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NEW ZEALAND'S NATIONAL STANDARDS POLICY: HOW SHOULD WE VIEW IT A DECADE ON?

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It was on 2 April 2007 that a media release from then Opposition leader John Key announced that, if elected, National Standards would become the “cornerstone” of [National’s] education policy (Key 2007). The stated rationale for the policy linked back to earlier Education Review Office (ERO) reports that too many children were failing, that students at risk of failing were not being identified well enough, and that schools were not reporting adequately to their communities (ERO 2005, ERO 2007). National won the next general election in November 2008 and the Key Government put the National Standards legislation through under urgency allowing it to bypass the Education and Science Select Committee. The bill went through three readings and was passed, all on a Saturday before Christmas, 13 December 2008 (Education - National Standards - Amendment Act, 2008).

Most New Zealand primary teachers will be well aware of the National Standards assessment system that has followed during the last three terms of government and the controversies surrounding it. Teachers draw on a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence to make ‘Overall Teacher Judgements’ (OTJs) about primary school achievement. The OTJs are in reading, writing and mathematics, on a four-point scale—‘well below’, ‘below’, ‘at’ and ‘above’ and are reported to parents and, in an aggregated form, to the public. This National Standards system has, however, been accompanied by numerous concerns about their nature and impact, some of which are discussed later in this article. My latest book *‘The Search for Better Educational Standards: A Cautionary Tale’* (Thrupp with Lingard, Maguire, & Hursh, in press) provides a detailed description and policy history of the National Standards as well as outlining related research and putting this New Zealand development into an international context.

In this short article, I consider how teachers might judge the National Standards system these days and also how the policy might be understood more generally. These are important questions coming up to the 2017 election because the National Standards system has been such a central feature of the current Government’s approach to education. Teachers will be aware of teacher and principal colleagues who are supportive of National Standards while others are much less so. Conflicting views amongst teachers and principals about the value of the National Standards is also apparent from a recent New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) national survey (Bonne, 2016). School websites indicate diverse views as well. There are some primary school websites that reflect enthusiasm about National Standards and some that barely mention them.

Given this situation, how do we make a judgement about whether or not the National Standards system has been a success? The answer shouldn’t be found in a popularity contest. Even if the National Standards are getting more popular over time (and there is some evidence of this with principals, see below), this is not sufficient evidence that they have been a success. One reason is that the National Standards are being enacted, not implemented, so that it may not be the intended National Standards system that is becoming more pleasing to principals. Another reason is that teachers’ ways of being or subjectivities may be changing over time so that growing enthusiasm for the National Standards could be a symptom of wider changes amongst teachers and principals.

To make a better judgement about the National Standards it is important to look at the possibilities and problems they raise for practice and the related evidence. The problems are important as well as the possibilities because the National Standards system cannot be regarded as successful if it works well for only some schools and only some students. The National Standards policy also need to be understood as unfinished business. By looking at Government aspirations for the National Standards we are in a better position to make a judgement about their impact on education in the future. This article looks at all of these issues before concluding by putting the National Standards debate into a broader national context as well.

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The National Standards as enacted

As early as November 2011, former Education Minister Anne Tolley's biography on her Ministerial website was telling the reader that "[s]he has implemented the ... National Standards" (National Party, 2011). But the notion of 'implementing' reforms tends to assume that politicians and policy makers decide on policies and those in schools simply do as they are told and put the intended policy into practice, regardless of circumstances. Clearly this is not what really happens, and a more realistic understanding of what goes on in schools is the notion of policy *enactment*. This focuses on how policy is translated and reinterpreted by individuals and groups in schools amidst the messy complexities and uncertainties of schools operating in diverse settings and against the background of other education policies and wider social and political contexts (Ball, Maguire & Braun 2012).

It is principals and teaching staff in high socio-economic schools where National Standards achievement is highest that are most favourably disposed towards National Standards (Bonne, 2016). This is predictable because children from advantaged backgrounds will be more likely to be judged 'at' or 'above' in the National Standards and so this system presents fewer problems for high socio-economic schools. But because there is no external moderation, and because the Ministry of Education and ERO do not have the resources to ensure school compliance with all the expectations of the policy, there is a great deal of 'wriggle room' for other schools as well. Taking an enactment perspective reminds us how they could manipulate National Standards data to be more successful. For instance there is nothing to stop the staff at any school judging children 'at', when those at most schools would regard them as 'below'. So it might be that growing enthusiasm for the National Standards reflects increasing understanding of how to work the National Standards system. The latest NZCER findings are consistent with this. The proportion of principals supportive of National Standards had increased from 38 percent in 2013 to 44 percent in 2016, but the proportion who thought National Standards provided a valuable picture of student learning dropped from 37 percent to 23 percent over the same period (Bonne, 2016, p. 15).

