National Standards: The Public Debate – What Was It All About?

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INTRODUCTION

The introduction of National Standards in late 2009, to be implemented at the start of the 2010 new school year, generated wide public debate among politicians, principals, teachers, unions, academics, media commentators and the public at large. Much of this was on the radio (Morning Report) and television (Agenda) and in the print media (newspapers). The dispute well illustrated the point that 'education is a site of political struggle' as those for and against National Standards sought to have their voices heard. If we are to understand what the controversy was all about, then we need to have a good grasp of who was involved, and what were their views; but more than this, we need to probe below the surface features of the debate to explore at a deeper level what the struggle was really all about.

THE PUBLIC DEBATE: OCTOBER 2009 TO MARCH 2010[1]

Although elected in late 2008 with an education policy on National Standards, the National coalition government faced little public comment on the policy for almost a year. The first rumblings were heard in October 2009 following an announcement by the Ministry of Education that funding for school support services would be restricted to reading/writing and mathematics, in line with the soon to be released National Standards documents, with no assistance for other curriculum areas; it was reported (NZPA, 2009a) that school principals were concerned about the impact this would have on the range of school subjects. Several weeks later, in early November, some Canterbury parents, led by Dellis Hunt, formed a group called Parents Against Labelling to fight against labelling children as failures, while Francis Nelson, president of the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), expressed her puzzlement over the projected pass rates for each year level (Hartevelt, 2009a). Then, only days later, an ardent supporter of national standards and an architect of its broad conception, Professor John Hattie (University of Auckland), expressed dismay at the turn National Standards had taken, which was at variance with what he originally proposed. Issuing a critical discussion document (Woulfe, 2009), Hattie warned that National Standards could be a disaster, generate league tables, lead to teachers playing 'devious games' and would do little to raise

[1] For the purpose of this analysis, the discussion is limited to these critical first six months of public debate and mainly to material contained in online print media (unpaged reports), and is explored in the chronological order of reported events.

student achievement. Anne Tolley, the Minister of Education, and Mary Chamberlain, a Ministry of Education official, were both dismissive of Hattie's worries (Woulfe, 2009). In late November, Hattie, along with three other education academics (Professor Terry Crooks, Lester Flockton, Professor Martin Thrupp) published an open letter (Thrupp *et al*., 2009) to the Minister urging her to pay heed to their cautions about National Standards. At around the same time, Heather Roy, Associate Minister of Education, told participants at a Parents Vision Impaired conference that special needs students would benefit from the introduction of National Standards (NZPA, 2009b). How, was not made clear. And then, a few days later, the Minister announced that 'the standards were meant to address the widening gap between the highest and lowest performing children' (Hartevelt, 2009b), but she did not explain how National Standards would close the achievement gap, especially since National Standards would not be introduced to Maori language schools for three years 'despite new findings showing Maori are far behind their Pakeha classmates' (Hartevelt, 2009b). Professor Wally Penetito (Victoria University of Wellington) observed that the National Standards were a 'quick fix' which would not work for Maori' (Hartevelt, 2009b), but the Minister was unmoved. So ended 2009, with parliament in recess and the nation on holiday. Things remained dormant into the new year until late January 2010 when, on the eve of the start of the new school year, 'the bubble burst'.

On January 25, the Prime Minister announced that in a minor Cabinet reshuffle he had removed the Tertiary Education portfolio from Mrs. Tolley so that she could concentrate on implementing National Standards (Young, 2010a). Even though the Prime Minister expressed his confidence in Mrs. Tolley (NZPA, 2010a) and she denied that losing the portfolio was due to overwork (Young, 2010b), one commentator remarked that 'Tolley [was] the first to fail National's Standards' for 'if the introduction of national standards in primary and intermediate schools were going well, she would not have lost Tertiary Education this week in order to concentrate all her efforts on its implementation' (Young, 2010c). Audrey Young reported that Professor John Hattie 'has been consulted all the way along by National as it has developed its standards policy' so 'his criticism ... was a major embarrassment'. But 'National won't ignore Hattie'. On Wednesday January 27 the Prime Minister 'was having discussions in the Beehive with Hattie about his concerns' (Young, 2010c). Young noted that the NZEI could win the support of parents with its nation-wide campaign, given that primary schools are close to their local communities. While the government could buy a fight with teachers, doing so with parents was something the government could not afford. By now it was becoming clear that things were heating up between the Minister and her critics. Trevett (2010) observed that the row over National Standards was becoming increasingly personal: the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) president, Kate Gainsford, said Mrs. Tolley talked 'to' people rather than with them while Mrs. Tolley retorted that it was 'now difficult to trust' Ms. Gainsford.

