

# **Different Questions: Same Answer: A Comparison of the New Zealand and South African National Qualifications Frameworks.**

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## **Introduction**

In recent years, New Zealand and South Africa, like many other countries, have embarked on programmes of radical economic reform. For the former, this has involved the systematic dismantling of a model of social democracy founded on a welfare state. For the latter, it has meant overcoming the legacy of apartheid. Both have embraced a neoliberal programme of market reforms.

Such changes mean not only reorienting economic structures but also redefining the ideologies and conceptions of citizenship that underpin them, a process that calls into question existing educational aims. In each case, systems of education that had been designed to meet the needs of the old order have been deemed inappropriate for the new. In South Africa, a new, all-embracing education system has been created that joins education and training in one system and purports to include twin axes: human resource development and education for personal, and social development. Equality of access, it is believed, will redress the qualitative failings of the apartheid education system.

In New Zealand, the move has been away from a model which saw education as an unquestioned public good which was therefore provided free of charge by standardised state institutions with an emphasis on promoting principles of equality. In its place, the new orientation sees education as a private good that should be provided by a diverse range of competing institutions chosen by fee-paying consumers of education.

In the educational arena, and particularly in relation to processes and structures of certification, both countries have embraced remarkably similar models based around a National Qualifications Framework (NQF), albeit to achieve different aims, in different contexts and subject to different pressures. In the South African context, pressure for change came principally from progressive forces and reform was implemented in a climate of economic constraints that prevented it from achieving its broader goals. By contrast, pressure for change in New Zealand came from the right as part of a package of structural adjustment, although it did also claim to be addressing some long-standing concerns of progressive educators.

Thus, South Africa is moving in response to popular demand away from a position of extreme inequity while New Zealand is moving against the popular will away from a position of relative equity. However both exist within an international context of economic liberalisation that has had a considerable effect on the shape of the reformed education system in each country.

Christie [1996] and Dale [1994] have questioned the legitimacy of broad international comparisons of reforms to national systems of education. Christie argues that local possibilities and constraints have a vital mediating effect on global trends. In the South African context, she argues, the move to a competency-based model of education was driven by the need for an overarching mechanism to achieve redress within a unified system of education and training.

This paper, with Mokgolane and Vally [1996] and Samson [1997], argues that the model of outcomes-based education entrenched within the respective NQFs is inherently flawed and reflects an uncritical acceptance of market-driven education.

Moreover, the NQF model has been the object of a wide range of criticism, some of which has led to improvements in the framework in New Zealand. Concerns were raised, for example, about the

pass/fail nature of standards-based assessment limiting the information about the student's performance and providing no incentive for students to excel [Irwin et al, 1995: 14]. Attempts are being made to respond to this objection by making provision for assessing bodies to note not only whether but also how well standards have been achieved [Ministry of Education, 1997: 24-5].

More basic criticisms of the framework have proved less easy to accommodate. Elley, for example, has questioned the assumption (that underlies both the curriculum framework and the qualifications framework) of the universality of sequential learning. He points out that, unlike mathematics, subjects such as English and history do not "follow a pre-ordained sequence of learning" and cannot, therefore, have their component parts authoritatively listed at a particular point on a linear progression that represents increasing levels of difficulty [Elley, 1996: 12-3]. Moreover, this is just the beginning of the NQF's epistemological shortcomings.

The NQF model originated as an attempt to develop a comprehensive, accurate and harmonised system of training and allocating credentials for people seeking technical or trade-related qualifications. As such, it was a worthwhile exercise. And its insistence on expressing learning outcomes in strictly behavioural forms was quite appropriate. However, the subsequent attempt to force the entire spectrum of educational endeavour and schooling practice into this limited matrix was ill-conceived and bound to fail. The fundamental problem was that while the stated aim of the NQF was to transcend the separation between academic and vocational learning, it actually became an exercise in attempting to reduce the academic to the vocational. So in much the same crude way that B.F Skinner reduced language to "verbal behaviour", the New Zealand Qualifications Framework talks of "intellectual skills". [Ministry of Education 1997:10].

These frameworks are not able to deliver redress because they measure the worth of knowledge in purely instrumental, utilitarian terms and tie education to a particular model of economic development; one which is squarely within the tradition of neo-classical economic theory which envisages people as autonomous, rational, self-maximising individuals, and sees education in this framework as distinguished by its focus on defined and measurable educational outputs, rather than on inputs, processes, and pedagogy.

