National Standards: Are They Up To Standard?

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INTRODUCTION

The National Standards, one for Reading/Writing (Ministry of Education, 2009a) and the other for Mathematics (Ministry of Education, 2009b), were released in late October 2009 with much fanfare. They were launched by the Prime Minister with the Minister of Education in attendance, although the teacher unions and principals' organisations boycotted the event. It is fair to say that as a policy initiative of the new National-led coalition government, the National Standards have not received the professional support the politicians might have expected. This is due, in part, to concern about the conceptual base of and justification for National Standards. There appears to be much muddled thinking (or no thinking at all) by those who framed the policy about some fundamental aspects, particularly the underlying philosophical assumptions and problems which need to be exposed in order to reach an informed view on whether the National Standards are really up to standard.

THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR READING/WRITING AND MATHEMATICS

Both documents begin with a common statement that briefly indicates what National Standards are all about:

> The National Standards provide a nationally consistent means for considering, explaining, and responding to students' progress and achievement in years 1-8. They provide reference points, or signposts, that describe the achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics that will enable students to meet the demands of the New Zealand Curriculum. They will help teachers to make judgements about their students' progress so that the students and their teachers, parents, families, and whanau can agree on the next learning goals.
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> When used in conjunction with effective assessment practices, the National Standards will be a powerful means of informing students, parents, families, whanau, teachers, schools, and the education system about how well things are going and what could be done better to improve learning for all students.
>
> Ministry of Education (2009a, p.4)

This is given more specificity in the Mathematics National Standards document (Ministry of Education, 2009b): 'The standards for mathematics are statements about what students should know and be able to do in order to meet the demands of the New Zealand Curriculum' (p.6). Further, 'The New Zealand Curriculum establishes an expectation of progress through curriculum levels over time. The standards for mathematics set out what can reasonably be expected of most students by the end of each period or year of schooling, from the first year of school through to the end of year 8' (p.6). A similar statement appears on page eight in the Reading/Writing National Standards (Ministry of Education, 2009a). More explicitly still, with regard to reading/writing, we are informed that 'The National Standards make explicit the levels of reading and writing expertise that students are expected to reach. They are high but attainable standards based on consistent expectations of learning' (p.7). We are also told how the standards were arrived at (for mathematics anyway):

> Identifying expectations for each school year also involved examining current levels of achievement by New Zealand students and international expectations as defined by the curriculums and standards of other countries. Research on the numeracy demands of everyday life and the workplace was also taken into account.
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> Ministry of Education (2009b, p.7)

Finally, the mathematics document, unlike that for reading/writing, is quite unashamedly explicit about the linkage of national standards to future achievement:

> Together, the curriculum and the standards will play a vital role in the development of students' ability and inclination to use mathematics effectively – at home, at work and in the community.
>
> Current data about the numeracy of adults in the workforce gives cause for concern. Significant proportions of New Zealand students in the upper primary years do not currently meet the expectations. Unless this situation is addressed, many of these students will not achieve in mathematics at a level that is adequate to meet the demands of their adult lives.
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> Ministry of Education (2009b, p.6)

Such, then, is the description and justification of the National Standards for reading/writing and mathematics in New Zealand primary schools.

There are a number of questions that arise. What are standards? How are standards arrived at? Can standards be measured, and if so how? To what in education are standards applied to, and ought to be applied to? What are some of the problems that arise from applying standards to educational achievement? On these, the documents are largely silent – being introduced in the absence of a justification for their launch and the omission of any criteria for determining at a later time whether the policy initiative has been successful.

The utter paucity of reasoned argument in these two documents in defence of the introduction of National Standards is to be contrasted with the far richer account of standards of an earlier era contained in the 1978 report from the Department of Education on *Educational Standards in State Schools,* the content of which helps to shed considerable light on the issue some thirty years later (and one cannot help but reflect that if the writers of the contemporary documents had read the earlier report then history might not be repeating itself).

WHAT ARE EDUCATIONAL STANDARDS?