At the same time, it was reported that the Minister would spearhead a '$26 million charm offensive' to ease the introduction of National Standards. Hartevelt (2010a) commented that 'she will face a hostile reception as she tours the country, with at least 80 schools vowing to break the law and boycott the policy'. The Minister spoke of sacking Boards of Trustees (BOTs); in response Pat Newman, president of Tai Tokerau Principals Association and NZEI's

Francis Nelson warned the Minister of the dangers of doing so, while Lorraine Kerr, president of the School Trustees Association (STA), warned that schools had a responsibility to enact the standards which have the force of law. Two more teacher groups now joined the fray: the PPTA issued a discussion document critical of National Standards while Ernie Buutveld, president of the Principals' Federation, criticised the standards for the use that could be made of them in the construction of league tables (Hartevelt, 2010b). While the Minister sought to allay concerns about league tables, setting up a working party to report back on the issue, she also expressed interest in the Australian Government's My School website league tables which are based on national literacy and numeracy testing at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 across 10,000 schools. Schools are placed in one of three colour-coded categories – red for below, white for average, green for above. Its purpose: 'To allow parents to assess the standard of their local schools and compare it with the performance of similar schools throughout the nation' (APN, 2010a).

At around the time the Minister announced her tour of the country, NZEI launched its own 'nationwide National Standards bus tour', starting in Northland and Bluff. The Bluff bus departed on February 2, farewelled by Invercargill mayor Tim Shadbolt, New Zealand's poet laureate Cilla McQueen, Labour MP and former Minister of Education Trevor Mallard, and the NZEI's national secretary (Morgan, 2010a). The buses were to visit hundreds of schools up and down the country. Clearly, the battle lines were being ever more sharply drawn.

On the day the NZEI buses hit the road, an editorial in *The New Zealand Herald* suggested that the Prime Minister was deeply worried about National Standards. The government was urged to hold its nerve despite the fact that 'a chorus of teachers, principals and academics are damning it' (APN, 2010b) and that the architect, Professor Hattie, had changed his mind. On the other hand, the Labour leader Phil Goff declared that Mrs. Tolley 'should be sacked over the 'shambles' of the National Standards policy' (Hartevelt, 2010c). The Minister's woes were not helped by the Associate Minister of Education and co-leader of the Maori Party, Dr Pita Sharples, publicly expressing concern about National Standards. A quiet word from the Prime Minister quelled that moment of political unrest in the Cabinet ranks. John Minto, activist and Quality Public Education Coalition (QPEC) member, thought Sharples was right to be concerned, and asked why the government was persisting with National Standards in the face of intense criticism from teachers, principals, schools and academics. Minto's answer: 'because the policy has always been about creating a marketplace in education for the private sector to get a bigger share of the education dollar' (Minto, 2010).

Worried about public perceptions of National Standards, the Prime Minister sent out a letter to 350,000 households and announced that 'all of National's MPs would begin a round of public meetings to explain the policy' (Kay, 2010). This was a clear indication of a government on the back foot; to gain the offensive, the Prime Minister also launched a strong attack on teachers and others opposed to National Standards with teacher unions criticised for protecting under-performing teachers, accusing 30% of teachers of not doing a good job.

The next day, February 3, was the start of a media onslaught. The president of the Principals' Federation, Ernie Buutveld, rejected the government's position. He called for a trial of National Standards, noted that

the Education Review Office (ERO) had pointed to only 10% of poor teachers (and not 30% as Key and Tolley had claimed) and criticised the different treatment being allowed for Maori immersion schools – benchmarking rather than standards and a trial period (NZPA, 2010b). NZEI president, Francis Nelson, said 'the campaign was the Government hitting 'the panic button' as it realised opposition to the policy was growing' (APN, 2010c), while Ernie Buutveld of the Principals' Federation observed that 'By ripping into teachers and unions over their opposition to national standards Prime Minister John Key has revealed a different agenda than helping students' (NZPA, 2010c) – 'a tool to bash schools and blame teachers'. Labour leader Phil Goff also weighed in, saying that the government's campaign amounted to propaganda: 'It's not focused on the kids any more, it's focused on trying to sell their side of the story when they've got so many people offside' (Hartevelt, 2010d).

