What Can We Learn From History? The Early Post-World War Two Debate Over Literacy And Numeracy Standards, 1945-1962 In Perspective.

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RESEARCHING LITERACY AND NUMERACY STANDARDS DEBATES

Nowadays, the vexed question of education standards seems never far from our national media headlines. This reflects the fact that, especially since the introduction of the Education (National Standards) Amendment Act, 2008, there has been intensive debate over the wisdom of implementing national standards in schools – a debate that has generally generated more heat than light. Depending on one's point of view, the Act is a timely measure that will ensure our children can and will succeed in a rapidly changing global society, or a piece of reactionary legislation that will saddle both teachers and students with narrowly focused achievement objectives to the detriment of real education.

So which side, if any, is right? Historical examples of previous education standards debates in New Zealand ought in theory to tell us. Unfortunately, and especially post-2008, previous standards debates have been mined by commentators determined to prove their point, one way or the other. However, a more legitimate and ultimately more productive use of past examples lies in what they might reveal concerning the origins of contemporary theory and practice. Through this process, we can then critically interrogate the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpin the present debate. This paper focuses particularly on the early post-Second World War debate over academic standards in the primary school.

The years from the end of World War Two until the publication of the Royal Commission on Education (the Currie Report) in 1962 witnessed a fierce debate over literacy and numeracy standards in New Zealand state primary and secondary schools. A major problem in researching this period, however, lies in the fact that the rhetoric of the time, as with subsequent discussions of the debate, have largely fallen into two broad categories. The first claims that literacy and numeracy standards have *fallen* significantly due to either the introduction of liberal teaching methods and/or the introduction of new curricula, whilst the second argues that the education system must be *defended* from what are essentially groundless, often politically motivated charges from ill-informed critics of modern education.

This article, however, contends that during periods of intense national debate over literacy and numeracy standards, the various discourses of 'system decline' and 'system defence' combine to downplay the way in which political, social, economic and philosophical factors shape the respective positions

assumed by the protagonists. In the case of the early post-war period it will be shown that the entrenched positions adopted on standards were underpinned by radically different conceptions concerning the purposes of schools and the aims of education that ultimately could not be resolved. The story that this article will reveal then, inevitably reaches beyond the rhetoric of crisis to embrace the ways in which literacy and numeracy standards debates are situated at the intersection of competing claims to truth.

GENESIS OF A CRISIS

In his key study of curriculum politics, United States education historian H.M. Kliebard has shown how a number of key groupings, each with its own view of schooling, contested the American curriculum during the twentieth century.[1] In New Zealand, the emerging early post-war debate over literacy and numeracy standards was to be similarly characterised by a sharp division of professional and public opinion, behind which lay competing conceptions of education. By the 1940s an increasing number of New Zealand educators were being influenced by progressivism. Although progressivism drew its original inspiration from early European pedagogical reformers such as Rousseau and Pestalozzi, it traced its immediate historical antecedents to the late nineteenth century reaction against the alleged narrowness and formalism of mass education systems that ultimately came to be epitomised in the ideas of early twentieth century international figures such as Dewey, Montessori, and A.S. Neill.

From the mid-1930s on, progressive educators in New Zealand were greatly encouraged by the abolition of the standard six Proficiency examination, that had traditionally shaped the primary school curriculum and controlled entry into secondary school. This had the effect of freeing up the primary school curriculum from the rigidity of the formal examination system. They also drew inspiration from the 1937 New Education Fellowship (NEF) Conference, which reconvened in New Zealand with support from the Labour Government and the Department of Education. With justification, it was claimed that 'never before in the history of the Dominion had audiences of like numbers and enthusiasm assembled to listen to discussions on educational topics'.[2] Meanwhile in the secondary school, the rapid growth in numbers and retention rates stimulated broadly similar calls for reform from both liberal educators and some Labour politicians, leading to the 1943 Thomas Report.

In the immediate post-war years, the dissemination of progressive ideals globally was facilitated by the growth of a new liberal middle class that was to increasingly dominate the social services, and especially state-funded education systems. Throughout the Western world, it was this grouping that became rapidly enculturated into the politicised approach of 'redemptive' social sciences as means towards an overtly political goal.[3]

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[1] H.M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958*, third edition, New York and London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004, 23-25.

[2] A.E.Campbell (ed). *Modern Trends in Education. Proceedings of the New Zealand N.E.F conference*. Wellington: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1938. Introduction, xi-xii.

