

Attitudes towards Motivation, Achievement, and the NCEA

Our survey and focus group interview data from the 2005-2006 and 2006-2007 research suggested patterns of relationships between aspects of school policy and practice on the one hand and student study behaviour and achievement on the other. This research also revealed that some student “groups” behaved in contrasting ways. To explore these issues further, focus groups were convened during the first half of the 2008 school year to raise issues probing particular patterns of stakeholder perspectives with policy and practice implications for schools, particularly with regard to choices and opportunities and the values of different cultural groups. A particular issue of interest was student perceptions of NCEA design changes and other issues such as the review of Unit Standards and what students think about multiple opportunities on internal assessments.

Sample

Parents and students were invited to participate in focus groups identified at ten different schools; five of these schools were selected from our national sample of 20 schools, and five additional schools were identified and agreed to participate as well.

The ten participating schools included co-educational state and integrated schools as well as single sex schools across the country and across the range of decile levels. They included 4 in Auckland, 2 in Christchurch, 2 in Wellington, and one each in two large town centres (one North and one South Island). The decile levels of these schools range from 3 low decile schools (1-2), 5 middle decile schools (5-7) and 2 high decile schools (8-10). Two of the schools enrol a high percentage of Māori and Pacific students, one including a bilingual programme and another including a *wharekura* (Māori immersion). Thus, our sample for these data is broadly representative of the national data base.

At two schools (one of which was the *wharekura*), two parent focus groups plus individual parent interviews were also conducted in order to address specifically Māori and Pacific parent perspectives. These focus groups and interviews were conducted by Māori and Pacific researchers, both of whom were bilingual.

General description of student focus groups

Schools were requested to provide a range of students for each focus group to include one group comprising Year 10 students and one group of mixed achievement level students across Years 12 and 13. We involved the Year 10 students to find out their perceptions prior to starting NCEA, but did not interview Year 11 students who would generally have had only a few weeks’ participation in NCEA level 1. Three schools also organised one group each of high achieving Year 12/13 students: At one of these schools, there had been considerable discussion over the past 2-3 years about the relative merits of NCEA and the Cambridge International Examination (CIE), so we were interested in what the students might have to say in this context. One school organised focus groups according to students’ ethnic identities including one Year 10 Māori and one Year 10 Pacific group and a mixed Year 12/13 Māori and a mixed Year 12/13 Pacific group. In all, 220 students participated in 23 student focus groups. Focus groups

were conducted at the 10 schools over a ten week period from beginning of April to mid June 2008 (excluding the two week term break from mid-April to early May during which time no groups were scheduled).

Year 10 students who were not yet registered in NCEA comprised 11 of the 23 focus groups from 10 schools involving 110 students (56 males and 54 females). Most of these students reported they had commenced studying and gaining a limited number of credits. We were interested in the Year 10 groups to investigate their knowledge and perceptions of NCEA generally and of particular aspects including the endorsements and the standards offered.

There were also five Year 12 focus groups from 5 different schools, involving 46 students (22 male and 24 female); 5 combined Year 12 and Year 13 focus groups from 4 different schools involved 45 students (22 male and 23 female) and two Year 13 focus groups from 2 schools involved 19 students (10 males and 9 females). Table 26 summarises the composition of focus groups; of the total 220 students interviewed, exactly half were male and female.

Table 26: Focus group composition by gender

Focus Group	No. conducted	Male	Female	Total
Yr 10	11	56	54	110
yr 12	5	22	24	46
yr 13	2	10	9	19
combined Year 12/13	5	22	23	45
Total	23	110	110	220

Descriptive data for selected student focus groups

A total of 124 students participating in fourteen focus groups, eight Year 10 groups and six Year 12 or Year 12 and Year 13 combined groups, had the opportunity to answer the question: *What is the highest level of NCEA you aim to achieve prior to completing your secondary education?* All but nine students responded (see Table 28). The majority of Year 10 students 53 (79%) indicated they aimed to achieve Level 3, with 12 (18%) students indicated they are aiming for Level 2 and 3 (4%) students aim to achieve Level 1 prior to completing their secondary education (see Table 27).

Of the fifty-two students in the Year 12 and Year 12 Year 13 combined focus groups, 38 (73%) indicated they aim to achieve Level 3 and 9 (17%) students aim to achieve Level 2, and 5 students did not respond to this question.

Table 27: The highest level of NCEA students aimed to achieve prior to completing secondary education

Focus Group	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	No response	Total
Year 10	3 (4%)	12 (18%)	53 (79%)	4 (6%)	67
Year 12		7 (28%)	16 (64%)	2 (8%)	25
Combined Year 12/13		2 (7%)	22 (81%)	3 (11%)	27
Total	3 (2%)	21 (17%)	91 (73%)	9 (7%)	124

The 67 students participating in 7 of the focus groups (4 Year 10 groups, 2 Year 12 groups, and 1 Year 12/13 combined group) organised at the final 4 of the 10 participating schools were also asked several descriptive questions. These questions were: (1) whether the student knew the NCEA certificate could be endorsed with Merit or Excellence; (2) age; (3) gender; (4) highest level of NCEA the student intended to achieve prior to completing your secondary education; and (4) what the student planned to do after completing secondary school. Tick boxes were available for the first three questions, and the last question was open-ended.

