

## After National Standards: The Curriculum, Progress, and Achievement policy developments

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*The Labour-led government elected in 2017 quickly decided to get rid of National Standards and set up a Curriculum, Progress, and Achievement Ministerial Advisory Group in 2018. That group reported in 2019 and a related Ministry of Education work programme has begun. This provocation from May 2020 provides some background to the MAG, considers its organisation and membership, and briefly mentions some features of the report and the early response of government. The use of data and the struggle for researchers to keep up with multiple reviews are also discussed.*

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Being an educational researcher in a country with a very small research community sometimes requires stepping out of one's comfort zone, simply because there is an obvious topic that no-one else seems to be investigating. So it was with this provocation presented to the Cancelled Conference Conversations (CCC) in May 2020. Although I am more a policy scholar than a curriculum specialist, it had become clear to me that someone needed to at least draw the attention of other academics to the work and report of the Curriculum, Progress, and Achievement Ministerial Advisory Group (CPA MAG). This MAG was one of the many educational review groups set up by the Labour-led government after it was elected in 2017. It had a particular focus on curriculum and assessment in primary schools, as well as in the first two years of secondary (up to Year 10). Another review group was charged with looking at the NCEA qualification in the later secondary years.

My interest in the CPA MAG grew over time and I discuss this here because it may illustrate how an educational researcher comes to take up a new topic. To begin with, I had been asked to become part of the MAG in May 2018. I declined (a same-day decision was needed, and I didn't like the tone of some of the terms of reference), but this at least made me aware that the MAG was being set up. Second, the MAG would be considering what should come after the National Standards assessment system which I had both researched and campaigned against since it was established in 2008 and which the Labour-led government had quickly removed. Third, I was conscious that a New Zealand Association for Research in Education policy seminar planned for June 2020 was going to consider a number of the government's education reviews but that the CPA MAG was not amongst them.

My interest was further piqued after attending an online Quality Public Education Coalition (QPEC) seminar in May 2020 during lockdown. At the seminar, Liam Rutherford, President of New Zealand Educational Institute Te Riu Roa, suggested that the CPA MAG, of which he had been a member, had gone under the radar. This was possibly because the Tomorrow's Schools Review Taskforce (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce 2018)

had taken the limelight, having been the peak review in more ways than one. Rutherford talked about the CPA report having a lot of high level comments that no-one could disagree with but which were hard to pin down to specifics. Nevertheless Rutherford also suggested the MAG had been much more important than any reading of the report might suggest. It has translated into Cabinet actions (a paper released on 26 August 2019) and a Ministry work programme. Moreover he observed that it had been one area of work to come out of the many education reviews that had continued through lockdown. Rutherford further expressed concern about the government's intention to use the same assessment data for both informing classroom practice and for funding decisions, arguing that this would skew classroom practice. His concern raised important questions about the place of data in and around schooling under the Labour-led government.

Another consideration in looking into the CPA MAG was that any change in policy would go to the heart of educational provision in schools up to Year 10. Certainly the Tomorrow's Schools Taskforce would impact wider schooling provision, but this MAG would potentially have more direct influence on teaching and learning. I was also aware that without some reasonably convincing progressive settlement around primary assessment and reporting, another destructive high-stakes assessment system like the National Standards could easily be reintroduced in New Zealand, for instance as part of an opposition party manifesto. Finally, returning to the point that no-one else seemed to be writing about the MAG, it was apparent that just because a topic is important, doesn't mean it will eventually be researched in the New Zealand context where research coverage is patchy: strong in some areas, very limited in others. A good example of the latter is that only one academic article seems to have been written about Partnership Schools (Courtney 2017), even though this charter school development was a major education policy focus for the National-led government of 2008-17. The general dearth of recent New Zealand education policy research and scholarship reflects a decline in national capacity for reasons that have included frequent restructuring of university education faculties and changes to educational research funding.

All of this suggested that the report of the CPA MAG would be well worth considering further. This article, based on my May 2020 session, looks at the background to the MAG and its organisation and membership, and briefly mentions some features of the report and the early response of government. I connect the work of the MAG to the central concern raised by Liam Rutherford in the QPEC session already mentioned, and question, in the light of multiple reviews occurring at the same time, whether the Labour-led government has really wanted to have research and scholarly responses to its educational reform programme.

Reflecting what have been coalition governments until the very latest parliamentary term, this article employs the terms 'Labour-led' for the current government in power since 2017, with Jacinda Ardern as PM, and 'National-led' to refer to the previous government in power 2008-17 when John Key was PM for most of that time. Ideologically there is some difference between the two. Labour has long sought to distance itself from the neoliberal project which it introduced to New Zealand in the 1980s and the latest Ardern Government has made the strongest pitch yet to do this, but it also remains quite constrained by the ideologies of earlier times. National, on the other hand, had a more clearly neoliberal approach to New Zealand educational politics but with much pragmatism. I discuss this further elsewhere (Woods, Thrupp & Barker, 2021).