### **Two contexts, one outcome**

#### **South Africa**

In South Africa, the development of a National Qualifications Framework has its roots in a consultative process initiated by the National Training Board (NTB) in the post-1990 period. A range of stakeholders began to reconceptualise the structure and nature of the education system as a whole, in an effort to redress the huge legacies of inequality left by apartheid, and to link education to training in order to make the former more responsive to the larger national and global goals of human resource development [Christie, 1996: 408]. A model was developed in which education and training were linked in order to accommodate the full range of learning contexts within one system which would be based on the principle of lifelong learning. The overarching structure that would encompass and regulate these many forms of learning was the National Qualifications Framework. To draw together the disparate strands of education within this structure, a competency-based curriculum (later renamed outcomes-based) was chosen in preference to the existing content-based model of curriculum.

An analysis of the policy documents in which the NQF driven model of education was articulated provides rich material for analysis. The Critical and Specific Outcomes for the Human and Social Sciences and the Rationale with which they are prefaced tellingly reveal that the reformers have

indeed adopted a fundamental neoliberal ideology that is driven more by the needs of the global marketplace than by sound educational principles:

'Human and social sciences contribute to developing responsible citizens in a culturally diverse, democratic society within an interdependent world. They will equip learners to make sound judgements and take appropriate action that will contribute to sustainable development of human society and the physical environment' [Rationale for the Human and Social Sciences 1997]

Telling markers here are the treatment of the concept of citizenship and the conceptualisation of development. Citizenship is narrowly defined and static. The concept of citizenship is constrained by need to be a 'good' global citizen. One preordained version exists and learners are expected to perform in terms of it. Nowhere are we told that this is just one view of citizenship and an ideologically loaded one at that. Where is the space to explore differing ideological conceptions of citizenship?

The concept of development is similarly constrained. It has to be 'sustainable', rather than desirable, an important shift from earlier positions in which development was paramount and the engine that would drive reconstruction.

A shift towards neoliberal values is also evident in the Critical Outcomes. These are broad, generic, cross-curricular outcomes which underpin the entire curriculum.

They state:

In order to contribute to the full personal development of each learner, and social and economic development at large, it must be the intention underlying any programme of learning to make an individual aware of the importance of:

1. 'Reflecting on and exploring a variety of strategies to learn more effectively
2. Participating as a responsible citizen in the life of local, national and global communities
3. Being culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts
4. Exploring education and career opportunities, and
5. Developing entrepreneurial opportunities.

[Ministry of Education 1997: 13,14]

Two areas here serve as ideological markers: citizenship is conceived of as a static concept which moreover must be constrained by 'responsibility'; and most telling of all, an understanding of the economy is narrowly conceived as 'entrepreneurship' rather than an understanding of the ways economic life entrenches power relations and unequal access to resources.

What space is there for radical principles of equity and justice and a broad vision of education and development in an education system imbued with these values?

So although in the South African context, the shift to outcomes-based education was the most obvious response to the need for equity in the education system, it has not been achieved. Redressing historical inequalities of access and quality within the education system was to be achieved by unifying the education system to include adults, out-of school children and youth, and

in-school children, in one education and training system. Equity was simply equated with providing equal access to the education system.

Even more problematic has been the application of the principle of equity to the curriculum. South Africa has a well documented legacy of race, gender and class inequalities. Given that the fragmented and unequal nature of the society was entrenched and reproduced in a rigid and content-bound formal school curriculum, it was reasoned that a focus on concepts and skills rather than content would achieve equity. However, there is a serious flaw in this logic: it makes no provision for redressing deep-rooted structural and systemic problems which do not simply disappear because legislators fail to recognise them. Nor can the hidden curriculum be legislated away. This failure to grapple with the real and still present problems of the values attached to knowledge and the way the elements of the hidden curriculum reproduce the status quo fatally undermines the prospect of achieving equity through an outcomes-based education system.

### **New Zealand**

New Zealand's National Qualifications Framework was launched in 1991 as an essential part of the government's response to the globalising economy. In a budget statement in 1991, the Minister of Education declared:

"The National Government came to office in October 1990 with a clear policy to enhance educational achievement and skill development to meet the needs of a highly competitive, modern international economy... The Government is committed to an education system that prepares New Zealanders for the modern competitive world" [Smith, 1991: 1-2].

The NQF was intended to stand as a single schedule for recognising and certificating learning of every kind wherever it took place in New Zealand. Each learning 'outcome' would be allocated an appropriate level on the unified framework.