Table 28 indicates the age distribution across the range of focus groups for these students. Of the students involved in Year 10 focus groups, 35 indicated their age as 14 years old and 5 were 15 years. The remaining 27 students who participated in Year 12 or combined Year 12/13 focus groups, one student was 15 years, 15 students were 16 years, 8 were 17 years and 3 indicated their age as 18 (see Table 28).

Table 28: Focus group composition by age for seven focus groups

Focus Group	14	15	16	17	18	total
Year 10	35	5	0	0	0	40
Year 12	0	1	12	4	0	17
Combined Year 12/13	0	0	3	4	3	10
Total	35	6	15	8	3	67

Table 29 summarises student responses to the question, *Did you know you can get the NCEA Certificate as Achieved but also with Merit or Excellence?* Fifty-eight students representing 87% of the total number of responses indicated they were aware that the Certificate could now be endorsed. Nine (13%) of students indicated they were unaware of this change, and eight of the nine students who were unaware of this change were in Year 10.

Table 29: Knowledge of NCEA certificate with endorsement

Focus Group	Yes	No	Total
Year 10	32	8	40
Year 12	16	1	17
Year 13			0
Combined Year 12/13	10	0	10
Total	58	9	67

Table 30 summarises student responses to the question *What do you plan to do after completing your secondary education?* As can be seen from the table, 51 of the 74 students (69%) who responded to this question indicated they intended to further their education either at university, college, polytechnic or technical college. Two of this group indicated they hope to study abroad. Fifteen students (20%) indicated they did not know what they would do. The remaining eight students (11%) indicated they plan to work following completion of their secondary education in various fields including, music, photography, fashion, TV or radio, mechanic, author and a pilot (these students may plan a tertiary education as well, but did not indicate this).

Table 30: Summary of plans following completion of secondary education

Activity	No
University (course not specified)	12
University (course specified)	24
Polytechnic	7
Teachers college	3
University—abroad	2
Broadcasting school in radio	1
Toi Whakaari NZ drama school	1
Floristry course	1
Total indicating further education	51
Musician	1
Tennis coach	1
Photography	1
Fashion design	1
Pilot	1
Mechanic employment	1
Author	1
TV or radio presenter	1
Total indicating work	8
Don't know	15
Total	74

Data Collection and Analysis

Each focus group was led by two researchers, with one researcher serving as facilitator to introduce the questions to the students and the other researcher recording responses in writing. The note-taker read out the recorded responses to the group following each question to allow for additions and edits and to check for accuracy. In total, seven researchers either led or acted as note-taker for the different focus groups. Different facilitators led each group based on their experience and demographic characteristics. For the student and parent interviews with Māori and Pacific, the facilitators for the focus groups were themselves Māori and Pacific. These facilitators were fluent in the respective languages and were experienced researchers but not otherwise involved in this project. Thus, a training session was conducted to familiarise them with project procedures for the focus group interviews.

Student Focus Groups Research Questions

The focus group questions for the students were modified from those used in our earlier reports to incorporate the recent design change issues as well as overall perspectives on the NCEA. For the Year 10 group, we were interested in the students' knowledge about the NCEA generally, what their parents, siblings and friends think about it, what they know about changes to the NCEA and their views on those changes, and where they heard about both the system and the changes. For the seniors, we were interested in the influences of recent changes on how they approached their work, if there were any other changes they would like, and what

they wanted to stay the same. We were also interested in their thoughts about Unit Standards and Achievement Standards. For both groups of students we were interested in how their school work is influenced by their friends, parents, family, teachers and/or any other factors. (See also Appendix B for a full list of the questions for each group together with the general procedures for each focus group.)

The data were analysed qualitatively using well-established procedures to identify themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once defined, themes were then cross-referenced to previous themes that had emerged from the 2006 and 2007 studies. Table 31 also indicates the main themes and the sub-themes that emerged together with the number of references made to each across the focus group interviews with Year 10 and Year 12/13 students.

Table 31: Focus group themes

Themes	Sub themes	No of References	Total references by theme
Intrinsic Motivation	Impact on self esteem	8	81
	<i>Doing My Best</i>	73	
Extrinsic Motivation	UE and scholarship needs	14	321
	Employment needs	8	
	Family Influence	56	
	Friends' Influence and others in class	51	
	Teacher and school influence	60	
	Pressure	48	
	Other external Influences	74	
Negative Motivation	<i>Doing Just Enough</i>	19	28
	Learn for Assessment	9	
Qualification Design	Exams, externals	58	344
	Internals	44	
	Time management issues	16	
	Unit and Achievement Standards	57	
	Inconsistencies across schools/subjects	14	
	Grading system	92	
	Record access	12	
	Levels	10	
	System improvement	19	
	Qualification recognition	9	
Knowledge of Endorsements and NCEA Knowledge		46	46
Irrelevant to motivation			10
Total References			820

In total there were 820 references that were coded under five main themes. The remainder of this chapter describes these themes and sub-themes and provides sample quotes for each.