## **Background and arrangements**

As noted earlier, part of the background to the MAG was the removal of National Standards, a rather narrow and crude assessment system that had been established by

the National-led government in 2009 (see Thrupp, 2017). By 2017 the National-led government still had every intention of extending the National Standards policy after the September general election, but in the event support from minor party New Zealand First allowed the Labour-led government to be elected. Having only a tiny majority, it was less risky for this Labour-led government to consult than to take action, which helps to explain the proliferation of reviews, taskforces and advisory groups assembled over 2018-19, including the CPA MAG. Meanwhile the Labour-led government's removal of the National Standards policy was almost immediate in November 2017. Likely resistance from some schools was cleverly pre-empted by the government not insisting that schools immediately drop the National Standards but simply advising that schools would no longer have to report against them. Yet this development still raised the question of what the Labour-led government would do in the same space, especially as it had already indicated there would be a new emphasis on progress. As new Minister of Education, Hon Chris Hipkins put it, there needed to be "... more feeding and less weighing of the pig" (quoted in Moir, 2017).

Against this background the CPA MAG was set up in April 2018 and Ministry of Education briefings to the Minister and from his office to the Cabinet Social Wellbeing Committee (all released to the public on the Ministry of Education website) showed that the MAG had a very wide remit as implied by its name. It was asked to build the capability of teachers and leaders to undertake curricula building on both the New Zealand Curriculum, and the Māori medium version, Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, along with personalised learning opportunities, data literacy and use of data for improvement, inquiry, planning and reporting. All of this massive remit was to be achieved in an inclusive and culturally responsive manner. Responding to teacher resistance to the National Standards and the associated Progress and Consistency Tool (see Thrupp, 2017), it was also to be achieved while building trust about the purposes and uses of assessment information because '[w]ithout trust it is likely that the willingness of the sector to engage with and use any common frameworks and tools will be reduced' (Hipkins, 2018 p. 2).

### **The CPA MAG**

The CPA MAG of 14 members had both Pakeha and Māori co-chairs and strong Kaupapa Māori representation. The members were to be appointed until December 2018 and would meet up to 10 times with reappointment possible. There was also a wider reference group with no fewer than 44 members, representatives of numerous school sector organisations and school types. While this 'more the merrier' and partnership model approach was ambitious in terms of organisation, it had the effect of bringing educators 'inside the tent' rather than on the outside criticising, and of pre-empting Māori criticisms especially.

At the same time the broad representation seems likely to have been more impressive on paper than in practice. My own experience suggested that for those asked to join the MAG, it would have been a leap of faith rather than being well-informed. The terms of reference raised more questions than answers (for instance the strong emphasis on data literacy) and yet once on the MAG, it would become difficult to be open about dissenting views because of the confidentiality arrangements. Indeed a significant problem with trying to understand the work of all such groups is lack of 'on the record' information published about what really goes on within them. There may be numerous papers produced, and the Labour-led government has a policy of proactively releasing them, but they are generally high-level papers, such as briefings to the Minister. Published

'unofficial' accounts of the culture and tensions within working group such as the one provided by Vince Wright (who worked with the Ministry of Education to produce the Mathematics National Standards), are invaluable, but also very rare (Wright, 2015).

Anecdotally, (but it seems plausible), attendance at both the MAG and the reference group meetings was patchy as those involved had many other commitments, including being on other government education review groups. It also seems likely that although such large reference groups as that serving the CPA MAG look impressive, the members are rarely involved enough to have much impact on the recommendations of the core MAGs or review groups once they gain momentum.

One interesting feature of the CPA MAG was the choice of Mary Chamberlain as co-chair given that she was director of a private PLD company Evaluation Associates, and yet the Labour-led government had a strong platform of repudiating the business-led approaches of previous governments. (Private actors were involved in the MAG process in other ways too. In July 2018 the work of the MAG was supported by a report about sector engagement undertaken by Martin Jenkins, a private consultancy company that has worked for governments of both stripes). Chamberlain had also previously worked as a senior manager for the Ministry of Education and in that role had helped design and promote the National Standards which the Labour-led government had removed. This willingness to overlook the politics of previous work seems to have been a particular feature of this Labour-led government as it has sought to build consensus around its '30 Year Plan' for education. (Another extraordinary example was former National Minister of Education Lockwood Smith being appointed 'guardian' of the 'Education Conversation' public consultation process). The wider problem is again a loss of national capacity, this is true of educational policy makers as well as academics. Few people would have had as much experience to bring to heading up such a MAG as Chamberlain and this may have been the Minister's main pragmatic consideration.