Numerous media commentators also joined the chorus. John Armstrong (2010) commented: 'It's going well. Swimmingly so, according to the Prime Minister. Well, things aren't going well ... Tolley has done a poor job of selling national standards – a policy which should be a winner for National'. Colin Espiner (2010) opined: 'In taking on the teacher unions over national standards, Prime Minister John Key is picking a fight he cannot easily win ... The NZEI is a formidable foe'. And Tracey Watkins (2010) observed: 'To win the argument, the Government now has no choice but go on a war footing against the New Zealand Educational Institute. This is the fight Mr Key was desperately hoping to avoid. National governments have taken on the teacher unions before over bulk funding and lost. But too much is at stake for National now to back down'. Support for National Standards came from an unexpected quarter. Professor Tom Nicholson (Massey University) claimed that the National Standards would 'bring clarity and consistency across schools' and, more alarmingly, that 'there is nothing to fear about national standards' (Massey University, 2010a). He also spoke approvingly of league tables.

A new justification for National Standards emerged with the Minister grasping at it; according to an OECD report, the New Zealand economy 'could grow up to $6 billion a year if Kiwi children lifted their academic performance' which led Mrs. Tolley to claim that 'the report was evidence of how much there was to gain from the national standards education policy' (Hartevelt, 2010e). However, the same day Professor Terry Crooks (University of Otago) pointed out that the $36m of extra funding for National Standards would provide no more than half a day's tuition to children whose achievement is at the lower end, a view echoed by Associate Professor Alison Gilmore (University of Canterbury) who noted that 'there is too much politics in it' (Hartevelt, 2010f).

A further flurry of public debate and media comment occurred a day or two later over the weekend of February 6-7. An Nielson survey of 545 *The New Zealand Herald* readers found that while 73% of respondents supported the introduction of National Standards, only 12% said they had a full understanding of the policy, 62% had a partial understanding and 26% had no understanding at all! 48% thought league tables to be a good thing; 56% believed that many of the curriculum subjects not covered by the National Standards were as important as or more important than reading and mathematics (APN, 2010d).

Professor Glenda Anthony (Massey University) expressed concern that the National Standards would not improve children's learning, especially in mathematics. Labelling children as being 'below', 'at' or 'above' a fixed point

raises questions about 'how the teacher would arrive at this label, what evidence they would need to collect and collate, and how reliable and valid is their assessment' (Massey University, 2010b). Her colleague, Associate Professor Tracey Riley (Massey University) noted that, in relation to gifted students, 'the reporting mechanisms for National Standards may put them at even greater risk, because although a child can achieve at 'below' or 'well below' average, one can only achieve 'above average'' (Massey University, 2010c). But it was Professor Hattie who captured the media attention that Saturday. In a lengthy article on him, it was reported that Hattie had been consulted by Key and Tolley, and before them by Bill English. Hattie supports the idea of national standards, but not the form that the National Standards has taken, about which he was not consulted. Labelled 'National's education guru' (APN, 2010e), Hattie said: 'When I ask at the moment what percentage of kids can pass each of the standards, I don't get an answer at all and I think that's just absurd' (APN, 2010e). But on 3 November 2009, Hartevelt (2009a) reported on Ministry of Education projections attributed to a Ministry official, Mary Chamberlain. In mathematics:

Years 1-6	75-90% of pupils would be at or above
Years 7-8	50-70% of pupils would be at or above
Year 3	93% of pupils would be at or above
Year 7	69% of pupils would be at or above
Year 8	51% of pupils would be at or above

The same day, Hattie announced that 'he was about to start work on plans for a national league table system' (APN, 2010f), but his justification for doing so was puzzling. 'He did not support league tables, but the introduction of national standards ... made them inevitable' (APN, 2010f) so he would do the Government's work for them (or the media's, in reality). Three days later, the University of Auckland announced that Hattie would be running National Standards workshops for teachers in 2010, from Auckland to Invercargill: 'The seminars will assist schools to better understand how to implement national standards, and will demonstrate how e-asTTle ... can be used alongside standards' (University of Auckland, 2010). Hattie was a principal developer of asTTle.

The commentators had another field day. John Roghan (2010) wrote: 'The league tables are for the information of parents who want their child to have all the advantages they can get ... National is paying a price for timidity. It could set up all schools ... (as) independently managed, voucher funded and obliged to satisfy sufficient parents to survive'. Coincidentally, Matt McCarten (2010), taking an opposite stand, asked: 'Is there a wider political agenda Key isn't sharing with us? Privatisation and vouchers, anyone?' Deborah Coddington (2010), critical of the teacher unions, was of the view that 'a few standards in schools is not too much to ask for'. Kerre Woodham (2010) queried whether National Standards pass the test: 'So many questions and until we get a few answers, the energies of government ministers and education professionals will be taken up in fighting for the moral high ground rather than

helping the most vulnerable of our kids'. And Tapu Misa (2010) concluded that 'there is no easy answer on national standards'.