[3] See for instance A. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class*, London: MacMillan, 1979; J. Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, London and Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994. See also E. Rata, "Elite Agency in the Cultural Production of Indigenous Knowledge in New Zealand Universities", Working Paper for

In post-1945 New Zealand, the salutary experiences of world-wide economic depression and total war, with its attendant horrors, led this grouping to enthusiastically embrace a new mission to save the world from mass destruction in the atomic era. This also entailed a tacit acceptance of contradiction that involved a rejection of the competitive aspects of Capitalism whilst accepting the material and other advantages Capitalism provided them. Acceptance of this contradiction explains the enduring and sometimes militant resistance within the education sector to attempts by successive governments to introduce testing, because such initiatives were seen to be not only based on dated and retrogressive notions of standards, but also on ideals of competition that conflicted directly with its historic mission. The acceptance of this mission is thus central to appreciating both the enduring commitment of much of New Zealand's education sector to progressive educational ideals, and the siege mentality its supporters frequently display in the face of criticism.

In the early post-war years, such criticism became increasingly apparent, with many parents and employers expressing alarm at what they regarded as the rapid decline in the basic literacy and numeracy skills, that for them constituted the central aim of compulsory education, in favour of a broader social curriculum accompanied by a radical new pedagogy expressly designed to produce a different type of citizen. Ironically, as with the progressive ideals critics so vehemently opposed, the view that schools were essentially about achieving quantifiable outcomes also had its origins in the ambiguous late-19th century response to the creation of mass public education systems. Some of its adherents drew inspiration from the so-called social efficiency movement that flourished particularly in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. According to this view, the management of industry was essentially similar to the management of schools. As the United States educator Ellwood P. Cubberley put it in the 1920s, schools were 'in a sense, factories in which raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet various demands of life'.[4]

In New Zealand, a similar view was expressed in a 1947 paper by C.J. Wood, President of the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce. Lamenting the lack of basic skills among school leavers, Wood issued a clear warning to educators that, as educational consumers, the commercial sector was deeply dissatisfied with the current educational product.[5] Wood's solution, that 'there should be a close liaison between the schools and commerce', was to be rearticulated at various times over the next sixty years. Thus Alistair Rivers, writing in 1996, claimed that schools should aim to produce a product that is both in demand and appropriately skilled to meet the expectations of the market place.[6]

Social efficiency, however, was not the only ideology that underpinned concern over educational standards in New Zealand during the early post-war

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publication in the Working Papers on University Reform Series, Danish School of Education, University of Aarhus, Copenhagen, September 2009.

[4] Cited in J.D.S (David) McKenzie**, "**The Cult of Efficiency and Miseducation: Issues of Assessment in New Zealand Schools", in *Education Policy in New Zealand: The 1990s and Beyond*, edited by M. Olssen and K. Morris Matthews, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1997, 48.

[5] Cited in R. Openshaw, *Unresolved Struggle. Consensus and Conflict in State Post-Primary Education*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1995, 63.

[6] McKenzie**, "**The Cult of Efficiency and Miseducation", 54.

years. Innate conservatism also lay behind many allegations that schools provided inadequate teaching in basic skills. Accordingly, the view that the educative process required constant monitoring still held considerable currency across the community. Critically examining historical opposition to liberal educational experimentation, McKenzie, Lee and Lee (1996) have claimed that, particularly where it was suspected that it threatened academic standards, 'the very word "experiment" was a common pejorative term in the critic's armoury'.[7] Post-1945, this view was powerfully reinforced by an older generation's grim experience of economic depression followed by a world war. Thus Prime Minister S.G. Holland, opening Palmerston North Teachers' College in March 1956, made a heart-felt plea to the incoming staff and student teachers to warn children that the alternatives to a British way of life were 'not pleasant to contemplate [and to] … lead them to honour the Queen and to love our Empire and to love our own country.[8]

Clearly, such sharply differing views of education were almost bound to find expression in conflict over literacy and numeracy standards. More ironically perhaps, during the intensely politicised national debate that was to emerge, both critics of standards in the basic subjects and the defenders of the new education were to entrench themselves in discourses that increasingly took on the attributes of anti-intellectualism.