### **The CPA MAG report and the government response**

In September 2018 the Minister requested an extension of the terms of reference and time to include information needs of the Ministry and Government. This meant the CPA MAG did not report until June 2019. There is little room here to go into the report (CPA MAG, 2019), but as discussed earlier, the May CCC provocation was in any case more intended to introduce it. The report was called 'Strengthening curriculum, progress, and achievement in a system that learns'. It mentions (as headings) 'Issues that must be confronted' and 'Voices that must be heard' but there is not nearly as much critique of past problems as in the Tomorrow's Schools Taskforce report (Tomorrow's Schools Independent Taskforce 2018). It provides a largely Aotearoa New Zealand discussion drawing mainly on Ministry of Education resources. The overall vision - again expressed in section headings - was 'A system that learns' but 'A system cannot learn without information'. The MAG 'worked in partnership with the Reference Group to lead a conversation'. Māori-medium focus areas were 'equity,' 'trust,' and 'coherence' whereas English-medium focus areas were 'clarity,' 'trust,' 'information needs,' 'collaborative networks,' and 'capability.' The main recommendations within the report are paraphrased below:

- Review Te Marautanga o Aotearoa
- Information sharing that uses kaupapa Māori methodology
- A Centre of Excellence for Māori-medium Education
- Ongoing review of the National Curriculum
- Develop curriculum progress maps that clarify critically important markers of progress

- Education Data Protection and Use Policy (EDPUP) that ensures data is collected and used in ways that benefit learning and ākonga
- Independent Education Data Protection and Use Governance Group tasked with designing a process to allow stakeholders to access progress and achievement data
- Design and trial rich records of learning
- Require schools to partner with their communities to reach agreement on what ākonga progress and achievement information will be shared with parents and whānau, how, and when
- Address gaps in currently available assessment tools by prototyping and trialling approaches and tools that illuminate progress
- Provide services to help schools, kāhui ako, and other networks analyse, interpret, and use assessment and aromatawai information
- Expand the focus of the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMSSA) to capture a wider range of outcomes
- Ongoing system level inquiry into how to more effectively make the most of expertise and capabilities across and between networks
- Legislate minimum employee entitlements to recognise the importance of whānau involvement in their child's education
- Develop resources to strengthen participatory processes
- Strengthen MoE capability in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and aromatawai
- Independent Advisory Group to report on the state of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment and aromatawai across the education system
- Appoint an independent Chief Advisor Māori (Kaitiaki Mātauranga Māori)
- High quality learning opportunities for kaiako and tumuaki
- Replace Te Kete Ipurangi with a new portal that enables kaiako and tumuaki to quickly access, use, adapt, and contribute to the collation of quality teaching and learning resources

In much of this we see the high-level comments that no one could disagree with that Rutherford mentioned at the QPEC session. Of the recommendations a number of initial actions were supported by the Labour-led government in its response (Hipkins, 2019). They included updating Te Marautanga o Aotearoa and the National Curriculum, testing the feasibility of a curriculum progress map, developing digital records of learning that could travel with students from early learning to post school, and exploring use of these records for various government purposes.

One paragraph in the government's response also resonates directly with Rutherford's concerns expressed at the QPEC forum, as it illustrates the extent to which the Labour-led government was considering using individual-level student data for multiple policy purposes:

“With the right protections in place, aspects of records of learning could provide the information the government needs to know what works, what needs to be improved, and where to allocate resources to better support students' learning, development and wellbeing. Records of learning could help improve our understanding of learning and development objectives under the draft Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy. Aspects of records of learning could provide information on education equity for Ngā Tohutō Aotearoa – Indicators Aotearoa New Zealand. Records of learning would help Oranga Tamariki meet requirements under the

National Care Standards to monitor and support the educational progress and achievement of children in care, and maintain records of their achievements.” (Hipkins, 2019, p. 9)

## Conclusion

Discussion of the Curriculum, Progress and Achievement Ministerial Advisory Group raises many issues around the nature of the Labour-led government’s education review programme, as well as subsequent policy decisions. These issues include the manner in which review groups and reference groups have been assembled, how they have operated, and the extent to which they have really been able to engage with the politics and practices of the areas they are looking at. The appropriate use of data appears to have been a key underlying issue for the CPA MAG. Another fundamental concern has to be that with so many reviews going on, New Zealand educational researchers have had very little capacity to keep up, hence this CCC session to try to inform participants about what had been going on in this CPA area. It all begs the question whether the Labour-led government has really wanted research and scholarly responses to its educational reform programme.

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