On February 11, Garth George (2010) put it bluntly enough: 'It's long past time the teacher unions, too, were put in their place. Teachers are public servants and as such ought to be made to do what they're told'. This on the same day it was reported that 'between 200-300 teachers in Southland would boycott workshops aimed at preparing teachers for the introduction of National Standards' (Morgan, 2010b).

A *New Zealand Listener* (2010a) editorial asserted, 'Teacher unions have no right to jeopardise efforts to lift children's attainment'. Repeating the claim that '30% of Year 1 and 2 teachers were failing to adequately teach numeracy and literacy', the editorial went on to say that National Standards is 'a policy aimed solely at attempting to lift the educational achievements of New Zealand children'. On league tables: 'In an era in which the public has come to expect the ready accessibility of data and information, it is ridiculous for anyone to consider that the education sector can somehow plead an exemption from transparency'. And to finish off, the editorial concluded: 'The debate should not be whether National Standards are valuable, but whether they go far enough in reducing our high levels of underachievement' (p. 4). Response was quick. Emeritus Professor Ivan Snook (2010a) castigated the editorial for its misuse of the quoted 30% and in reply to the editor's note (*New Zealand Listener*, 2010b), Snook (2010b) again observed that the ERO data did not support the conclusion of 30%. Emeritus Professor Warwick Elley (2010) set out a very measured reply which not only identified the key issues and considered shortcomings but also indicated that the National Standards were unlikely to close the gap or shorten the tail. Another respondent, Gordon Dryden (2010), put it succinctly enough: 'The real challenge is to fund the resources and programmes, inside and outside school, needed to lift that tail' (p. 7).

The dust settled, but only for a few days. On February 17, the Minister announced the membership of the Independent Advisory Group for National Standards. The government statement noted that the group 'will support the implementation of National Standards' (Tolley, 2010). Said the Minister, 'It will provide me with independent, free and frank advice ... on any refinements that could enhance the effectiveness of the Standards' (Tolley, 2010). The chair, Professor Emeritus Gary Hawke is a retired Professor of Economic History so could not be expected to be an expert on National Standards; Professor Tom Nicholson and Professor John Hattie both support the introduction of National Standards; Dr Tony Trinick was recommended by the Associate Minister Pita Sharples, and is a former colleague of the Minister at the University of Auckland; and, Dr Avis Glaze is a Canadian of unknown quality. Given the policy constraints (implement) and policy interests (support implementation) it is hard to conclude how independent their advice can be. Indeed, the Minister was moved to warn them, 'If I think adjustments need to be made, then I will make them ... but we don't have to do everything they recommend' (Beaumont, 2010a). Critical experts (e.g., Professor Terry Crooks, Professor Emeritus Warwick Elley) are noticeably absent. The same day, Mrs Tolley came under pressure from Labour's education spokesperson, Trevor Mallard, who in the House asked her repeatedly to explain how 'inter-school moderation' worked. Her explanation:

> The National Standards, at their heart, are to address inter-school moderation. Currently a large number of assessment tools are used by schools, and no one standard applies across them. That is what national standards are. So the existing assessment tools will remain in place, and the national standards will go right across all these tools, so that it will not matter which school a child goes to, or which assessment tool a particular school uses, because there will be a standard that is national. That is the essence of national standards, so the inter-school moderation is exactly that.
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> APN (2010g)

To which Mallard pointed out that 'inter-school moderation was making sure there was consistency of judgements between teachers in schools, between schools in the same location and between locations' (APN, 2010g). Elsewhere, it was noted that while 'Anne Tolley may well know exactly how moderation works ... her seeming reluctance to explain when questioned in parliament yesterday left the distinct impression she was less than 100 per cent sure' (APN, 2010h).

Trouble was also brewing on a new front. The School Trustees Association (STA) sent an email to all BOTs warning of the consequences if National Standards were not implemented. Board members were advised that it would be unwise for them to sign a petition against National Standards: NZEI and the Principals' Federation both condemned the advice as anti-democratic in its attempt to stifle dissent (Hunt, 2010a). It was also clear that there are schools around the country prepared to break the law (APN, 2010i).

Local difficulties also emerged. Karori Normal School apologised to parents after complaints were received about the sending home of the Principals' Federation petition. The STA questioned the 'politically motivated' design of the petition (Beaumont, 2010b). A South Auckland teacher, a supporter of National Standards, criticised the action being taken by NZEI (APN, 2010j), while at the same time Massey University (2010d) announced that Professor Tom Nicholson, a supporter of National Standards and a member of the Minister's expert group, would give a public lecture on National Standards on Auckland's North Shore.