Talk of educational standards tends to elicit a fairly favourable response; after all, who could be opposed to there being standards for education? We want our athletes to be the best they can be and achieve the very highest standards of performance; we expect the products we purchase to be of a certain standard below which they should not fall. But the idea of education standards is not quite so clear-cut as setting a minimum time to run a certain distance or that a can of fruit is of a minimum weight. It is a far more complex notion than this.

The first point to make, and a conceptual one, is that the term is ambiguous. There is a distinction to be drawn between ideal and empirical standards and we need to understand how each relates to the sphere of education. An ideal standard is one where a standard is set, such as the 'gold standard', so to speak. It is something against which other things are to be measured; for example, one thinks of the 'ideal' metre rule that sets the standard against which all other metre rules are assessed as accurate measures of a metre. This does not seem to be the sense being used when we talk about education standards for it is hard to comprehend quite what such a standard would look like in education. Perhaps the term 'standard' is being used in a slightly different sense of ideal standard, such that we set a standard that lays down a marker for successful and unsuccessful achievement. So, with athletes seeking a place in the team to attend the Olympics, the various sports organisations set a standard (normally high) achievement above which leads to inclusion in the team, and failure below the standard means exclusion from the team. So a runner must run the 100 meter dash in a predetermined time, the long jumper must cover a predetermined distance and the pole-vaulter must reach a predetermined height, and so on. This starts to get closer to what we mean in our talk of education standards. However, it is relatively easy to specify the required standards of speed, distance and height for athletic events; it is a lot harder to do the same for education standards. This is clear from what the 1978 report has to say about standards:

> Standards are yardsticks or norms. They are used to measure the worth or value of something … When people talk about standards, they usually have in mind something that is stable and consistent, something that can be applied to individual cases to make an authoritative decision or judgement.
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> Department of Education (1978, p.5)

This distinction between the 'gold' standard and the standards of human achievement illuminates another important point about education standards that should not be lost sight of, even if it is not acknowledged by the National Standards. Said the 1978 report:

> There is another important respect in which educational standards differ from many other standards. The Standard Yard will make the point. Once established, the Standard Yard was accepted as valid by everyone who used imperial measures. No one ever suggested that the length of the Standard Yard should itself be increased. People were happy enough to accept the standard itself, their only concern being to measure with it as accurately as possible. Most educational standards are not viewed in this way. Virtually everyone who gives any thought to standards in education will assume that, whatever they are, standards in education ought to improve: not only should an increasing proportion of the population achieve standards that are considered to be acceptable, but the standards are indeed being raised gives confidence that the education system is serving the public well. Evidence that standards are being maintained may be less than reassuring – people intuitively feel they should be improving. And evidence that standards were declining would cause people to accuse the education system of letting society down. What is happening, or thought to be happening, to educational standards can thus have an important bearing on the way that members of a national community feel about their community and its prospects. Discussion about educational standards is often also discussion about national aspirations and fears
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> (pp.6-7)

Empirical standards, on the other hand, are just those levels of achievement actually attained in some performance. For example, we might say of an ice-skater that she set such a high standard that it would be difficult for anyone to beat her in the competition. They are those achievements which are observed and empirically measured in some way using some sort of instrument – time, weight, distance, height and the like, using stop-watch, scales, tape-measure and so on; these are some of the means by which an actual physical performance is recorded. In education, the favoured instrument is the test or examination while the performance is the answer given which is assessed according to criteria and granted some 'objective' mark such as 6/10 or 60%. From one occasion to the next, a child's actual standard of achievement may vary slightly or greatly, leading us to say that the standard of a child's work is higher or lower than before. Against this is the 'official' or ideal standard against which a child's performance will be judged. The standard for passing can be set at any level such as 5/10 or 10/10. In an examination a pass mark of 5/10 may suffice but in a spelling test of 10 words a pass of 10/10 may be required. There is a degree of arbitrariness as to where we set the ideal standard as a measure for the success of actual standards of achievement arrived at in a particular performance. Just as the empirical standard may rise

or fall from one time to another so too may the ideal standard be raised or lowered in order to manipulate the proportion of those who will succeed or fail.

The National Standards do appear to define 'standards' in the ideal sense since they talk about 'what students should know' or what can be expected of students. So far, so good. But problems remain.

TO WHAT IN EDUCATION ARE STANDARDS APPLIED TO?