THE EMERGING CRITIQUE

During the late 1930s and early 1940s New Zealand Department of Education officials had often emphasised the extent to which innovative teachers had successfully introduced the new progressive ideals. At a national education conference held in Christchurch during October 1944, however, it became evident that these ideals were far from gaining universal acceptance. Both *defenders* and *critics* of the new education sought to use the conference to promote their own views on educational change. The Government appears to have envisaged a conference that largely endorsed *Education Today and Tomorrow.* This document constituted Labour's blueprint for future education, signed by Minister of Education H.G.R. Mason but, according to John Ewing, bearing 'unmistakable signs of Beeby's hand'.[9] Offering its own warm endorsement of *Education Today and Tomorrow*, the New Zealand Educational Institute arranged to send copies of its own booklet, *Educational Reconstruction*, to every conference delegate. The Institute's secretary, G.R. Ashbridge, clearly regarded that publication as 'an authoritative statement made by the Institute Executive regarding the progressive changes the Institute deems desirable in primary education'.[10] However, at the various conference

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[7] D. McKenzie, H. Lee and G. Lee, *Scholars or Dollars? Selected Historical Case Studies of Opportunity Costs in New Zealand Education*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1996, 17-18.
[8] Cited in R. Openshaw, *Between Two Worlds. A History of Palmerston North College of Education 1956-1996*, Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1996, 31.
[9] J.L. Ewing, *The Development of the Primary School Curriculum 1877-1970*, Wellington: NZCER, 1970, 260. Often held to be the instigator of so-called "playway education by his opponents",C.E. Beeby was Director of Education from 1940-1960.
[10] G. Ashbridge, Secretary New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI). Circular letter entitled "The Minister's Conference", 28 August 1944, AAVZ, Acc W3418, Box/item 23, No record number, Education Conference, 1944. Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

forums fierce opposition soon emerged. At the primary education forum, criticism of the new education, and of Beeby personally, surfaced from employers and a number of secondary school principals.[11] At the secondary education forum, there was trenchant criticism of the proposed new Common Core, including claims that rigidly prescribed subjects and time allocations had already resulted in declining standards in basic subjects.[12] Galvanised by the Thomas Report, similar views were to be expressed both by prominent University of New Zealand academics and by Catholic educators.[13]

As the War drew to a close, continuing concern over literacy and numeracy standards engendered a more defensive official attitude, with inspectors now reporting that they were now giving 'special attention' to basic subjects[14] while after the War, criticism of educational standards continued unabated. Some secondary school principals, particularly those from the more traditional single-sex institutions, utilised annual prize-giving addresses to articulate their client's concerns over falling academic standards in the primary schools that had allegedly resulted in the introduction of considerable secondary school remedial work in the lower forms. That conceding any of these points could have political repercussions was clearly illustrated by the frosty reception accorded the annual report of Labour's Minister of Education, T.H. McCombs for 1947. McCombs merely observed that in 1917 only 37 per cent of students entered secondary schools. Given that most primary school students did not progress beyond Form II, these were, with few exceptions, the academically brightest in what was a highly selective system. Hence it was inevitable that 'the average level of achievement in English and arithmetic in Form III should be lower now than it was thirty or even ten years ago'.[15]

This admission, however, was destined to backfire. Expressing his concern at the low standards in post-war academic achievement, the Opposition National Party member for Remuera, R.M. Algie, drew directly upon a recent address from the headmistress of Epsom Girls' High School. Linking her comments regarding the capabilities of recent primary school intakes with similar concerns recently raised by Professor Chapman of Auckland University College, Algie claimed that, whilst standards had been high during the 1930s, decline was now 'all too apparent in the fundamentals'. Algie went on to allege that the Minister of Education's recent annual report constituted an irrefutable admission that such a decline had indeed taken place. Quoting from a recent *The New Zealand Herald* editorial, he concluded that 'no more disturbing document had been laid before parliament in recent years'.[16]

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[11] Ewing, *The Development of the Primary School Curriculum*, 259-261.

[12] (Rev) C.J. Callaghan (St Patrick's College, Wellington), Statement of the General Case Against the Report of the Consultative Committee, with Special Reference to the Position of Private Schools, Undated but written in response to the Recommendations of the Conference promulgated on 7 November 1944, AAVZ, Acc W3418, Box/item 23, No record number, Education Conference 1944. Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

[13] See for instance, W. Anderson, *The Flight from Reason in New Zealand Education*, Auckland: Catholic Teachers' Association of Auckland, 1944.

[14] J.M. Soler, "Reading the Word and the World: The Politics of the New Zealand Primary School Literacy Curriculum from the 1920s to the 1950s", PhD diss., University of Otago, 1996, 119-120.

[15] Report of the Minister of Education for the Year Ended 31 December 1947, *Appendices to Journals of the House of Representatives* (Henceforth cited as *AJHR)*, E-1, 1948, 5.

[16] *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (Henceforth cited as *NZPD),* 1948, vol. 283, 3092-3093.