Throughout the whole debate, various parties have called for a trial of National Standards prior to a final decision on their implementation. The Minister has consistently rejected this. However, in a poll conducted by UMR research for NZEI, of a sample of 750 adults, 52% strongly agreed and 14% agreed, while 7% disagreed and 11% strongly disagreed, that 'National Standards should be tested before being introduced' (Hunt, 2010a).

The *New Zealand Education Gazette* of March 8 carried a report on a three-day training programme on National Standards for school advisors which discussed, amongst other things, moderation of teacher judgements and the use of various assessment tools. The Minister, once more, pointed to the achievement gap and announced a three-year monitoring and evaluation project for National Standards to be run by independent researchers (Erb, 2010). How independent they will be remains to be seen given the 'independence' of the Minister's advisory group on National Standards. Erb also highlighted a feature of National Standards which, disturbingly, is

underpinned by a Ministry ideology present in various official strands of policy. It is worth quoting in full:

> Education researchers have pinpointed some of the most powerful levers for lifting valued student outcomes. National Standards have the potential to activate each of these. Mary Chamberlain outlined the five aspects that are based in part on findings of the Ministry's Best Evidence Synthesis programme:
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> - Active parental support for children's learning and well-being
> - Effective teaching for diverse students
> - Effective school leadership
> - Effective professional learning and development
> - High impact research and development that creates powerful connections between schools and families.
>
> Erb (2010, p. 2)

The public debate over National Standards showed no signs of going away, however much the politicians and policy-makers might have wished it would. There was another burst of activity around 10-11 March. Law (2010a) reported that in Canterbury Southbridge School, with the support of BOT, principal and parents would not enforce the National Standards until they had been trialled and Somerfield School would not implement them until staff had been trained. On the same day, in another report, Law (2010b) covered the Prime Minister's visit to Clearview School, also in Canterbury. When asked if rebellious BOTs would be sacked, he replied that he preferred to work with schools in the first instance. Said he: 'In the end, if they don't, then those schools need to answer to the parents of New Zealand why they are prepared to allow one in five young New Zealanders to leave school without adequate literacy and numeracy skills'. From this, two points are worth noting. The first is a posited causal connection between implementing National Standards and raising literacy and numeracy skills, which is questionable; the second is, if 'answering to parents' is 'in the end', then nothing else could lie beyond, such as sacking BOTs. One could therefore assume, although not safely, that BOTs are unlikely to be sacked as the political consequences could be damaging to the government.

After her less than convincing performance in the House over moderation of National Standards, the Minister of Education took to the road in March. At a meeting held in Johnsonville, Mrs. Tolley received support from a parent over the need for better school reporting of student achievement, but was also challenged by a teacher over 'what evidence she had that there was any link between national standards and improved achievement'. Good question, poor reply: 'National Standards wasn't evidence; it was just a tool to identify the problem to see how it should be addressed. She said it was sad and frustrating that she was still having such debates with 'the sector'' (Young, 2010d). Back

in the House, and once more questioned by Labour's Trevor Mallard, Mrs. Tolley 'remembered to pick a line and keep repeating it ad nauseum ... nearly one in five pupils were leaving school unable to read, write or do maths at anywhere near the levels they needed to in order to succeed in life' (APN, 2010k).

In Mid-March it was announced that Hamilton East School was one of the first to issue 'national standards-based student reports' amid concern expressed by the principal about a narrowing of the curriculum, the impact on failing children, and the effects on teachers' workloads. Said the principal of Papatoetoe Central School in support: 'Reporting by national standards would take a 'huge amount of time' for teachers' (APN, 2010l).

Sir Paul Grant, a school principal from the United Kingdom, arrived in New Zealand in late March to speak to educationalists and Ministry Officials. Said he: 'national standards make teachers and schools accountable' (Hubbard, 2010). While he rejected Hattie's criticism that National Standards would lead to 'teachers teaching to the test' and that National Standards need not reduce the school curriculum, he did, however, share the critic's worries about league tables based on National Standards which 'did not reflect ... desirable qualities'.

The public debate continued on through the rest of March 2010. It was reported that an OECD review team would be visiting New Zealand to assess our education system, including National Standards: 'The OECD review would also assist the work of the recently appointed independent advisory group on national standards which gives advice on the implementation of the standards' (NZPA, 2010d). Who will write the OECD report (OECD team, Ministry of Education officials) remains unclear, nor is it certain what sort of assistance the advisory group will receive.