The National Standards are limited to three areas of the *New Zealand Curriculum,* reading/writing and mathematics. Interestingly, the earlier report covered the whole gamut of the school curriculum – English, mathematics, science, music, art and craft, health, outdoor education, and the personal qualities of students; the only exception being social studies where a new syllabus had been introduced. The very narrow focus of the National Standards is a cause for concern; it gives a clear signal that some curriculum areas form the 'basics' while other subjects fall into the 'frills', with the former being given high priority and the latter much lower status. This has a number of serious implications. First, in terms of professional development, the Minister of Education has made it abundantly clear that for 2010, contracts will only be made available for those curriculum areas covered by the National Standards with no funding being made available for the other curriculum fields. This will have profound employment consequences for the university-based school advisors in these areas whose current contracts will not be renewed and also for the schools which have up until now benefitted from the work of the advisors. Once gone, they will not be easily replaced in years to come.

A second impact on schools is likely to be the emphasis given to the two National Standards 'basics' at the expense of the other 'frills' in terms of time allocation and staffing. With regard to time allocation, it is of interest to note that in the 1978 report (p.85) the average weekly time given to subjects is as follows:

	Standard 1	*Standard 4*	*Form 2*
Language (oral and written)	3.30*	4.00	3.30
Spelling	1.40	1.40	1.30
Handwriting	1.30	1.00	.40
Reading	4.00	3.30	3.30
Mathematics	3.45	3.45	3.30
Social Studies	1.30	2.30	2.30
Science	1.00	1.15	1.00
Manual Training			1.40
Physical Education	1.30	1.30	1.30
Health	.30	.30	.45
Art and Craft	1.30	1.00	1.00
Music	1.00	1.00	1.00

*Time is given in hours and minutes

Table 1: Average Weekly Time Given To Subjects

How well the 'frills' subjects will fare in the future remains to be seen but given the increasing pressure being placed on schools to raise student achievement so that more students meet the National Standards then it is a not unreasonable prediction that the 'basics' will gain a greater share of the available time while the so-called 'frills' will suffer by comparison.

There are several important conceptual matters regarding National Standards that must be considered, and here the 1978 report is instructive.

CAN STANDARDS BE MEASURED, AND IF SO HOW?

The measurability of standards

The 1978 report was quite explicit in its warning that not all educational standards are measurable, and this has important implications for National Standards.

> But by no means all standards are measurable – and this is particularly so in education. Many of the most important outcomes of education are abilities, attitudes of mind and personal qualities. Qualities such as reliability, initiative, inventiveness and loyalty can be assessed, judged, and compared – but not in units of precise measurement. Much that is said about educational standards is thus subjective. The standards that are appealed to are judgements of what *ought* to be. They are often – inevitably and rightly – as much as an expression of the values and judgements of the person making the judgement as they are a measurement of the mark or its quality.
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> (p.5)

It is evident that the National Standards, as promulgated, are those which can be measured in a direct and empirically observable way, and these are included at the expense of other areas of the curriculum which have been excluded. For example, given the importance of science, not only for understanding the world we inhabit but instrumentally for the benefits it can bring to our general well-being (weighed against the failings of science), it is of concern that science has not found its way into the National Standards. And the same could be said for other curricular areas too. Even more troubling, granted our social ills, is the absence of the dispositions of social living – why are standards of conduct according to a moral way of life simply ignored? To be sure, citizens need to be literate and numerate to engage in all the activities of their personal and working lives but they also need to be committed to the very highest standards of cultural, economic, political and social behaviour if they are to live good lives in a good community. So, by restricting the National Standards to literacy and numeracy, other equally if not more valuable achievements are removed from recognition as standards worthy of national status. In short, the National Standards differentiate the curriculum into high status basic subjects (literacy, numeracy) and low status frills (the rest) (Snook, 1990).

