards on offer.<sup>4</sup>

The NCEA English panel itself makes the point that the achievement standards do *not* lay down a compulsory course of study (author's italics). Rather, they point out, "Some English teachers may like to develop a composite course from which students can be assessed for a range of achievement standards drawn from English, Media Studies and Drama" (Ministry of Education, 2000).

Looked at positively, this feature of the NCEA's design has the potential to empower students and teachers to design programmes of study commensurate with the needs and aspirations of students. Looked at negatively, it potentially enables students to avoid more demanding achievement standards, or achievement standards that are assessed by external examination. It also has the potential to encourage schools to enter students for unit or achievement standards where they are more likely to succeed, not for the good of the student but for the reputation of the school as a quality provider. Finally, it has the potential to destroy the notion of a subject as constituted by a discipline and a body of integrated knowledge. The word "package", used by the Ministry in the overhead transparency quoted earlier, is a telling discursive marker perhaps portending the fragmentation of traditional subjects and their replacement by market-oriented packages.<sup>5</sup>

## SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT AND FORMATIVE PRACTICE

As far as teaching and learning are concerned, assessment is the most powerful single influence (Wolf, 1995). Widespread recognition of the negative impact of one-off, end-of-year examinations in English and other subjects has been continuously cited by the Ministry of Education as a justification for NCEA development. Such examinations were seen as narrowing the classroom curriculum and raising validity issues for those aspects of subjects that were examined by such means.

While not disputing such impacts, I would want to draw attention to the fact that the impact of summative assessment in the form of end-of-year examinations on formative assessment has been less scrutinised. In an article based on case studies of "effective" Year 12 teachers in New South Wales, Sawyer (2000-1) suggest that, far from being dominated by the end-of-year Higher School

Certificate examination, these teachers refused to let it stop them generating an interest and genuine understanding about their subject. Despite its shortcomings, a one-off, end-of-year examination *does* allow what might be "formative postponement". Cramming and other examination-dictated practices can be put off or at least contained until the end of the year.

What the NCEA is introducing is an assessment culture which in a particular way combines external assessment (examinations in respect of English) and continuous summative assessment. Achievement standards, whether externally or internally assessed, will be graded through the use of especially developed grade-related criteria – but not, as I shall be pointing out, the variety of grade-related criteria associated with the move towards achievement-based assessment that occurred in the late 1980s (Locke, 1999b).

Because of the pervasiveness of this assessment culture, it must be anticipated that it will have a profound impact on formative assessment, defined (after Black & Wiliam, 1998) as ". . . encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged (pp. 7-8). Subject formation occurs, in Foucault's sense, because a choice of assessment-related or evidence-gathering activities is necessarily dictated by the way in which prevailing discourses construct teaching and learning. Information, then, is not just about the neutral-seeming "what students have learnt and need to learn" but about the extent to which they have been inducted into a particular discourse (of English or any other subject).

In the remainder of this section, I will identify some of the assessment-related activities associated with the NCEA and comment on what I see as their discursive underpinnings. In particular, I will be looking at the judgement of levels of student performance, the development of Ministry-developed tasks and the use of exemplars.

These criteria also have a number of notes appended, including the imperative (in bold): "Always reward a sense of personal voice".

Table 2 is an example of broad-banded, grade-related criteria. While there are five grades, each grade allows markers to allocate marks over a band. It is also an example of achievement-based assessment (ABA). Student performance is seen as located on a continuum, with points on that continuum describable in terms of a cluster of descriptors.

In practice, of course, markers using such criteria find that student performance seldom coincides neatly with a cluster of criteria. A piece of student writing, for example, may be characterised by a range of expression, be interesting (but not fully sustained) and be weak mechanically. An assessor, viewing the performance holistically, may put such a student in the B category, but give that student 8 or 9 out of 12 because of the injunction privileging "a sense of personal voice"<sup>6</sup>.

### **Assessing Levels of Student Performance**

A place to start in contemplating the potential impact of NCEA assessment is the marking criteria for "Expressive/Poetic Writing" in the current School Certificate English examination. These criteria are reproduced as Table 2.