This undertaking was promoted, at least in part, on the grounds of its potential for addressing calls for greater equity in the New Zealand education system. One of the laudable aims of the qualifications framework, for example, was to 'establish a seamless education system which reduced the separation of school from tertiary education, and academic from vocational learning' [Ministry of Education, 1997: 12]. The framework was also seen to be going some way towards meeting calls for educational assessment to be criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced<sup>1</sup>. Schools would orient the learning of students towards the completion of unit standards which would be accumulated at a pace in the curriculum areas most suited to the individual.

The introduction of unit standards came with the promise of abolishing the New Zealand School Certificate examination that is held at the end of the third year of secondary schooling. There have been regular calls for the abolition of school certificate dating back to the 1974 report of the Working Party on Improving Learning and Teaching [Dept of Education, 1974]. As a qualification that was norm-referenced, examination-oriented, nationally-awarded (although there has been considerable progress towards internal assessment), school certificate was designed with pre-determined failure as one of its features. Whereas, in the past, those who failed school certificate had nothing to show for their ten years of compulsory schooling, the new qualifications

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1 Although there is an important distinction between competency-based and norm-referenced forms of assessment, it should be noted that these are not entirely discrete and mutually exclusive categories since some assessment procedures can have elements of each [see Coogan, 1996: 96-8].

framework made it possible for all school-leavers to be given a formal statement of their achievements.

It is arguable how much more attractive a school-leaver who has only managed a few low level unit standards (for example, able to 'read a telephone directory', 'fill in a simple form' or even 'prepare to participate in District Court criminal proceedings' ) would be compared to someone who failed school certificate. Nevertheless, the move towards recognising the capacities of students rather than classifying them as less able than their age-group cohorts would be a positive development for low-achievers. What has happened, however, is that the scope of the qualifications framework has been restricted to the point where unit standards are not replacing but supplementing the existing forms of educational assessment. This is reflected in the statement in the 1997 Green Paper that the framework can only be successful if it "includes all major types of qualifications ... regardless of how they are designed, taught or assessed" [Ministry of Education, 1997: 6]. The clear implication is that qualifications may be included within the framework even if they employ norm-referenced assessment procedures.

Early evidence indicates that the addition of unit standards to the existing assessment regimes may further disadvantage the low-achievers. This is because the top students tend to accumulate unit standards in the process of preparing for school certificate and university bursary (normally two years after school certificate) and thus complete their schooling with prestigious qualifications as well as large numbers of impressive unit standards. This undermines equity by further enhancing the prospects of high achievers in comparison to those students who leave school with only a handful of low-level unit standards.

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) defends its failure to eliminate school certificate on the grounds that "to win widespread endorsement, (the framework) must be inclusive" [Ministry of Education, 1997: 26]. In practice, however, its position amounts to an official backdown in the face of the refusal of elite schools to abandon the types of assessment procedures that favour their students. Some New Zealand schools are already preparing their pupils to sit the international baccalaureate and there have been discussions about a private schools' initiative to launch their own national examination.

Reformers in both South Africa and New Zealand claimed that outcomes-based education and an NQF would advance equity but this has not been the case. In South Africa, equity was highlighted as the main aim of the reform while in New Zealand it was presented as a positive by-product of reform for human resource development. Despite their very different histories, achievement of equity in both education systems was undermined by the innate conservatism of the underlying economic and ideological principles on which education reform was based. Equity was a necessary casualty of the economic rationalist assumptions that are assumed by the model of a national qualifications framework.

### **Human Capital Theory**

In both the New Zealand and South Africa contexts, education policy, particularly in relation to the respective NQFs is informed by an implicit and sometimes naive attachment to human capital theory. In both countries, the governments' adherence to human capital theory is assumed in their declarations rather than explicitly defended. In New Zealand, this is clearly evident in the rationale for the NQF:

"If New Zealand is to prosper, we must be internationally competitive... With limited economic power and physical resources, we must look to the skills and knowledge of our people to feed innovation and improvements in productivity... More people with higher and more relevant skills and knowledge are critical to our economic and social success." [Ministry of Education, 1997: 10].

Similar assumptions are found in the South African policy documents. As Samson has noted, South Africa's White Paper on Education and Training fails to discuss issues of economic and social redress.

"Rather, the document focused on the need for the new education and training system to produce the 'smart', 'learning' workers required for a successful, internationally competitive post-fordist economy [Samson, unpublished: 9].

The perspectives in these and other reviews<sup>2</sup> are consistent with the ringing endorsement that human capital theory has received from institutions such as the World Bank and the OECD. The OECD rediscovered and revised human capital theory in the mid-1980s, arguing that the global liberalisation of trade and investment patterns had made it even more important than it had previously been.