How standards are measured

Standards set a level of achievement for people to meet for particular purposes. How the achievement of standards is measured and reported can take several forms, the most obvious being the two embedded in the very National Standards themselves – words and numbers. But how a standard is to be measured is given by the nature of the standard itself, and it was Aristotle who so wisely observed that we can only gain as much precision in a subject as the subject allows. How, then, to measure achievement of the National Standards? Again, the 1978 report is instructive:

> Judgements that can be measured and expressed in numbers often appear to count for more than judgements expressed in words. There is a tendency to reduce discussions of educational standards to abilities that can be measured and quantified. The number of words a student can spell correctly, for example, can easily be added up and compared with other students' results. The same student's developing ability to use these words accurately and effectively, however, is much less easily reduced to a numerical scale.
>
> Department of Education (1978, p.5)

This should serve to remind us, if we needed reminding, that great care must be taken over how standards, National and otherwise, are measured, for there is a very real danger that any press for school comparison by way of league tables will lead to measurement reduction whereby standards most appropriately measured by words are most inappropriately measured by numbers. To do so would signal ideology's triumph over rationality.

Comparing past and present standards

The 1978 report also alerts us to something else we should generally avoid, namely, comparing present standards with past ones.

> ... there is no way of comparing students' understanding, today, of a syllabus that stresses mathematical understanding, with students' understanding, ten or more years ago, of a different syllabus. That syllabus placed less stress on understanding and, where it did stress it, placed it on different kinds of understanding. Mathematical understanding has improved, but public discussion focuses most easily on the decline in computational skills. That decline is measurable in numbers and percentages – it is concrete fact and refers to an aspect of numeracy that virtually everyone in the community can understand.
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> (p.6)

Note two things. First, the standards set for today's child at school will in many cases be different from those in place for their parent's and grandparent's earlier eras. What they were set to learn twenty-five or fifty years ago, and be

assessed on, may no longer be applicable today. While some basic skills demanded in sport and physical education may still be the same (such as catching a cricket ball or vaulting a gymnastic box), in other areas (such as science, mathematics and technology), today's understanding bears no comparison with past understanding, given the advances made in the content of these curriculum areas, so no reasonable comparison is possible. Second, older citizens with nostalgic memories of what was required of them as children at school have a marked tendency to take these as the 'gold standard' of achievement and against this, judge current standards to have declined. This may or may not be the case. The computational skills of 'mental arithmetic' may no longer be what they once were but given modern technology (calculator, computer, cash register) perhaps this does not matter. On the other hand, an older generation, especially academics and employers, bemoan the perceived lower standards of students' written language with its poor spelling, incorrect grammar and low level of meaning. Whether current standards, National or not, have risen or fallen is something far more complex to determine, extending far beyond a simple yes or no.

HOW ARE STANDARDS ARRIVED AT?

There is a further matter, not raised in the 1978 report, which is deeply troubling. Standards are value judgements about the level of performance people are expected or required to achieve. A standard can be pitched so high that no one attains it (setting the high jump bar at 5 metres) or so low that everyone can achieve it (placing the high jump bar on the ground). These are two extremes of no use to measure achievement. But a high standard is set if the purpose of the standard is to set a criterion for only a few to achieve (set the high jump bar at a level only elite athletes can achieve in order to go to the Olympics) or at a reasonably low level so that most participants can demonstrate a mastery (set the high jump bar at, say, 30 cm which would exclude few, perhaps only those in wheelchairs). Or, the standard can be set according to some predetermined level of achievement which will permit anything between 0-100% attainment. What, then, of the National Standards?

Hartevelt (2009a) has reported that the Ministry of Education predicts the following achievement percentages in mathematics:

Year 3	93%
Year 6	75%
Year 7	69%
Year 8	51%

We are told that the year standards are those that need to be achieved if children are to stay on track to pass NCEA level 2 in Year 12. If the 42% decline over Years 3-8 is extrapolated out over years 8-12 then the percentage rate for NZCEA will be 3%! There is something odd about the predicted percentage outcomes which raise an awkward question about the level at which the National Standards are set for each year. What is the justification for setting such a low standard in Year 3 so that 93% can achieve but a higher standard

set at Year 8 so only 51% achieve (shades of School Certificate!) or whatever percentage level one chooses. Although the percentage set would be arbitrary, one % rate for all would at least have the virtue of being consistent over the Year 1-13 time span. But to set yearly standards which decline so dramatically suggests the standards have been set at a level so totally unrelated to the developmental understanding of children's mathematical understanding. It is as if the standards have just been 'plucked out of thin air' with the percentage rate left to fall where it will.