Table 2: School Certificate Marking Criteria: Expressive/Poetic Writing

<b>A</b>	<b>VERY GOOD</b> 11-12	Striking, sustained personal voice Credible, convincing Commands attention Shows flair and creative skill Fluent, controlled style Range of expression/vocabulary Well structured Few mechanical errors
<b>B</b>	<b>GOOD</b> 8-9-10	Interesting, perhaps not fully sustained Credible, convincing (but less so than A) Some fluency and sense of style Controlled Structured Few mechanical errors
<b>C</b>	<b>REASONABLE</b> 5-6-7	Could have some sense of originality and interest, <b>BUT</b> be weak mechanically, <b>OR</b> Sound mechanically, but not very interesting Pedestrian, straightforward
<b>D</b>	<b>WEAK</b> 3-4	Simplistic, unconvincing Little sense of style Frequent fluency lapses Mechanically weak
<b>E</b>	<b>POOR</b> 0-1-2	Probably short Makes little sense Weak control Incoherent Mechanical errors intrusive

These criteria, of course, are first and foremost designed for use by the external examiners who mark the current end-of-year School Certificate examination. However, it is a widespread practice for English teachers to make them available to their students and to apply them in instances where students engage in practice exam questions for formative purposes. The extent to which they affect more day-to-day practices in respect of the teaching of writing would need to be researched. However, one might expect that the cluster of ingredients which constitute the grade descriptors to have a bearing on the selection of teaching and learning activities, with teachers designing activities to teach syntactical control, develop vocabulary and sort out a range of mechanical errors.

As a discourse constructing the act of writing, the criteria appear to support skills-based and personal growth versions of English. What is missing from them is any mention of audience, intention or cultural context – discursive markers which would indicate a critical/rhetorical version of the subject.

Let us now turn to the Level 1 achievement standard grading criteria for 1.1: Produce creative writing (Ministry of Education, 2000c), Table 3:

Table 3: Grading Criteria: English 1.1: Produce Creative Writing

Credit	Merit	Excellence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Express idea(s) with detail in a piece of creative writing</li> <li>• Use a writing style appropriate to audience, purpose and text type.</li> <li>• Structure material in a way that is appropriate to audience, purpose and text type.</li> <li>• Use writing conventions without intrusive errors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop idea(s) with detail in a piece of creative writing.</li> <li>• Use a controlled writing style appropriate to audience, purpose and text type.</li> <li>• Structure material clearly in a way that is appropriate to audience, purpose and text type.</li> <li>• Use writing conventions accurately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop idea(s) convincingly with detail in a piece of creative writing.</li> <li>• Use a controlled writing style appropriate to audience, purpose and text type and which commands attention</li> <li>• Structure material clearly and effectively in a way that is appropriate to audience, purpose and text type.</li> <li>• Use writing conventions accurately</li> </ul>

Like its School Certificate counterpart, it constructs the act of writing in certain ways by selecting elements of the process for attention – ideas, style, structure and use of writing conventions. The construction is refined by the addition of notes. These include: "Ideas includes thoughts/feelings, experiences or sensory qualities." "Develop ideas means to build on a single idea by adding detail, link that idea to other ideas and details, and work towards a coherent planning whole." "Commands attention could be through use of a distinctive personal voice, the inventive use of language, use of a wide range of diction, dimensions or viewpoints." "Writing conventions includes spelling, punctuation, grammar, syntax and paragraphing." "Intrusive errors means errors of such frequency and level that they detract from the reader's ability to read fluently, understand and enjoy the piece."

What is occurring here is the discursive legitimation of a version of writing. It is a version which appears to focus on the "how" of writing (structure and style) more than content. It has a stronger sense of the social situatedness of acts of writing than its School Certificate counterpart. Conversely, the personal growth version of English is less evident. (The phrase "personal voice" is relegated to a possibility in a note and is no longer privileged.) It uses the expression "writing conventions" in a way that is much narrower than an approach to writing that comes out of a critical/rhetorical version of English. And so on.

