



# External Exams: The Woes and Wows



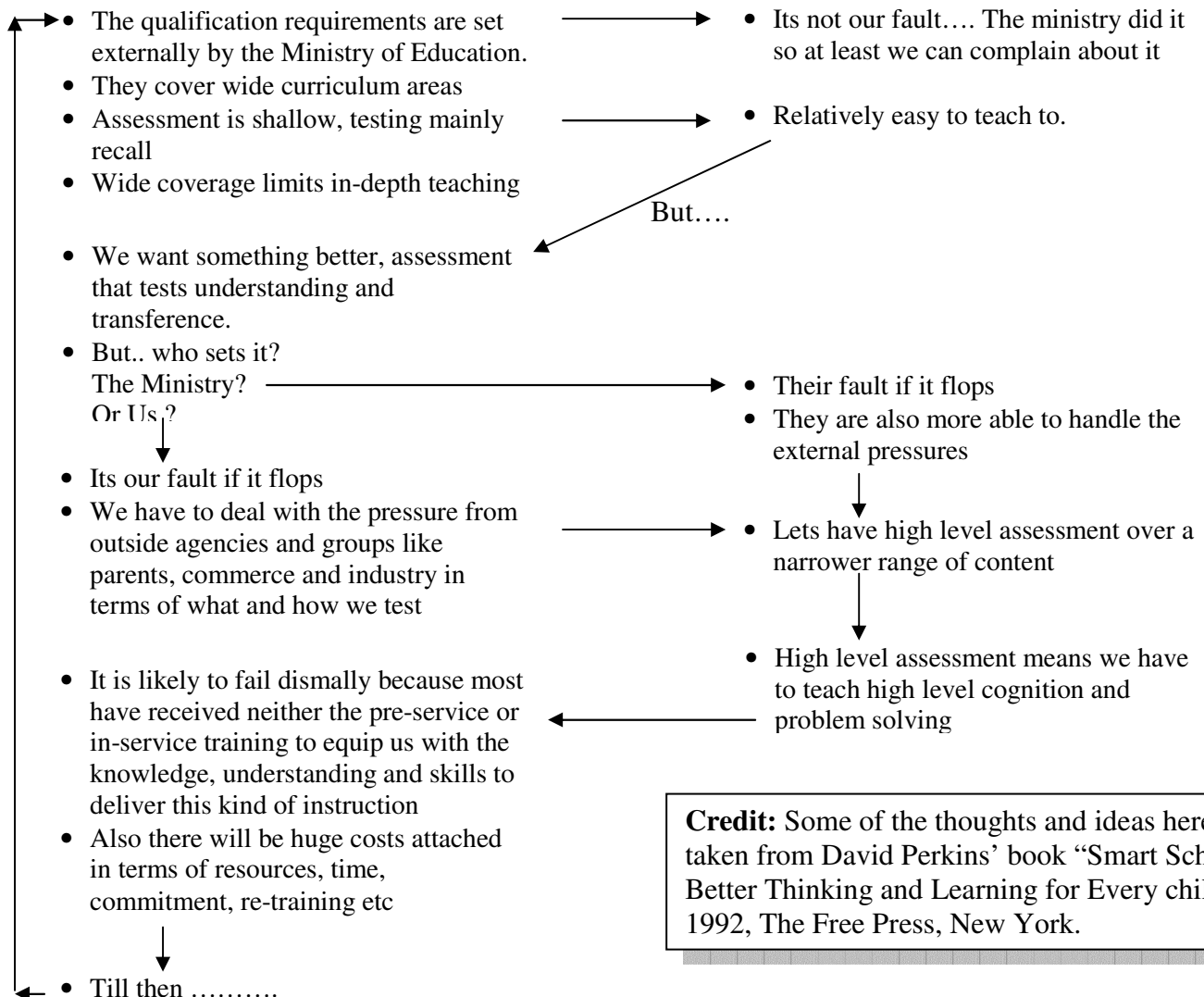
Whenever one is involved in professional development with High School teachers in New Zealand the subject of external exams and qualifications soon arises. It seems as if these are prime factors that govern what and how we teach in our secondary schools. Most teachers feel that:

- the content of their teaching is controlled by these external factors
- the quality of their teaching is limited because of content coverage needs
- the required assessment is low in quality and excessive in quantity

I would certainly agree that there are a number of complicated issues involved but surely, as professionals, we should constantly be working to achieve two main goals.

1. We should strive to teach the content that we see is of value to our pupils,
2. We should aim to teach it in a manner that is creative and leads to our pupils understanding, using and transferring knowledge.

As external qualifications and testing seem to be getting the blame for issues perhaps we should examine the issue in a manner that looks at the positives and negatives of the current system. Amongst this perhaps we may be able to identify some ideas or insights as to how we can bring our teaching practice back in step with the goals expressed above. The Woes and Wows below are garnered from readings and from comments made by numerous teachers during workshops that have been run throughout New Zealand.



**Credit:** Some of the thoughts and ideas here are taken from David Perkins' book "Smart Schools: Better Thinking and Learning for Every child", 1992, The Free Press, New York.

This perhaps summarises some of the issues involved and illustrates why it is easier for us to moan about things than to actively work at altering the current situation.

We do have some options available to us. Let me define them as low level and high level options.

### **Low Level Options.**

1. Resign: A very simple option. Stop moaning and get out of the uncomfortable situation. Sadly though for many this is not such a simple option, as unemployment is a prospect even more appalling than professional discomfort as a teacher.
2. Status Quo: A plausible choice in the light of the previous option.
3. Retrain and teach Primary: Yeah right!!!!!!!

### **High Level Options:**

As public schools we can't step outside the system but we can alter how we work within the system.

1. As a school make a policy decision that reduces options, reduces the curriculum spread and allows more time and energy for in depth teaching that moves our learners into better and richer understanding.
2. Source professional development that up-skills teachers and equips them with the knowledge and understanding that are necessary for facilitating high level learning.
3. Schools still carry out internal testing as part of ongoing assessment.  
So within the narrower focus re-structure internal assessment that fits the deeper teaching and learning. Allow the external assessment to service the low level recall based approach while internally we work professionally at doing the best we can to service the real learning needs of our pupils.

This article while perhaps a little limited in scope, and a bit simplistic in its view does contain suggestions that may assist schools and teachers to make a start in addressing some very large and complicated issues that face us as in education today. Any school wanting to make changes will need to examine and consider a host of other factors as they make innovations in practice.