WHAT INFLUENCES AFFECT NATIONAL STANDARDS?

National Standards have been introduced in a climate of political ideology and the absence of a sound justification from Minister and Ministry but for the mantra that the National Standards will raise standards nationally. This remains to be seen, but if the political will is to translate into reality much more is required than pious hope. The 1978 report alerts us to a wide range of influences that can advance or constrain standards which we need to be fully conversant with. These factors will not be detailed here but attention simply drawn to them: changing expectations of parents, youth sub-culture, changing school population, internal migration, increased length of schooling, staffing improvements, changes in teacher education, time allocation to subjects, curriculum revision, and evidence from research.

One final factor is of special interest given current times. Said the 1978 report in its conclusion:

> The schools are now doing their work in a bleak economic climate. There are not jobs waiting for all school leavers, regardless of what they bring to an employer in the way of attainments, personal qualities and attitudes. In New Zealand, as elsewhere, teenagers form a high proportion of the unemployed.
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> Teenagers with poor attainment thus find themselves at a double disadvantage. They are less attractive to potential employers than teenagers with better scholastic records. They are often, as well, less attractive than older people who, competing with them for the same job, have greater maturity and, quite often, a proven work record.
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> In these circumstances it would be surprising if there were not a great deal of public debate about the work of the schools – what they should be concentrating on, whether, indeed, they should be attempting to do so much, and whether what they are doing is good enough. And this is exactly what is going on.
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> (pp.102-3)

History repeats itself!

SOME FINAL TROUBLING ISSUES

The introduction of the National Standards has brought with it a number of quite troubling issues. In a covering letter accompanying the distribution of the National Standards documents, the Minister of Education wrote:

> We know that many of our students are among the most successful in the world, but we also know that too many are falling behind. Nearly one in five of our young people leave school without the skills and qualifications they need to succeed. This has to change. That is why lifting student achievement is a key priority … The National Standards will enable us to improve student achievement by providing sound information about how students are progressing.
>
> Hon. Anne Tolley (2009, p.1)

The PIRLS, PISA and NCEA data all confirm that our top students perform well but that we have one of the largest gaps of underachievement in the OECD. The Minister informs us that 'The standards have been designed so that a student who meets them is on track to succeed at NCEA level 2' (p.1). Several points are worth noting. First, merely documenting National Standards will not do the trick of raising standards. Specific causal mechanisms for increasing learning and raising the level of achievement must be identified and to date these are singularly lacking. It therefore remains a moot point whether the National Standards will achieve the goal set for them. Second, the National Standards cover Years 1-8 but level 2 NCEA is pitched at year 12 so at least three years of secondary schooling are without crucial National Standards to get children from the end of Year 8 to the end of Year 12. The reason for this gap remains unclear. Third, the Associate Minister of Education, Heather Roy, claims that 'A system of new National Standards to assess primary school students will benefit special needs students' (NZPA, 2009). How they will benefit is decidedly unclear. We are told that 'their progress will be assessed against the standards' (NZPA, 2009) but whether there is any point in including special needs children in this blanket scheme remains to be seen for such children will always remain below the National Standards for their year, so will always be counted as 'failing to meet the National Standard'. On the other hand, the very group of children who are identified as falling into the long tail of underachievement are the very ones who have been excluded from the National Standards regime. Maori Language schools will not implement National Standards for another three years even though the National Standards are designed to raise the level of achievement of these under-performing students (Hartevelt, 2009b).

The Minister has said repeatedly on radio that 150,000 children fail to achieve, and that National Standards is the means by which their achievement can be raised. This is a bold claim indeed, for it posits National Standards as the causal mechanism that mediates educational success and failure. However, if it is pre-determined that the National Standard for each year are set at a level of difficulty such that some will pass and others will fail (i.e., not set so

low that all will pass) then the introduction of National Standards will do nothing for those who fall below the standard. Here is an empirical prediction: children who pass the National Standards in the first few years of their schooling will continue to pass the National Standards set further on in their schooling and go on to pass NCEA Level 2 while children who fail National Standards in the early years of their schooling will continue to do so and will eventually fail NCEA Level 2. If this prediction is borne out by the empirical evidence then National Standards will have turned out to have been a colossal failure. Time will tell, twelve years in fact, for this year's new entrant intake to reveal whether the politicians or the critics were right. By then, the politicians and the critics will have long gone, leaving the students to reap the 'rewards'.