Days later, the Associate Minister of Education, Pita Sharples, changed his mind on National Standards. Having earlier voiced his opposition to the policy because of the impact it would have on Maori schools, Dr Sharples said that with more information and feedback from these schools, he was happy to see National Standards implemented although he remained worried about the use of league tables (Fox, 2010). An NZEI spokesperson, Laures Park, responded by accusing the Associate Minister of ignoring the 80% of Maori students in mainstream schools who will be subject to the forced implementation of National Standards (the Maori immersion schools will be trialling National Standards): 'Ms Parks says Maori students are most at risk of being labelled failures under the new testing and national standards need to be trialled in all schools' (APN, 2010m).

In the final days of March, the public debate over National Standards took a new twist. ERO was taken to task for the data it provided that was subsequently used by others in a misleading way. Kelvin Smyth observed that a 2007 ERO report found about 90% of primary schools could demonstrate student achievement in English and Mathematics while across ***all*** curriculum areas this fell to 57%: 'But when the Government publicised national standards, which focus on literacy and numeracy, it quoted the 57 per cent figure, seriously over-stating the need for better literacy and numeracy reporting' (Hunt, 2010b) He called for the resignation of the CEO of ERO. This was rejected by Dr Stoop who defended the report: 'ERO said its 2007 report used an external reference panel of assessment experts, including university academics' (Hunt, 2010b). Two Massey University academics, presumably not on this panel, offered

critical rebuttal: Professor John O'Neill expressed concern about the basis of the factual claims in the ERO report, saying that it 'would have failed peer-reviewed research tests' and claimed ERO 'are taking subjective opinions and turning them into facts' (Hunt, 2010b), while Emeritus Professor Ivan Snook said the ERO report was not genuine research since it did not have 'a hypothesis and a robust methodology for testing' (Hunt, 2010b). As March came to a close, so too did the NZEI bus tour, culminating in a gathering on the steps of Parliament. Vowing to fight on, the union took its case for trialling the National Standards to the Minister who simply replied, 'we're implementing the standards' (NZPA, 2010e), dismissing the NZEI position with 'I think the union's still arguing last year's argument' (Bennett, 2010).

And then, as if on cue, came the most bizarre contribution to the public debate on National Standards. It has a delicious irony, so to speak. It was reported (APN 2010n) that Jamie Oliver's school dinners have had a significant effect on standards testing in the United Kingdom. Those students who regularly ate his meals did better than those students who did not. Food for thought, indeed, given this government's reversal of Labour's ban on junk food and the promotion of healthy fare in school canteens. It would be a strange thing indeed if better meals for those kids in the trial turned out to be the key factor in raising their school achievement (there is good experimental evidence for this – see Benton, 1992). If this turned out to be so, it would be a compelling reason for locating school underachievement outside of the school and with those who prepare school dinners, not school teachers, responsible for raising school achievements! It would be the death knell of National Standards.

Since the final day of March 2010 was the cut-off date for discussion of the public debate for this article, perhaps the last word should be given to the Minister of Education, for the sentiment she expressed in the very last media report considered here, perhaps exemplifies why the critics of National Standards have been so strong in their opposition to the policy. Said Mrs Tolley: 'It was disappointing that those who did not agree with the standards continued to 'attack anybody and anything they don't agree with'' (NZPA, 2010e). Sadly, Mrs Tolley failed to see that those who 'did not agree with the standards' had very good reason to 'attack ... anything they don't agree with'. Inevitably, the public debate is destined to continue well into the foreseeable future.

WHAT WAS IT ALL ABOUT?

T. S. Elliot, the poet, wrote, 'Between the appearance and reality lies the shadow'. On the National Standards the shadow has surely fallen. Initial justification for their introduction seemed plausible enough: to provide parents with good reporting of their children's achievement and helping to raise the achievement of our lowest performers. Who could possibly object to parents being given clear information about how their children were doing. And who could be opposed to finding ways of children 'in the tail' being helped to do better. The problem is that National Standards are not required in order for schools to provide accurate reporting of children's progress and National Standards simply do not stack up as a causal mechanism for raising the achievement of underperforming students. On reporting to parents, of a kind sought by the Minister, improvement can be obtained by schools being provided

with firm guidance on what is required, and National Standards are not required for this. On raising the achievement of the poorest performers, it is hard to see how those children who, year in and year out, fall below the minimum level of achievement in National Standards, could ever possibly succeed by the time they reach NCEA Level 2, for failure is built into NCEA and the National Standards. Not all can pass and in all likelihood those who fail early on are doomed to fail throughout. The effect of the National Standards will be to reinforce even further the gap in school achievement. So, if reporting to parents and 'closing the gap' are the 'appearance' on which the National Standards were sold to the public and the profession, what, then, is the reality?