However, it is in the nature of the prescribed assessment process that a different and more radical shift in teaching practice occurs. As indicated above, a teacher grading a student's work according to the School Certificate marking criteria, uses the clusters of level descriptors holistically while privileging

"personal voice". A different approach is required with these NCEA grading criteria since it is a stipulated requirement that a student can obtain a grade *only if he or she meets all of the criteria pertaining to that grade level*. For example, a student who meets all the criteria for merit but produces work with "intrusive errors" (that is, the teacher marking the piece was distracted by them) will fail to gain credit, even if they, for example, "develop idea(s) convincingly with detail" (an excellence descriptor). A student may fail to be adjudged as excellent, simply because they don't, in the view of a particular teacher, develop their ideas "convincingly".

What this means in practice is that the grade students gain will in principle be dictated by the element in the marking criteria they are least proficient in. This is a radical shift away from the holistic marking practices exemplified in the School Certificate marking guide and which are, I would argue, a feature of achievement-based assessment (ABA) as these have been used in many New Zealand schools since the later 1980s. In this respect, NCEA assessment is certainly not "business as usual" but a radical shift away from traditional marking practice. Ironically enough, it calls into question the accusation by opponents of the NCEA that its assessment regime represents a "dumbing down" of students. In this respect, one might describe the system as a "dumbing up"!

But wait, there is more. As indicated earlier, a number of NCEA critics have highlighted validity and reliability issues raised by the small grade-range and the high-stakes decision-making that will inevitably occur at the grade boundaries (Elley, 2000; Hall, 2000). However, there is another implication of the all-or-nothing form of assessment that has received less comment. An examination of Table 3 shows that, unlike true ABA, the form of standards-based assessment in the NCEA is more accurately described an adaptation of competence-based unit standards (Locke, 2000a). There are, as noted above, four elements in the assessment criteria. The first, related to the quality of a student's ideas, suggests that the difference between credit and merit can be summed up by the difference between "expression" and "development" while the quality which characterises the excellent student is "convincingness". The second, related to writing style, suggests that the difference between credit and merit can be summed up in the possession of "control" (as if a creditable writing style is *not* controlled) and that the excellent student possesses the additional ability to "command attention". The third, related to structure, suggests that the difference between credit and merit can be summed up in the use of a "clear structure" (as if a creditable writing style uses an unclear structure) and that an excellent student is additionally effective (as if a clear structure might in some way be non-effective). The fourth, related to the use of writing conventions, insists that a student has to use writing conventions "without intrusive errors" to get credit and to exemplify the added quality of "accuracy" in order to get merit or excellence (while seeming to imply that *degrees* of accuracy either don't exist or don't matter).

My concern here is less with the way in which such discriminations will be applied consistently across the nation than with the way they further construct writing and establish a hierarchy of values. For example, the implications that there are not degrees of accuracy, or that the adverb "convincingly" adds a difference in degree to the quality of development, or that the qualifier "which commands attention" adds a difference in degree to the quality of control, or that an "appropriate" structure can be "unclear", are *all* open to challenge.

Moreover, a hierarchy of values is created by the qualities that somehow function as what we might term *boundary riders*. Comparing Table 3 with Table 2, it is clear that the rider, "intrusive errors" has come up in the world. In the current

School Certificate system, it patrolled the boundary between weak (D) and poor (E) students. In the NCEA, it has become part of the *sine qua non* for students to even achieve credit for their creative writing. It might be expected then that it will move to centre-stage in teaching and learning. There will be voices that will exclaim, "And not before time!" But such a move will also bring with it dangers of decontextualised grammar teaching and a narrowing (as indicated above) of the concept of writing convention.

### Using Ministry-developed Tasks

The above example serves as indication of the way in which the detailed nature of the NCEA assessment criteria can construct aspects of English as both subject (in this case "creative writing") and practice (including assessment). Another vehicle for the construction of English and other subjects is the shaping of teaching and learning through the design of units of work. In the current milieu, textbooks are becoming increasingly organised around the provision of units that teachers can uplift and apply in their own classroom programmes. Moreover, there is a contemporary trend for English teachers to download and use material from websites such as English Online and from the proliferation of other similar sites.