Intrinsic motivation

These comments were concerned with positive aspects of motivation from the individual's perspective that were seen as resulting from NCEA changes. We reported previously that some students indicated they had no incentive to continue study once they had achieved their 80 credits. Now that students can receive recognition for higher achievement through the award of the NCEA certificate at each level endorsed with Merit or Excellence, the following comments illustrate student responses to these endorsements. Eighty-one comments were categorised under the two sub-themes of Impact on Self Esteem and *Doing My Best*, some indicating a positive impact on their motivation and others a negative impact.

Impact on Self Esteem

Makes you feel good socially and that makes you do well educationally

Some people think it's cool to not do well, but for others it can give social status to do well

Gives us a sense of pride, know you've worked hard, proud of achievement

Some people are really upset if they don't get Excellence

Makes you feel better if you get Merit and Excellence

Some teachers treat us as a friend—can praise us and that's good

Doing My Best

Some friends say "this year I want to get Merit or Excellence," last year, "just pass"

If [the NCEA is] harder, students will work harder

I strive to get more Excellences, knowing it will get recognised now; before it wouldn't, just get Achieved

It makes me try harder to the best of my ability

Having Merit and Excellence not just Achieve—you have a higher platform to strive for

If knew about it [endorsements] earlier may have worked harder

Want to get best results you can

Influenced by stats—Māori [are a] lower group, [this] makes you want to achieve more & be successful to prove them wrong.

Some students indicated, however, that their behaviour had not changed, though there were fewer of the following kinds of comments:

Hasn't changed my effort

I've always achieved Merit, doesn't bother me

No change, am focusing same as I would

Extrinsic motivation

This category encompasses all comments made about external influences on student motivation, organised further into the sub-themes in Table 32. There were a total of 321 comments coded under this main theme, and sample quotes are provided below:

UE and scholarship needs

Some universities offer scholarship to those with Excellence

Hasn't changed what I'm getting, I returned to school to get University Entrance and it doesn't make a difference. If needed Merit or Excellence to get UE would strive harder

Still get UE with Achieved, so why bother?

Have to have qualification, for University Entrance and jobs

There are some stupid subjects—"bum subjects"—that are really easy to pass, e.g. tourism and computing. People who aren't as motivated to do well take a lot of these—they are like free credits—not because they want to do that kind of work but because they are easy, and can get UE on them.

It was interesting that some students were well aware of the fact that universities were using the endorsements for selection into programmes (e.g., those with restricted entry) and scholarship awards, while others did not know this.

Employment needs

Students felt that the endorsements would be of interest to employers as well:

Distinguishes people, if you have different levels, shows where you're at, like for job interviews

Merit and Excellence are better credentials for an employer

Its good because when you go for a job you've got more of a chance if you can show that you worked harder

[The endorsement] looks good on your CV to get jobs

Family influence

Many comments spoke about how one's family could best support achievement:

If parents encourage you to do work it helps—you do better; if they don't, you don't do your best

Parents' expectations influence you—if they expect you to do well, talk to you about your work, take an interest in your schoolwork—you do better, try to please them. But if they go over the top, focus too much on school, too much pressure—you switch off, rebel

Parents' expectations affect what you do, especially if they are supportive and understanding, you can talk to them

[Parents] won't let you go to friends until I show them I did my homework

The environment at home has a big impact—if the family promotes learning, gives you space to do it, if they motivate you, you can also want to be more like them and be something.

Many students commented about the achievements (or lack of achievements) of their siblings as having an influence on them:

Older brother not into the education thing, mainly influences in school, racism towards Māori so he thought he might as well drop out

Older brothers, oldest passed, have to live up to that, other brother autistic, passed level 1

My brother failed school, regrets it, so he's telling me to take opportunities

Very important—family a big thing. Sister dropped out and really struggled without education, parents really want me to do well in 6th form

Makes you want to strive more if older sibling has dropped out, hard to get a good job (older brother)

But there were also comments about possible negative family and sibling influences:

If you have fights, you don't think about what you have to do, don't do school work

If someone is sick you don't do work but worry about them instead

They [parents] make you do chores, etc, so you don't have time for homework

Sometimes they [parents] can be helpful—explain, sit down and help you. But I don't like them to tell me what to do

Looking after younger siblings—takes time away from doing homework, and then afterwards you don't feel like doing it either—energy

Friends' influence and others in class

Friends and classmates also have an impact on study and achievement:

When I'm in class with the easily distracted kids I find it hard to work, so if I do Cambridge, the kids in that class will be more motivated

Friends can be distracting from work, but some can be boring if all they do is study

My friends are supportive, will help me out, parents don't have time

A friend can be like a conscience. A friend who can keep you honest, knows you will be studying

Friends are important too, smart person might offer to help, but you might not be comfortable to take help from them

You muck around more, pay more attention to your friends, socialise, not do school work. But when you're doing work or tests you're not paying attention to your friends

Friends can teach you, tutor you—show you how to do something

Friends that do well, you'll also want to do well

Students mentioned competing amongst friends as having a positive influence overall:

Friendly competition can make you do better

Can demoralise people if you just get an achieved and your friend gets Excellence but in some cases it can motivate you to try harder

We're involved with friends, our friends push each other to reach for Excellence and Merit. Friends-wise Merit and Excellence is the standard

Friends can also help students keep a balance:

Friends keep you loose, so you don't stress out

Studying with friends is good, makes it fun

I'd do homework with friends—more social and fun

I work with friends and that motivates me

On weekends you put friends first rather than doing homework

Finally, students commented about the influences of classmates:

Work harder to do better than classmates who muck around

Surrounded by under achievers which reduces motivation

If they aren't motivated it lowers your motivation, others who are good students raise your motivation to do well

Motivated people around you motivates you—e.g. how much you study

Teacher and school influence

There were a large number of comments about how teachers at the school affect motivation and achievement. Some students thought their teachers made all the difference:

Teachers are the single biggest impact on learning. Teachers with a good personality—makes learning fun, uses variety, humour. Dull ones make the subject boring

Good teachers like the subject they teach, treat you like an adult, know a lot, are up with current knowledge, use both oral and written (notes)

They're [teachers] here to help us. Supportive like a parent, push us to do well & really want us to pass. Good to know they are there for us—they are really caring about us totally as people, all aspects of our life

Teacher makes the subject, if interesting tend to enjoy, remember, pay attention

If teacher can't explain subject, really lost if teacher can't tell you how to do something, means you won't strive for Merit or Excellence

Teachers influence you, if they believe in you and say you can do it, are positive

Good ones [teachers] make you want to go to class, everyone participates, listens, has fun, teacher sticks to the topic, makes sure everyone understands

Greatly—you're able to learn a lot better with a teacher who understands you, has fun with learning. But teachers who don't help you learn limit you

Not all teachers were viewed positively, and students mentioned negative teachers and teacher behaviours as well:

Teachers get angry—makes you not want to work or do what they say

Some [teachers] swear, some are sexist, some pick on you and some teachers are hard to understand

[teacher] Can pick on one person they don't like, have favourites—single them out; It makes it harder to learn if you're being picked on—you can't ask for help from the teacher

If you get along with a teacher it's easier to ask for help, but if you don't get along they get angry at you for asking 'dumb' questions

[teacher] Can control you too much—tell you how to do it, look over your shoulder—don't like that

Sometimes they [teacher] don't really teach; if they don't control the class, you don't listen

Students also commented on strategies teachers used to teach different students:

Some students like to learn from notes written on the board, some from discussion—teacher needs to tailor the class to their students, do different things, not the same all the time

[Teachers] have a lot of impact. Some help us catch up and provide extra tutoring if necessary

The teachers decide where the class is at in terms of choosing which standards (unit vs ach). It's a disadvantage on you because it depends on what the teacher thinks you can do and what the kids in your class can do

I still don't get it, the teachers need to pass on all the information

Some teachers prepare us for lecture style that we will experience at university

It's unfair [that] they teach Merit or Excellence questions only in higher streamed classes

Pressure

There were quite a few comments about the pressures associated with external examinations, both positive and negative:

End of year exam hard, too much pressure

It should be optional to do exams—they are added stress; it's intimidating being in a big hall with people watching you, etc

Don't like how the external exams are timetabled because you only know in the last few weeks and that's not enough notice we want to know earlier so we can balance things

The pressure for exams is hard; I reckon the only external exams should be those that are the required subjects for tertiary.

Students commented that internal assessment reduced stress for them:

Having internals eases pressure

Can pass the year without sitting externals—takes the pressure off

When you have 80 credits you can try to finish off the year as best you can—it takes the stress off to pass

On the other hand, a few students acknowledged that pressure was sometimes unavoidable and even a good thing:

But you still need external pressure like you will get out in the work force

Pressure can be good—a life skill—but also backfire and make you do worse on the exam

Need stress to prepare for workforce and real world situations

There was pressure on my brother to study. But he got 140 credits in both Year 11 and 12. It was easier than he expected. He learnt a lot. He is now at CPIT and they asked him a lot about his NCEA results when he applied there.

Other external influences

A smaller number of students made comments about the impact of other, non-school activities:

Youth leaders in community/church groups—encourage us to work hard in school & see the good things available to us.

People at church, grandparents, police encourage us to do schoolwork & get a good education; distracted, put down, put shame on you if you don't pass.

Depends what you think you're good at, i.e. if sports, stick to that rather than exams.

Negative motivation

Comments coded under this theme fell outside the themes of Intrinsic Motivation and Extrinsic Motivation. They were coded under the sub-themes of *Doing Just Enough*, and *Learn for Assessment*.

Doing Just Enough

Some students' comments mirrored the motivation orientation of doing only what was needed to get by:

I take it the same way, not striving for Merit or Excellence, just want to get Achieved

If doesn't make much difference, if you pass it's good enough

There are students who just settle at an achieved though, they just get there.

It's still down to the student—if they don't care, are lazy, this system won't change them

If you have all the credits you need you don't have to worry so much on the exams.