The debate about National Standards cannot be seen in isolation, but must be located in a wider set of government policies designed to promote the privatisation of education. At a time of financial restraint on the funding of state schools, the government: increased funding to private schools; public-private partnerships were close to being agreed to for the construction and ownership of new schools; and, an inter-party (Act, Maori and National parties) report advocated a voucher system for the top 5% and bottom 20% of school achievers to be able to attend private schools or schools of their choice. If parents are to have 'choice' (a catch cry) there must be a market to provide options which implies a level playing field of public and private providers. National Standards is the means of providing the data for the construction of league tables to be used by parents as 'reliable' sources of information to underpin school choice. Schools can 'market' their top ranking to attract 'customers' who bring both state funding and their own resources to the school. Here lies the reality which casts a long shadow over all that is of educational value. Elsewhere, I (Clark, 2010) have explored the privatisation of education up to and during the time of the Clark Labour government; it is clear that the slowdown of the privatisation agenda during the first decade of the new millennium is matched by a 'picking up of the pace' in the second decade.

Sub-plot: The experts?

The public debate over National Standards has played out in the media at several different levels. Some of the participants have generally just reported events, helpfully so. Others, and there are many, have offered us commentaries, often as not displaying their ignorance of what the issues surrounding National Standards are all about. Their contributions have added little. Then there are the education experts who have entered the public arena.

On some aspects of National Standards, the issues are technical in nature and so warrant the input of technical advice from recognised experts. Education academics in literacy and numeracy may have something important to say in respect to the hows and whys of children's learning in these areas of the curriculum. However, much of the debate surrounding National Standards is anything but technical. Rather, it is deeply rooted in normative considerations where competing values are to the fore. Such questions as: Ought we to have National Standards? If so, what ought they consist of? How ought they to be obtained? By whom? For what purpose? What can they achieve? How are they to be used? and the like are in the moral realm and here there are no experts. Further, since National Standards is the subject of extensive political debate then the debate is also highly political, especially from the politician's point of

view. And academics are ill-equipped to enter into the political territory of professional politicians who have access to both extensive government resources and parliamentary power to further their goals.

For the academic with technical expertise, there is every reason to alert politicians, policy-makers, practitioners, parents and the public at large to the strengths and short-comings of National Standards. The implications of adopting such a policy certainly deserve airing so that the debate is rational and well-informed. But once academics stray into the normative and the political there is a danger of their exceeding their academic authority as an expert, especially when an advocacy role is adopted. If academics seek to defend a position on National Standards, for or against, then they have an obligation to mount a compelling argument which underpins and justifies the stance taken. For these academics who have declared their standpoint, there has been much in the way of bare assertion and little by way of defensible argument and robust vindication of views expressed. In short, public posturing has on occasions replaced reasoned examination; vested interest has at times overtaken academic critique; and personal ambition might have clouded rationality itself. Exceeding academic authority has a marked tendency to harm academic reputation.

The big question: Unanswered

Whatever advantages National Standards have, and there are probably few, the one big question remains unanswered. Can National Standards significantly reduce the gap or shorten the tail of student achievement? Possibly, but to a very limited extent; those at the bottom will remain at the bottom however much the narrowing of highest and lowest achievers. The full answer will be a long time coming, if we begin with the new entrants on 2010 and track their annual achievement up to their performance at NCEA Level 2. That would provide the empirical evidence for the success or failure of the policy. One of the claims made to justify the introduction of National Standards is that National Standards will raise the level of achievement of the lowest performers in NCEA and so close the gap with the highest achievers. Care will need to be taken over claims that National Standards will have this causal effect. The 2009 NCEA results, announced in April 2010, revealed that between 2005 and 2009 Maori students achieving Level 1 of NCEA had risen from 45% to 57% with Pacific students having a bigger increase from 37% to 52%, compared to a European pass rate which rose from 74% to 80% (APN, 2010o). Several commentators alluded to causes other than National Standards, including professional development programmes such as Te Kotihitanga, family involvement, using an active apprentice scheme as ‘bait’ to keep students at school and many high decile schools opting out of NCEA in favour of the Cambridge Examinations and the International Baccalaureate with the consequence that since many top students are not included in NCEA results then to maintain or increase the percentage pass rates of NCEA the level of achievement required to pass declines, such that students who would not otherwise have passed now do.