Obviously, there are many teachers who would see the uncritical use of practices embedded in the work of others as militating against their own professionalism and the needs of their students. However, where the importation of teaching practices from textbooks and other sites becomes widespread, there are clearly implications as to who constructs the curriculum that is actually being delivered in the classroom situation (Apple, 1986). Moreover, whenever a new curriculum is implemented, or a high-stakes, state-sponsored assessment intervention such as the NCEA occurs, they are inevitably accompanied by a wave of textual support materials, produced by either government or private providers.

There are a number of ways in which externally provided teaching materials can impact upon teaching practice. These include the ways they contextualise learning and the ways they construct learning itself. In respect of achievement standard 1.1 *Produce creative writing*, the Ministry will have provided four activities by July, 2000. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Ministry-developed Activities for Creative Writing (1.1)

Activity Title:	Summary:
Getting Personal	<i>Develop a piece of original writing based on events from a news item</i>
Tough Choices	<i>Write a narrative featuring a conflict, crisis, and resolution</i>
Now and Then	<i>Write a description of a scene or place</i>
Writing about a character	<i>Write a description of a character</i>

On the face of it, these activities offer a choice between two major language modes, narrative and description. (There is a hint here that argument is being constructed as not having a place in creative writing.)

Each activity is accompanied by a set of teacher guidelines which offer contextualising suggestions. "Getting Personal" is accompanied by the suggestion that it may be used as part of a writing unit or in the context of a newspaper study.

"Tough Choices" may be used as part of a writing unit, or in a unit based on the same theme. "Now and Then" may be used as part of a writing unit. Taken cumulatively, such suggestions are bound to be formative of teacher practice. What is particularly significant in these suggestions is that none of the three activities mentioned (the fourth was unavailable at time of writing) links writing with a unit focused on the study of literary texts. One is bound to see such an omission as further encouraging the temptation to separate reading from writing and to postpone units of reading until nearer the end-of-year examination when it will be tested.

The apparent range of these activities might suggest that the teaching of writing in Year 11 English classrooms will become a rich and varied activity. This may not prove to be the case. Teachers wanting students to achieve well "against the standard" may well choose to focus their teaching on one selected writing activity and drill their students in the achievement of it rather than having their students develop their writing in a range of genres as the documentation suggests. After all, when it all boils down, it is only one piece of writing that is summatively assessed.

A teaching activity inevitably brings a particular kind of construction to bear on its subject matter. Teachers who make use of these Ministry-provided activities will consciously or unconsciously be buying in to these constructions. In the activity "Getting Personal", for example, students are charged with using the facts of a general news item as the basis for developing a personalised story based on the facts provided. Such an activity gives rise to misgivings on a number of counts. Is this how news items are used in real life? Is this the way in which short stories or personalised accounts normally arise in for real writers? What message is this activity conveying about the creative writing process? How creative actually is an activity which provides students with a good deal of the content? One might conclude that the activity is a kind of "five finger" exercise, which actually invents a school-based written genre and communicates rather dubious messages about the nature of writing. A similar critique can be made of other creative writing activities.

Finally, in respect of this achievement standard, there is the matter of the conditions under which this summative assessment is to occur. The conditions are spelled out for each of the Ministry-prepared activities and are consistent:

This activity should be worked on in class under teacher supervision to ensure authenticity. Teachers may guide students actively through the initial tasks. Teachers may demonstrate how the techniques used in the samples in the activity can be applied to the students' own writing. As students develop their final drafts, teachers can offer appropriate guidance that the writing may need further work on ideas, language, structure or accuracy in spelling, punctuation or paragraphing. Teachers may not correct errors, rewrite sentences or suggest specific ideas. Students should have access to dictionaries to check their writing. Word processing is acceptable providing it is done under teacher supervision (Ministry of Education, 2000a, p. 58).

Such a prescription is clearly designed to allay reliability concerns. However, it defies belief that teachers nationwide will apply this prescription uniformly, even should it be unambiguous. It is not, of course. What does "guide . . . actively"

mean? What is the specific relationship in practice between "demonstration" and "application"? What forms might "appropriate guidance" take?

It can also be predicted that this prescription, with its construction of the teacher-pupil relationship, will have a flow-on effect in respect of formative assessment practice. The extent to which a formative assessment practice reliably reveals evidence of real attainment is termed the disclosure of that assessment (Wiliam & Black, 1996). As high-stakes summative assessment conditions begin to pervade the day-to-day ambience of the classroom, they can be expected to exert a negative impact on student disclosure.