Learn for assessment

Teaching-to-the-test and learning for assessment were also mentioned by a few students:

There is focus on NCEA system rather than looking if the students are receiving better learning

We learn how to pass exams and there is no encouragement to remember beyond the exams

We are expected to learn for the assessment to get the credit but we don't learn the background. We learn different parts but not the whole thing, for example we learn only what we need to learn for the credits we want to learn [not] the whole thing

Qualifications design

This theme encompassed the largest number of comments (344), discussed by sub-themes below with sample comments for each:

Exams, externals

Exams are not real life, never going to have to write an essay in 20 minutes

The exams are too long

Not relying on exams so much—working throughout the year so not leaving it to the end of year

NCEA questions difficult to understand—language they use—not sure what to do, what they are asking for

External can be good for last minute opportunity to achieve the credits needed

If externals were scrapped would increase teacher leniency which would be a problem

Internals

Nearly as many comments were made about internal assessments. The pros and cons of being able to re-submit assignments and resit classroom assessments were mentioned often:

Like that you can re-sit, can fix and try for higher

In some way a re-sit is good, but in the real world some there are some things you cannot re-sit, if you fail you fail

Doesn't make sense to be able to re take internals over and over again, shouldn't be able to have everyone pass for reputation at school

We like the internal assessments as they are not too much, you can be reassessed on them if we don't do well

Like internals and externals, during year, not just at end of year

If you have all the credits you need you don't have to worry so much on the exams.

I like the internals options—they can be more enjoyable as can put work to use

NCEA has improved because of the internals (compared to bursary/school C system).

Internal/External split benefit learning.

Internals spread throughout the year and organised so that you don't have everything due at once.

A few remaining comments concerned feedback:

Take too long to receive results—reduce time

Think it's good to see what you got right or wrong—get feedback, so you know what to improve on

Should be getting constant feedback to know how to improve

Time management issues

Students mentioned aspects of time management and how they made various decisions to meet commitments:

I stopped sport so I could work (school work)

A lot of problem concerns time management

Time management is an issue—all assessment is due at the same time

Extra curricular activities encourages time management

Going on exchange in August and need to pass all internal subjects for UE prior to my departure

Stage challenge—didn't do it this year because I knew it would be too much with school work as well

Sports team but had to pull out, too busy, couldn't manage everything.

Over-committing yourself can impact on schoolwork, ie through work and sport

Playing sports, sometimes you are too tired after sports to take the test the next day, you cant think straight

[Going] to national cultural competitions [makes it] hard to catch up on school work

[I] do lots of extra curricular activities: house competitions, theatre sports, school productions and work... it screwed up my school work to start with but then it made me get organised so its good and bad

Work, sport, committees—these all can damage your opportunities if you do them too much; you have to do them to make your CV look better, but they can lower your achievement in school—less time for school work, sleep

Unit and Achievement Standards

Students were asked to comment about unit and Achievement Standards, an important issue given the ongoing review of Unit Standards. While they did not mention the review, they had different opinions about having two types. Positive comments included:

[It's] good, to give students struggling to just get achieved or not achieved

Unit standards for lower level

US [are] good for people who just want to leave school and not go to uni

It's good to have both—gives you choice: Unit Standards for people who just want to pass, Achievement Standards for people who want to do Merit or Excellence

Having both is good. Unit standards don't mean anything at tertiary study.

Many more comments, however, favoured having a single system of achievement standard rather than Unit Standards:

Having both is confusing—why not have just one?

It's kind of unfair if you only do Unit Standards and not Achievement Standards, because then you can't go on to uni if you want to further your learning

Unit Standards don't mean anything. People will always pick the person with Achievement Standards (e.g. tertiary/job)

Art and photography are Unit Standards. They are more complex and [students] can only get achieved. They should both be made Achievement Standards

We are given Unit Standards throughout the year and get Achievement Standards at the end of year (in externals) and it's a disadvantage, we want to aim for Achievement Standards.

Because it means more we want to do the Achievement Standards, would prefer that

All should be Achievement Standards.

Interested in psychology but the subject is Unit Standards and people see it as a joke

Stupid—for some students who do Unit Standards can't aim for Excellence in Unit Standards and sometimes if its your best subject it can be disheartening

There's no advantage to studying harder for Unit Standards.

Inconsistencies across schools and subjects

Students were also concerned about inconsistencies and discrepancies in effort and recognition for their work. Typical comments were:

Change the amount of credits, for some credits you have to do lots of work and for others you don't, it should be balanced

The categorisation of marks in internals is stupid: if I fail 1 question I can fail the whole exam. They assign you the lowest mark. E.g. if you get 2 questions at Excellence and 1 at Achieve, they give you an Achieve overall. But this is inconsistent between subjects—in some they do give you the best 2 out of 3.

For practical subjects you get more credits, theory is too hard, not sure how it works. English and woodwork offer more credits but I'm not sure if the credits mean anything. We work hard but feel like credits aren't equivalent to the amount of work

Some credits aren't right amount for the amount of work you do—easy subjects like tourism in comparison to English—unfair

Another inconsistency is how much credits are worth—the amount of work varies so much between subjects, you can do a lot of hard work in PE for 2 credits, and do a 15 minute easy lab in chemistry for 3 credits.