A further matter of concern is this. The school curriculum embraces a wide range of experiences – the traditional areas of science, social studies and the arts are augmented by values, moral ones especially. These all contribute to children acquiring the qualities of educated persons – the ability to reason well, think critically, reflect thoughtfully, be free and autonomous, and participate as responsible citizens in a fair, just and democratic society. The placing of value on all of this is undermined by two areas – literacy and numeracy – being raised to the status of National Standards and accorded all the prestige that the state can bring to bear upon them. To be sure, literacy and numeracy are essential for becoming educated and living good lives, but so too are science, the arts and values if we are not to lose sight of the noble aims of education rather than reduce schooling to the barest minimum of technical competence measured by National Standards. That they can read is important, *what* they read and the *use* made of their reading even more so.

Concern that the data generated by National Standards will be used to construct league tables has been expressed by teachers (Hartevelt, 2010) and academics (Thrupp et al., 2009, p.9) but is not shared by the Prime Minister (Young, 2010) or press editorials (NZ Herald, 2010). Responding to worries raised by Dr Pita Sharples, Associate Minister of Education, that the publication of league tables will impair negatively on Maori schools which fare poorly, Mr Key met Dr Sharples and was later reported as saying 'I wanted to put his mind at rest that he shouldn't be concerned about the issue of league tables because that is an issue we need to confront in 2012. By the time we get there, I'm totally confident we will have that position in hand' (Young, 2010). However, we should be cautious about accepting such reassurances. In Australia, the Federal Government has established a My Schools website that 'rates the performance of 10,000 public and private schools using data from the National Assessment Programme Literacy and Numeracy test, conducted over the past two years among students in years three, five, seven and nine'; 'A simple colour coding demonstrates performance against national averages, with the colour deepening according to position above or below the norm: red for below, white for average, green for above'; 'It is designed to both allow parents to assess the standard of their local schools and compare it with the performance of similar schools throughout the nation' (APN, 2010). For what reason? Perhaps the answer is not too hard to find – to provide parents with information relevant to school choice and school choice only becomes important for parents when schools are competing in an open market. And not far behind this lurks the privatisation of state schools (Clark, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Much debate surrounds the introduction of National Standards. The Minister of Education is adamant (in the absence of empirical evidence for her policy) that they will contribute to raising children's achievement in literacy and numeracy, and by extension in other curriculum subjects. Critics (Thrupp, Hattie, Crooks & Flockton, 2009) think otherwise. If the Minister is correct, and only time will tell (but history is not on her side), then children will be the winners. But if she is wrong, then the consequences for children who do not succeed in achieving the standards being labelled failures and then being treated accordingly to their profound disadvantage (given up on by teachers and forced to do better by parents) will be extremely traumatic for them. Woulfe (2009) reports that the Minister acknowledges that the introduction of National Standards is 'a momentous moment in time ... and it can go either way' (p.1). If these are the best odds that the Minister can count on, then the risk of failure is extremely high indeed.

I finish with this quotation from the very last paragraph of the 1978 report, for it warns us not to be taken in by simplistic political solutions to complex educational problems:

> To talk, therefore, about improving the attainments of those with the lowest attainments in their age groups or in the community is to talk about problems that have baffled education systems for a very long time, problems that dedicated teachers in this and other countries are still wrestling with .... Solutions will be found only by pressing on with what teachers and researchers have been doing for a very long time in trying to find the causes of failure or of unsatisfactory performance, and then to find workable answers. More research will be needed in the causes of failure. More development work will be needed to try out methods that are successful. More will need to be done to help teachers become better equipped to deal with failing students. And if this is to be done, it can't be done for nothing – if the community really wants higher standards from children, teenagers and adults with low levels of attainment, it will have to pay more to get them.
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> (pp.165-6)

Good advice from thirty years ago. Is the Minister listening?

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