Finally, what this prescription overlooks is that the relationship between writer, mentor and audience is never fixed and that different writers process writing in different ways. Writers with assured competence in grammar and spelling may correct as they go along but leave matters of structure until late in the process. Other writers will reverse this order. A final draft for a student writing long-hand will differ from the final draft of one who is using a word processor. Constraining teacher input to the earlier stages of writing simply does not solve the authenticity problem. But it does distort student understanding of how writing occurs in real-life contexts. (Right now, I have a list in my head of the people with whom I will share the first draft of this article. I think of such people as mentors. I will not be asking them to restrict their comments to any particular aspect of the draft. I will also be submitting it to a journal editor who will come back to me with a range of criticisms and recommendations.)

### **The Use of Exemplars**

Because of a general recognition that the articulation of criteria such as those in Table 3 are insufficient to establish a standard of performance without degenerating into never-ending spiral of specification (Wolf, 1995), the Ministry has made the use of exemplars integral to the "... integrated set of arrangements [which] will establish consistency in assessment judgements" (NCEA, 2000). A good deal of the training that has occurred in nationwide professional development days has focused on the use of exemplars as a vehicle for fixing the standard for summative assessment events.

For all Ministry-provided activities, then, the Ministry of Education provides exemplars for "no credit", "credit", "merit" and "excellence" levels of performance. The first point to note about this procedure is that it couples the use of exemplars with summative assessment. While one can anticipate certain outcomes when exemplars are used for formative purposes, especially when they are used to exemplify process rather than product, the use of exemplars for summative purposes is likely to generate unwelcome outcomes.

For a start, while teachers are theoretically encouraged to develop their own teaching-learning activities in relation to the achievement standards, they will in all probability be disinclined to do so in the absence of Ministry-approved exemplars. The temptation must surely be towards the use of Ministry-produced activities (whatever their short-comings) that have exemplars accompanying them. In addition, the existence of approved exemplars in a system of high-stakes assessment will surely provide a temptation towards slavish imitation and learning activities consisting of drilled emulation of the exemplars provided.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis may suggest a view of teachers as mindless pawns in an ideological game and susceptible to having their views and practices shaped by whatever discourses prevail in any given time and place. This is not my view (Locke, 2000c). Nor am I wanting to denigrate the efforts of English teaching colleagues who have been involved in the NCEA implementation process. However, it is my view that the NCEA will serve to exacerbate further the centralised control over the work of teachers that has already been achieved by means such as the national curriculum. Broadfoot (1996) terms the kind of control I am referring to as colonisation rather than coercion, since the education goals represented in assessment procedures such as those associated with the NCEA tend to become ". . . the currency of the *self-imposed* moral and professional accountability of teachers and other actors in the educational system" (p. 200).

In the preceding analysis, I have been alerting readers to some of the ways in which particular discourses contribute to the construction of reality, specifically the reality of English as it is rationalised as a school subject and embedded in the classroom practices of English teachers. Individuals do not create discourses. But the way in which a major educational intervention occurs is bound to privilege certain discourses over others and to favour their embodiment in actual practices. Teachers who feel sympathy for a prevailing discourse will enjoy their time in the sun. Those alienated by or from it may drop out of teaching, resist or adopt an attitude of change without commitment (Webb & Vulliamy, 1999).

The analysis I have attempted raises questions in respect of the NCEA project itself and, indeed, of any summative assessment regime which has the potential to be as pervasive as the NCEA. I suggest that the NCEA matrix for English must be viewed as a *de facto* English curriculum imposing both a progressive and partitive construction on the subject. In respect of the former, I suggest that the NCEA matrix, modelled on the same sort of progression of contiguous levels found in ENZC, is bound to suffer from the same shortcomings. In this instance, a flawed construction of literacy in ENZC has infected the level descriptors of the achievement standards in NCEA English. In respect of the latter, I suggest that the matrix legitimates a skills-based version of English and privileges some aspects of the subject over others.