Changing subjectivities

It is also difficult to know how much to take any increase in support for National Standards at face value or whether it represents a shift in the subjectivity of principals. For instance, looking at the increase in the proportion of principals supportive of National Standards, are these principals with much the same values who have just decided National Standards are more OK than they used to think in 2013 or do the 2016 results reflect more fundamental change in outlook amongst a new breed of principals? Or perhaps a bit of both? It's an interesting question given the development of a data-driven and data-responsive disposition amongst principals and teachers in Australia and the USA (Holloway-Libell, 2016; Lewis, 2016). It seems unlikely that this wouldn't happen in New Zealand also given that data has become so central to school-level policy and practice.

The Research, Analysis and Insight into National Standards (RAINS) study I undertook with colleagues during the introduction of the National Standards suggested that after an initial period of contestation, teachers and principals came to make a virtue out of necessity (Thrupp & White, 2013). New demands related to the National Standards were to creep in because they were incremental. What wouldn't have been expected or acceptable a few years previously became 'business as usual'. There was too much risk for senior leaders of undermining their own leadership with staff by creating a kind of dissonance around the National Standards: "We are doing this but I don't really agree with it." It was easier to argue that the school could find a way through. The perspective essentially became that 'if we are going to do the National Standards we are going to do them really well, in the same way we do our best at everything else'. Meanwhile New Zealand primary principals appointed since 2010 have only ever known leadership in a National Standards environment, and as each year goes by will represent a greater proportion of the school leader workforce.

Possibilities and problems related to the National Standards

The RAINS research found the National Standards were having some favourable impacts in areas that included teacher understanding of curriculum levels, motivation of some teachers and children and some improved targeting of interventions (Thrupp & White, 2013). The recent NZCER survey also seems to identify some gains. For instance, the 41 percent of principals, who considered the National

Standards data from their school provided a reliable picture of their students' performance, said they used the data to "set strategic goals for raising student achievement (95%), make decisions around teaching and learning at the school level (90%) [and] identify areas of need for teacher PLD (89%)" (Bonne, 2016, p. 16). Meanwhile 74 percent of teachers agreed the OTJ moderation work they did with other teachers had given them useful insights into their practice and nearly half agreed that using National Standards illustrations had helped them identify ways to improve their teaching. (Bonne, 2016, p. 20).

Nevertheless, the National Standards policy has brought plenty of problems too. The RAINS research highlighted curriculum narrowing towards reading, writing and mathematics and towards assessment activities in these areas. It also noted the reinforcement of a two-tier curriculum through incentivising a tighter concentration on numeracy and literacy in low socio-economic schools, while middle class schools were still able to retain a somewhat more generous primary curriculum. There was intensification of staff workloads as well as the positioning and labelling of children as a result of the 4-point OTJ scale (Thrupp & White, 2013). There is some support for these concerns in the NZCER survey as well. For instance, 69 percent of teachers thought the National Standards had narrowed the curriculum they teach (Bonne, 2016, p. 20).

The National Coalition Government has preferred not to dwell on these concerns. Minister of Education Hekia Parata quickly dismissed the RAINS research as a small study funded by a teacher union (Kirk, 2013), but the Ministry of Education's own contracted research project, The School Sample Monitoring and Evaluation Project, has focused mainly on the dependability of OTJs (Ward & Thomas, 2016). As a result, there are really important questions about the National Standards that are under-researched, such as the impact on the curriculum offered by schools or the impact of repeated labelling of children as 'below' or 'well below'.

The National Standards as unfinished business

Another aspect to judging the success of the National Standards system is to realise that although it has not met all the aspirations of the National Coalition Government, it remains a work in progress. The main political failing of the National Standards policy has been around the public release of the data because there has been wide recognition that it can't be used to compare schools. So after several years of unsuccessfully trying to make hay off the annual release of the National Standards data, the National Coalition Government no longer seems to want to make so much of it any more. The annual release has become less eventful and there is not much other media coverage either.