There were several comments about inconsistencies across schools and the three levels of NCEA:

Rules are different from school to school—another inconsistency

There's a huge step between Level 1 and level 2, especially English and maths; e.g. doing Merit level work in Level 1 is now barely Achieved in Level 2—not prepared enough for this, and not really taught how to study

Depends on subjects, harder Level 2 than Level 1

Level 1 and 2 are easy, Level 3 is hard.

Grading system

As in previous years, students had much to say about the grading system. By far, they continued to advocate for finer grade bands:

I would like more information, not just Merit

Percentage better because it provides more information

[I] like both, a percentage and a grade (80%=Excellence), only the amount you get right should matter

Want to distinguish more, annoying to get same, want more grades

Offer more grades, for example, E, E-, E+ etc

It would be good to see the % who failed/did not achieve, so you can further tell how you did—it would motivate you

[It's] frustrating to get A when [you are] higher than someone lower who didn't even try but got the same mark.

Some students suggested getting more credit for higher marks:

Get more credits for higher marks—would make you strive harder

Achieve, Merit and Excellence still equals the same number of credits. Change this so we could gain more credits for achieving with Merit or Excellence

Give recognition for extra effort, ie higher grades means more credits

Not awarded anything extra. There is no extra credits for achieving Excellence [in subjects].

Other students favoured subject endorsements as a recognition strategy:

Subject endorsements would be a help

Change endorsement to per subject rather than overall. This would give more recognition for stronger subjects

Record access

Students were largely appreciative of their access to the record of learning:

You can check your credits to see where you are, what you have to do, how close you are to passing

Good to be able to access ROL

Record of learning is good, can see the levels and progress you are making and can use the information on your CV

Can go on internet to see percentage of people getting Merit, Excellence, so you can feel good about what you got if few others did

System improvement

There were fewer comments this year about the need for other improvements to the system. Most of these were noting approval of the endorsements:

We didn't know [about the endorsements] but we think this is a good idea. This new system helps to move education forward

Heard about Merit and Excellence and Achieved. [It's a] good system when you understand the meaning

Qualifications recognition

Finally, there were a few concerns about how the NCEA was regarded compared to other systems:

Cambridge International Examinations introduced worldwide, NCEA just here

NCEA is not as recognised as the GCSE system

The qualification isn't recognised

Overseas people don't understand the system

[My] parents think it's a waste of time, not recognised everywhere like Cambridge

Easier than Cambridge, I should do it, Dad wants me to do Cambridge, Mum wants me to do NCEA because there's less pressure

Knowledge of endorsements and NCEA

There were 46 comments referring to teacher, parent and student knowledge of NCEA and specific design features. Generally, most students wanted to know more and only a few of the focus groups seemed well informed about the NCEA. At one school, even the Year 10 group knew a great deal, but at other schools students said little information had been provided at their school:

Don't know anything about changes

If you don't know about the benefits then don't strive

Haven't heard about it.

School said that NCEA was coming up but didn't give us much information about it

One English teacher tells us a lot about it

School pretty much told us nothing, there was a Year 9 speech at assembly

[We] did know about Excellence and Merit, think its good

Didn't know there were changes

School/ teachers haven't told us much/ anything about it

[Māori girl]: Teachers told me, we discussed what is achievable.

Parent Interviews and Focus Groups

For this component of the research, we were seeking Māori and Pacific parent perspectives specifically, rather than a generalised parent perspective or perspectives from other parent groups. These parents were of particular interest given the limited information available to date on how they see their children's aspirations and motivations with reference to the NCEA.

Two parent focus groups, involving eight parents in each group, and two individual interviews were completed. Focus groups and interviews were carried out at two schools located in a large city, both early in April at a time coinciding with parent/teacher interviews in order to facilitate parent participation. These two schools enrol a high percentage of Māori and Pacific students, one of which has a *wharekura* (Māori immersion) programme, and their principals organised the meetings with parents as well as several student focus groups. Both of the individual interviewees were Pacific mothers, and these interviews were done individually at their request in preference to being part of a focus group; a Pacific interviewer did the interviews. This same Pacific interviewer and a Māori interviewer together conducted the parent focus groups; both have experience in interviewing, data collection, and working with teachers, parents, and students.

Parents were asked questions about how well they thought the NCEA was working for their child; what they knew about the endorsements; strategies they used to influence their child's study behaviour and achievement; whether they thought their child was influenced by friends and classmates; and, finally, what one thing they would change about the NCEA if they could and what one thing they thought should stay the same (see Appendix B for the full set of questions).

Results

Responses were recorded verbatim, read back to participants to check for accuracy and invite further responses and elaborations, and then entered into Word documents for qualitative analysis using the categories that emerged. The themes emerging from parent responses paralleled those from the student focus groups, including comments falling into the categories of Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation, Qualifications Design, Negative Motivation and NCEA Knowledge. These are discussed below with selected quotes from the parents illustrating each theme.