The dis-aggregation inherent in the NCEA's design, despite the Ministry's late espousal of percentages, contains a powerful dis-integrating pressure which may undermine both programme integrity and even the notion of subject itself.

Because the NCEA is so detailed in its assessment design, and because its continuous summative assessment component is likely to be so pervasive, then one can expect the distinction between formative and summative assessment to collapse. Formative assessment will increasingly reflect constructions of the subject and pedagogies implicit in the design of summative assessment criteria, tasks and exemplars. These constructions include a radically new (and, I would argue, invalid) approach to judging performance levels, and conceptualisations of aspects of English (such as writing) that will become powerful through official legitimation.

Broadfoot (1996) notes that:

As a growing emphasis on skills acquisition makes a greater emphasis on continuous assessment inevitable, teachers become the direct, as

opposed to the indirect, arbiters of such awards. To the extent that teachers are entrusted directly with the responsibility for assessment – rather than being employed simply as markers for a nominally independent agency – that power is increased (p. 112).

In the light of the preceding analysis, such a conclusion needs to be questioned. While the NCEA regime devolves an increased responsibility for grading to teachers through an increased internally assessed component, it cannot be concluded that their power has increased. Rather, they will be implementers of a system whose construction of the subject they teach will have become increasingly decided and legitimated elsewhere. Moreover, as a continuous summative assessment regime affects and displaces their erstwhile formative assessment practices, their work will increasingly be shaped by constructions of subject matter and practice that they have reduced control over.

In addition, their judgements in an increased range of contexts (professional development days, moderation procedures) will become subject to a form of line managerial surveillance, set up to allay the fears of those who quite rightly question the NCEA assessment regime on issues of validity and reliability. Rather than an increase in power, the spectre raised by the NCEA is one of increased deprofessionalisation, both ideological and technical (Derber, 1982).

Meanwhile, across the Tasman, the state of Queensland is trialling a new curriculum, pedagogy and assessment framework. Its recently appointed Deputy Director General of Education, Allan Luke, is publicly calling attention to the shortcomings of highly centralised regimes such as the NCEA with its plethora of performance standards, its testing regime, its construction of worthwhile knowledge and its implied pedagogy. Such regimes may even be making the deskilling worse and will certainly be inhibiting innovative approaches to curriculum and assessment which seek to deal with "the new technologies, higher order competences and skills, and the emergent demands of information/digital economies and cultures" (Hunter, 2000-2001, p. 134).

## NOTES

1. The matrix has undergone a series of changes since it was initially drafted. For a record of these and critical comment, see Locke, T. (2001). *The Achievement Standard Matrix for English*. Access at: <http://www.tmc.waikato.ac.nz/ESD/2001/ASMatrices.html>
2. Interestingly, the broad definition of literacy adopted for the NCEA Level 1, as recommended by the Secondary Sector Forum, is "the ability to use and understand those language forms required by society and valued by individuals and communities. It includes the ability to: speak, listen and respond; read and comprehend; write to communicate." Higher level literacy skills such as interpretation, analysis and critique are notably missing. (Ministry of Education, 2000, p. 5.)
3. The English experts panel themselves stated that they were concerned to make their starting point ". . . what a student needs from the subject English as a contribution to their NCEA", rather than to construct achievement standards directly from the strands/substrands of ENZC. They did not see it as either possible or advisable to attempt to assess the whole of the curriculum. Access at: <http://www.tmc.waikato.ac.nz/ESD/2001/aprilmatrix.html>
4. For examples of assessment programmes in English see *NCEA Update 5*.
5. The decision to assign grade averages for subjects is a recent governmental about-face. Its reception was distinctly lukewarm (McCarthy, 2001). In fact, the



notion of a percentage simply doesn't fit with the NCEA's principle of non-aggregation as discussed in this article. Nor is the percentage that might be arrived at *should* a student enter for a full "package" of subject achievement standards the same as a percentage as traditionally understood. In a traditional examination, for example, a "D" student can feasibly get 40%. A "D" student, who doesn't quite obtain credit in any achievement standard may feasibly get 0% as their NCEA grade average. (See also Irwin, 2001.)

6. As an aside, one might note that the expression "personal voice" is a discursive pointer to the "personal growth" construction of English.

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