"The development of contemporary economies depends crucially on the knowledge, skills and attitudes of their workforces - in short on human capital... The labour market challenges that call for long-term adjustment of the educational systems stem from the pressures of international competition, technological change and, more generally, the need for flexibility" [OECD, 1987: 69].

The World Bank bases its educational policy on human capital theory which it states in the following terms:

"Education contributes to economic growth both through the increased individual productivity brought about by the acquisition of skills and attitudes and through the accumulation of knowledge. The contribution of education can be estimated by its impact on productivity, measured by comparing the difference in earnings over time of individuals with and without a particular course of education and the cost to the economy of producing that education" [World Bank, 1995: 20-1].

When confronted with criticisms of its approach, specifically, those advanced by Bennell [1996] and Samoff [1996], the World Bank<sup>3</sup> replied, in part, by presenting human capital theory as the view that "has become the mainstream view in economics" and one that "is no longer considered controversial" [Burnett and Patrinos, 1996: 273]. This view echoes that of the OECD which refers to the "ever-widening consensus about the importance of human capital and the growing knowledge-intensiveness of the pathways to sustained economic growth" [OECD, 1989: 20]

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<sup>2</sup> In the New Zealand context, this can also be found in documentation about the national curriculum and the current review of tertiary education. In South Africa, it is found in the SAQA Act and the Green Paper on Skills Development.

<sup>3</sup> The reply is not the official view of the World Bank but was written by two authors of the original report.

Like any other theory relating to resource allocation within human society, human capital theory has never enjoyed universal acceptance. As Marginson has noted, it has gone through three distinct phases [Marginson, 1993: 40-50]. Although its origins can be found in the work of Adam Smith, human capital theory was brought to prominence by Theodore Shultz [Shultz, 1960]. It had a mutually reinforcing connection with modernisation theory and was embraced in the 1960s with equal enthusiasm. Its positivism allowed it to qualify as genuine scientific inquiry. If one ignored the problem of correlation not equalling causation, it provided explanations for the varying economic fortunes of different countries and reinforced modernisation theory's prescription of the most appropriate forms of intervention to promote development. And it seemed to provide the ideal US response to the shock of observing the technological sophistication of the Soviet Sputnik project [Myrdal, 1968: 1542]. In First and Third World countries alike, governments and planners saw educational spending as a vital economic investment.

Critics raised a number of concerns, including human capital theory's assumptions of a particular view of capital theory and its reliance on abstracting several very important but non-measurable variables [see Vaisey, 1972: 21-31]. However, the second phase of human capital theory was not brought about through academic debate. Rather, its eventual decline in the 1970s was a result of the end of the economic boom and the abandonment of the Keynesian model of economic development of which human capital theory was a part.

The theory re-emerged in the mid-1980s as part of the neoliberal programme of structural adjustment. Different policy prescriptions were being derived from it, but a new "consensus" was again announced: what was needed by way of educational provision "cannot be anything as simple as a quantitative expansion of existing educational arrangements" and certainly not anything "based on a monopoly of public provision" [OECD, 1989: 21]. It was not growth, but change that was required.

"If the 'human factor' is indeed becoming a more critical variable in economic activity, then indeed the process by which resources for improving the human factor performance are allocated must also be assuming more importance" [OECD, 1989: 74].

Like a Marxist caricature of capitalism, human capital theory is now being used to promote an overhaul of the education sector to bring it into line with the new globally deregulating economy. As with modernisation theory, the new formula requires every ingredient - monetary policy, privatisation (or, at least, corporatisation), minimal welfare, deregulated investment regimes, and a flexible (read casualised and docile) labour market. Human capital theory is, of course, only uncontroversial to the extent that all of these aspects of economic policy are also considered beyond question.

### **Conclusion**

This illustrates the circularity of the arguments for human capital theory and the educational policies that are derived from it. The World Bank presents human capital theory as a long-accepted orthodoxy by quoting Blaug as coming to the view that human capital theory had no genuine rival [World Bank, 1995: 21]. However, it ignores concerns the writer expresses in the same article about issues of falsifiability and circularity:

"We are thus condemned to judge the human capital research program largely on its own terms, which is strictly speaking impossible - even the flat-earth research program, judged on its own terms, is not faring too badly!" [Blaug, 1976: 849]



Similarly, if one accepts Wohlgemuth's view that the 1990s is "the age of realism" then it follows that the contemporary challenge for educators is to adapt to this reality. This is the logic that is driving the establishment of NQFs in New Zealand and South Africa and represents the primary influence over the shape they are taking. For those who remain critical of and in search of alternatives to market models of development, the challenge is to devise new models that take as their starting point the distinct needs of particular societies.

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