Intrinsic motivation

Virtually all comments made by parents falling into this category could be described as referring to the sub-theme of "supporting different learners." Parent comments referred to the need to support students across the range of academic performance, both high and low achievers. They were positive about their understanding that the NCEA offered individual students opportunity to demonstrate their own strengths rather than being marked in comparison to other students. They thought the system enhanced self-esteem and liked the fact that there were different assessments (internal and external), particularly the fact that internal assessment allowed them opportunity to monitor their children's progress for those students who would otherwise not stay on task. Typical comments were:

[The NCEA] took away bell curve & offers potential for schools to improve & design curriculum to suit needs.

Good for strugglers, improves self esteem.

This is a good way to encourage children to be learning all the year round and not just rely on examination time, because some kids have that attitude to just roam around the whole year so the internal exams area good way of keeping an eye on your child's progress.

Child is in Yr 10 but according to my nieces NCEA is very good. Child will try to achieve... it's dependant on child's effort & achievement. It helps the children to compete, encourages children to keep focused, have a goal.

Works well for granddaughter—the old system failed half of the students & wasn't fair.... As an ESOL [student, it was] was difficult in beginning but good for her now. School C would have been difficult.

Extrinsic motivation

Parents made many comments about motivators that would be described as “extrinsic.” These included comments regarding marks received from the assessments themselves, the accumulation of credits towards attaining a subsequent goal (e.g., getting the certificate, UE and/or employment), and various rewards or withholding of reinforcements by parents in order to motivate their children to achieve.

Qualifications design issues

Typical comments about the value of the qualification included:

[It's] working well for my son who took external for two subjects. Was good for him & he got his pass mark. I'll be happy when he does literacy and numeracy credits.

NCEA meant my brother achieved a qualification which he wouldn't have under previous ways.

Learner becomes engaged, and progress can track achievement—know what their accumulation of credits looks like—life skills—more engaged to progress.

[My] daughter [was a] bit wayward until Yr 13 and knew what was needed and eventually achieved her goals through [teacher] support—holistic support. She passed with good Excellence & achieved UE.

Good system for Māori, who can achieve while learning—can see it working throughout year. Can understand what student is doing.

Parents mentioned the value of getting recognition for one's work:

Son likes to be able to get Excellence. Some kids are really smart.

New grading for Excellence and Merit should be a real motivation. Maybe next year [my child will try harder].

There were also comments about students comparing themselves with others and concerns about whether there was sufficient challenge particularly for boys:

Competitive element exists at school level. Boys only perform under pressure—need crisis of exam to do best. For extending bright kids in quantity and quality almost drip feeding final exam tests certain skills.

Final exam in old days tested ability to present information and was a skill. Boys respond to that pressure.

Girls performing well but boys not so well. Some perform under pressure & other fall to pieces—good if there was something there to assist boys' style of learning.

Parent motivation strategies

Parents made many comments about how they encouraged their sons and daughters and communicated high expectations to them. This included working with them at home on assignments if help was needed:

[We] have expectations

School matters as this is last year for him and he's working to pass. [We] can't afford for him to repeat.

We help him with homework. Try to be his teachers at home too. We don't send him to school and then sit home and do nothing, but when he's at home we make home another classroom.

What matters most is schooling, education and his talent of piano playing and singing. We know because this is what he spends his time doing by observation.

[We] don't force [our] daughter but encourage her to do good work—if try to force, she received poor report.

Parents also mentioned specific approaches to goal setting and time management:

[We] developed a plan for son about what he wants to do and focus on goal—support—take him to sporting, library books, etc., computer.

Reduce TV [watching] to the weekend and encourage learning—TV has bad influence on results.

Family expectation that children [will do well], encourage through communication and focus on future goals.

Parents' involvement, interest and talking about what they are doing— [being] there and offering support is most important.

Parents commented about being the first in the family to have a university degree, and that learning “created a passion, a reward in itself.” One parent recalled that despite being the only Māori in the top class, s/he was not “pushed” at school and could have done better. Others stated that they had high aspirations for their

children and the family communicated future goals quite clearly, including possibilities for those who did not aim for high achievement in school:

[UE] is minimum requirement in our family... Both parents achieved university qualifications and [our] children encouraged [to do the same].

Children have seen difficulty of working long hours packing Woolworths' shelves.

[I want my child] to see what it's like to participate, go to uni—opens eyes and broadens horizon.

There was also considerable variety in the kinds of rewards and withdrawal of reinforcing activities that parents said they used or would use to ensure their children worked hard in school:

[We use] incentives: licence, car

Celebrate by going to dinner

If fail—I take something out of room for 3 months

We always reward them, we buy things. We promised at the beginning of the year to pay their fare to NZ if they do good. We always do these kinds of things to encourage them. This lets our children know what kind of parents we are, we support their education not because we want to reward them but because we want them to have better futures.

If she does something bad I don't talk to her. I don't punish; don't talk.

No kapahaka if don't do homework.

[We] have given money and family trips overseas as encouragement.

Negative influences on motivation

Some parents felt that the NCEA was not sufficiently motivating such that even though they believed it was easy for students, students would still not achieve:

I understand it—easy for kids to get certificate through NCEA—now have 14 exams and still finding so many kids not passing it.