Yet by 2014 the National Standards system seemed to be being drawn into a 'social investment' approach to policy with the National Coalition Government planning to use the National Standards data alongside a few other measures to track the progress of a group of schools and early childhood centres in a given area (Moir & Hartevelt, 2014). By 2016 the Government was drafting an update to the Education Act and consulting on changes to the planning and reporting framework that schools operate within. This included the suggestion that "annual reporting on National Standards would continue, with a move to student-level data" (Ministry of Education 2016). The emphasis on student-level data is important for furthering the social investment approach because it would allow the matching up of National Standards results with other kinds of government-held data about any particular child; for instance, particular social background indicators and financial allocations. It would also require improving the rigour of National Standards assessment through the Progress and Consistency Tool (PaCT), an online tool that has been developed over recent years in order to bring greater consistency to OTJ-making.

Although using performance in National Standards to allocate resources is a long-held Key Government aspiration, there is a new impatience about the social investment approach. It is very much about trying an intervention, measuring it, and discarding it quickly if it doesn't work in order to try something else. Unfortunately, the history of school improvement efforts illustrates that education interventions rarely make so much difference or so quickly, and there is a risk of useful interventions being discarded too quickly (Gray, 2001). The social investment approach also puts great weight on the significance of specific indicators and less on the overall context of deprivation or poverty. In this respect, the social investment approach works to individualise and contain the cause of the underachievement, instead of supporting a more structural understanding of the problem in the

round. From the social investment perspective, a child is held back not by the general effects of poverty and racism, but by specifics such as their mother's lack of education, their father being in prison, coming from an abusive family and so on.

Conclusion: Putting National Standards into a wider context

By the current third term of this National Coalition Government, the National Standards have become less debated. This may be for all the reasons already canvassed: the possibilities of enactment, changing subjectivities, insufficiently researched strengths and weaknesses, unmet aspirations and unfinished business. But by 2017 National Standards can also be linked to other New Zealand developments. The shape of wider economic and social changes has become clearer and a broader vantage point more compelling. These changes have included privatisation, a decline in public spending and more obvious signs of social inequality.

Despite some high profile failures, by 2016 privatisation reforms had occurred many times across the New Zealand public sector under the Key Government and were continuing to occur, including, for instance, selling off state housing, contracting out the running of some prisons and the setting up of Council Controlled Organisations to provide water and other services at local government level. The latest social investment approach, as discussed above, is being rolled out not only into education but also social services, supported by Treasury and drawing on Statistics New Zealand's Integrated Data Infrastructure (IDI).

At the same time, Government is being reduced and the public sector is having to do more with less. Analysis of the 2016 budget shows that spending on public services is shrinking with "tangible reductions in spending on health, education and family support" (CPAG, 2016). Any new spending mostly just offsets the effects of forecast inflation and expected population growth. It is only spending on superannuation that is forecast to rise sharply as the post-war baby-boomers reach retirement age and the Government holds to its political positioning of maintaining superannuation entitlements around the current level.

Rapidly rising house prices have also led to huge increases in personal wealth for many in the older generation, but younger and poorer New Zealanders struggle to get into accommodation and to afford anything much else once accommodation has been paid for. Many people just scrape by while others buy up rental properties and new cars and overseas holidays. New migrants are both welcomed and blamed for this state of affairs.

Recognition of this wider background places the National Standards in a different light than viewing them just as an educational reform. It makes the political campaigns around introducing and then publicly releasing the National Standards seem like something that preoccupied educators and appeased parents and the public while more fundamental changes to New Zealand education and society were afoot. In many ways this argument connects with what Bryan Gould (2016) has written about the legacy of Prime Minister John Key, who resigned in December 2016. "[His] personality was merely the means by which a deadly serious re-making of New Zealand—along ideological lines—was being undertaken." It seems likely that policies as well as personalities have acted as a political smokescreen for what has been really going on in New Zealand. To many educators National Standards have been well worth fighting over but, as it turns out, they may have also been distracting from a wider malaise.

Given all I have said, for this election I would encourage primary teachers (and other educators, policymakers and parents) to think about what has really been gained through the National Standards policy. Are teachers putting their energies towards the best purposes? And assuming there are some worthwhile assessment processes going on beneath the National Standards, what should be jettisoned and what should be retained?

About the author

Martin Thrupp's research interests are in education policy with a particular focus on the lived effects of policy across socially diverse and unequal communities. He is a well-known New Zealand academic and in 2016 received the McKenzie award from the New Zealand Association for Research in Education for his significant contribution to educational research. He has also carried out research

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