But there are also serious theoretical considerations which we can attend to now. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Education have drawn a strong causal connection between the implementation of National Standards and the raising of student achievement, especially that of those students at the lower

end of the tail. Opt in and all will be well; opt out and continuing failure is assured. But things are not as simple as this. If academics should be wary about entering into the political sphere surrounding National Standards, likewise politicians ought to tread carefully in the domain of the academic. Causality is no straightforward matter in the realm of social explanation. At the very least, a complex causal chain operates:

1. *Learning inputs:* all those antecedent causal forces which contribute to what and how a child learns. Broadly speaking, even though the impact lies in the detail, are such forces as family resources, media influences, peer relationships, socio-economic conditions, school circumstances and the like. All of these and more come to bear in complex and intricate ways on children's learning. Sociological and psychological studies assume importance.
2. *Learning itself:* learning is a neural process where the plasticity of the brain allows new learning to occur by the establishment of new neural pathways located in the forming and strengthening of connections at the synaptic gap between axons and dendrites. The greater the neural connectivity the greater the chances of new learning adding new connections. Here, neurophilosophy comes to the fore.
3. *Learning outputs:* If learning is neural it is, at least for the time being, unobservable (although advances in MRI look promising in revealing more about learning). To demonstrate their learning, children need to display some form of learning output, be it something written (essay, test), something performed (a play), something produced (a technology object) or something said (answer to a question).The problem, of course, lies in explaining how the output is causally connected to the antecedent input conditions as mediated by neural processing. If a child is underachieving, consistently so, wherein lies the causal explanation and wherein lies the causal intervention? If the causes are tightly bound to the external forces of the social structures in which students are concretely located and embedded, then any successful intervention will of necessity be enacted there; to ignore such powerful causal mechanisms by focussing on only one component of the complex causal mix, namely the school and particularly the teacher, and then to expect internal intervention 'levers' to causally outweigh the far greater power of the external causal dynamics is not only to seriously overestimate the capacity of the internal levers to effect improvement in learning but, more seriously, it is to raise expectations of success held by politicians, policy-makers and the public (but not necessarily by practitioners) about the causal efficacy of National Standards to render greater achievement when it is not warranted.
4. *Learning outcomes:* What is learning for? What does it contribute to? What is the value of learning in the scheme of things? All too often we read and hear about learning, and little more. It is as if learning is the ultimate good. It is not. Learning is of no value at all if it is not geared to some particular end. Learning only becomes worthwhile when it has a purpose. Some learning has extrinsic value, being instrumental in achieving other ends such as eventually getting a job. While not to

dismiss this as unimportant since material autonomy is a fundamental feature of living a worthwhile human life (and seems to be the pre-occupation of politicians, policy-makers and many parents) there is a compelling case to raise our sights higher and settle, finally, on that learning which has intrinsic educational value in so far as it contributes to reflective thought about living a good life in a good society. This lofty human ideal seems to have been lost sight of in the somewhat sordid public debate about National Standards but must be brought to the fore in any final reckoning about the merits of National Standards. In short, what is the *educational* value of National Standards, if any? National Standards may have extrinsic value for the provision of league tables to assist parental choice of schools in the market place, and if this is so, then the 'use value' of National Standards should be made transparent. But until the educational value of National Standards is clearly identified and justified then there seems to be no compelling educational reason for their implementation.

CONCLUSION

The National government seems hell-bent on implementing National Standards, come what may and in the face of strong professional opposition. As with Margaret Thatcher before her, so too for Anne Tolley now: 'This lady is not turning'. Given that National Standards formed a central plank in the government's education manifesto at the last election, it is not surprising that both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education are holding so firm to the introduction of National Standards. But as seasoned politicians they would perhaps do well to proceed with caution in the face of the arguments mounted by teacher unions and academics and be mindful of the resistance of teachers in particular and BOTs/parents in general.

What is so crystal clear in the whole sorry saga is the absence of intelligent debate about National Standards, the lack of criteria for evaluating the success or failure of the National Standards policy, and the failure to specify what sort of evidence would count as indicating the success or failure of National Standards in raising the performance of those students whose achievement falls within the lower end of the tail. Until this is done, National Standards is just one more policy introduced by politicians, implemented by policy-makers and supported by some (but certainly not all) academics and imposed on teachers and students with, in the Minister's own words, a 50:50 chance of success and failure; a very risky venture indeed upon which to rest one's political or academic reputation.

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[2] Due to the focus of this article and its predominant use of online newspaper sources, this list uses a simplified reference format. The full text of these online newspaper articles can be found through an internet search using their titles.

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