[It seems] easy—don't understand why there aren't more passing.

[I] think it's too easy to get NCEA, prefer School C.

Makes kids lazy if they only just achieved and don't get recognised for extra effort.

Once [students] have credits [they] don't have to pass external exam, so no incentive.

The influences of friends

Not surprisingly, parents had mixed opinions about whether their children's friends had a positive or negative impact on motivation and achievement. There were examples of decisions made based on advice from friends rather than the family:

Daughter won top in computing but changed to Art because friend wanted her to do art. So [I] came in and changed back to computing. [We] don't agree that friends should influence subject choice.

However, most parents spoke more generally about “good” versus “bad” influences rather than giving more specific examples:

In spite of [her] friends, granddaughter focuses and sets herself apart and gets on with it.

[Friends have both a] good and bad influence.

[My child is part of a] small group of friends and they push each other; if one lapses they encourage and support each other.

Competition—[friends] compare records, which motivates.

The influences of teachers

Parents had both positive and negative things to say about the influence of teachers on their children's motivation and achievement. They also made comments about wanting specific information about their child from the teachers and from school:

[The teachers have a] good influence on child's performance—wonderful teachers.

Teachers don't tell us honest truth—[they would] rather say [my child's] doing good without detail.

I like to find out the truth about what child is doing, [like] truancy and missing classes.

Qualifications Design Issues

Parents had varied information about the NCEA generally and the changes that had been made in 2007, including the addition of endorsements for Merit and Excellence. There were, for example, mixed opinions about examinations, grades, and marks:

Why [do we] still have externals? School C was a problem, many failed. Different for those who fell apart under exam conditions—internals [are] good.

A lot of parents complained that “not achieved” didn't appear on the record.

[My child's] teacher thinks ‘satisfactory’ is appropriate and believes student will strive for Excellence [without endorsements].

[I] heard about Merit, Excellence, and Achieved. [It's a] good system when you understand the meaning.

[They] need a certain number of credits to achieve more.

Endorsement with Excellence or Merit will be considered for UE.

Tertiary will need [to use] Merit and Excellence to indicate who should be admitted.

Parents also commented on issues regarding consistency across schools:

External assessment is essential component to get consistency of schools.

[There needs to be] more formal training for teachers—consistency in marking

Parent knowledge and understanding of the NCEA

The final challenge is, of course, whether parents have the necessary understanding of the NCEA to underpin their approach to supporting their children in school. The NCEA represents a dramatic departure from the system to which these parents were themselves exposed when they were in school. Typical comments included:

[We] don't have a full understanding of what it is—School C and NCEA is recognised nationally to me. It sounds big for a simple thing. Lack of info—[there should be] simple language to encourage [Pasifika families] to understand.

[There is] not enough info—am confused about what it is. There's internal & external; found out when there was 'A' results but found out it means Achieved.

[It was] difficult to understand—now understand and happy for it to stay as is. Youngest child is doing well.

Sons explained it to me—was confused before about how credits are accumulated.

Children given info but some may not have passed on to parents.

Summary of Findings from the Focus Groups and Interviews

Across the focus groups with students and parents, there are common threads that support findings from our survey and achievement analyses and related research in the international literature. Students and parents alike expressed a broad range of approaches to motivating students to perform well in school, and the large number of comments made about “extrinsic” motivators in particular reveals widespread acceptance of adding reinforcements and withdrawing privileges to emphasise the importance of doing one's schoolwork.

Students talked about the positive influences of their friends (often competing with them to see who would do the best), family/whānau (talking about high expectations as well as tangible consequences), teachers (wanting enthusiastic teachers who cared about them, knew their subject, and made the topic interesting) and siblings (being inspired by an older brother or sister). Students also talked about the negative influences of peers and classmates who didn't care about school, and some commented on how they had been influenced to do better in comparison to an older sibling who had no career or was locked in a dead-end job.

Both students and parents were overwhelmingly supportive of the introduction of the certificate endorsements for Merit and Excellence. With the exception of some of the Year 10 students in some schools, students and parents knew about the endorsements and felt they contributed to motivating students to continuing trying

hard on their NCEA assessments beyond the 80-credit minimum requirement at each of the three levels. Students continued, however, to advocate for more recognition for doing well, such as finer grade bands and having subject endorsements as well as certificate endorsements. They were concerned that recognition for higher level work was not equally available across subjects (e.g., those assessed with unit standards). As reported previously, they remain positive about internal assessment, the balance of internal-external assessment, and the benefits of each.

Surprisingly, students seemed to have less awareness of most of the design changes (announced several months earlier) than we had anticipated. This was especially so for Year 10 students, which one might expect. However, there were students in the Year 12 and Year 13 focus groups who also seemed unaware of various changes. Students consistently emphasised that they needed more information from their schools about the NCEA, and parents also indicated they wanted this. Interestingly, students from the bilingual programme at one school and from the *wharekura* were extremely well-informed about the NCEA and recent changes, including the Year 10 groups. They talked about how their whānau, teachers and they themselves had high expectations for their achievement and how they were motivated to gain endorsements and UE to study at university.