Matters further escalated when, following National's victory in the 1949 election, Algie became the new Government's Minister of Education. In his first address to the New Zealand Educational Institute, Algie spoke of the need for 'periodical stocktaking'. This phrase was widely interpreted in the national press to mean that the impact of new educational theories and methods should be carefully assessed. During this stocktaking process, the Minister believed, 'We should give plenty of weight to the views and criticisms of parents', along with those of prospective employers. Turning to the question of standards, Algie questioned whether a proper balance between work and play had been struck in primary school classrooms, claiming that 'many … would gladly see the so-called "three Rs" restored to their rightful place in our curriculum. And, on this point, I must say that I am whole-heartedly with them'.[17] Given the already strong commitment of the Institute to the new approaches in education, the response of the Institute to the Minister's speech was understandably one of cautious scepticism. A subsequent *National Education* editorial reiterated that the Institute had backed the recent changes in curricula and method introduced by the Department of Education. The editorial writers conceded that it was 'of course, possible that, by neglect of other subjects, and some persistent hammering at the children with less aptitude the overall standard in the three "Rs" might be raised a little'. However, 'it was for the Minister to decide, from the result of his stocktaking, whether such insistence would prove valuable to the child in later life'.[18]

In an address delivered some four months later to the Institute, the president D.M. Jillet was more emphatic in his rejection of any return to older curricula or methods. He agreed with the new Minister that teachers had to accept the need to subject their philosophy 'to the closest scrutiny', but added pointedly that 'when that philosophy is opposed by others we suggest that the criticisms that should be given most weight are those made by people or organisations who know our schools and our system best'.[19] Moreover, in emphasising the centrality of educating citizens and workers for a democratic society, Jillet warned his readers that 'the answer for education must not be as it was for the apostle Peter, "Back to be crucified"'.[20]

As it transpired, the worst fears of the Institute were not to be realised. C.E. Beeby's biographer, Noeline Alcorn, has described how both Beeby, as a liberal Director of Education, and Algie, as a conservative Minister of Education, eventually came to establish a working relationship of mutual respect.[21] Certainly, during his tenure as Minister of Education, Algie progressively modified his earlier uncompromising stance regarding the place of the basics, giving his cautious backing to the new education, and in practice softening his position concerning academic standards.[22] The Department, too, was doubtless content to furnish at least an outward appearance of meeting the Minister half-

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[17] "Minister Discusses His Task", *National Education*, vol. xxxii, no. 341 (1 February 1950), 4.
[18] "The Three R's", *National Education*, vol. xxxii, no.342 (1 March 1950), 41.
[19] D.M. Jillet, "Education for the Whole Man, the Citizen and the Worker", *National Educatio*n, vol. xxxii, no. 345 (1 June 1950), 166.
[20] Ibid., 170.
[21] N. Alcorn, *'To the Fullest Extent of his Powers'. C.E. Beeby's Life in Education*, Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1999, 180-181.
[22] See for instance, "Address by Minister. Comparison with Seventy Years Ago", *National Education*, vol. xxxv, no. 378 (3 June 1953), 168-169.

way on the standards issue. Thus, the incoming Chief Inspector of Primary Schools, F.C. Lopdell was at some pains to assert that 'our schools are giving good service, [and] that a better balance between tool subjects and the less formal subjects is being struck'.[23] Nevertheless, in his 1951 report – his last as Chief Inspector – Lopdell emphasised the greatly changed composition of modern primary school classrooms since the advent of social promotion, the changed teaching methods that had shifted the emphasis from teaching to learning, more flexible types of class organisation, and the advent of a better balanced curriculum. Acutely aware of growing public disquiet over academic standards, the Chief Inspector recalled that when he began his teaching career, 'a good standard of work was measured solely by the number of pupils who could get all the sums and spelling correct, read aloud fluently and with appropriate voice inflexions a passage from a set reading book, and answer the comprehension questions'. Today, however, the definition of a teacher's success was far wider, being informed by extensive consultation with inspectors, specialist teachers, training college lecturers, university professors, New Zealand Council for Educational Research officers, Health Department officials and other community members.[24]

In the House, the traditional friends of the new education amongst the Labour Opposition echoed the optimism of these reports in the scattered parliamentary exchanges over educational standards that took place during the first half of the 1950s. In October 1952, for instance, the Reverend Carr, Labour MP for Timaru, drew the attention of the House to Lopdell's final report in which the Chief Inspector had attempted to sum up the impact of modern developments in education. Carr believed that much public criticism simply reflected a mixture of inertia and resistance to what he termed 'the modern education revolution'. As for the education sector itself, Carr attributed at least some of the criticism here to the fact that older teachers 'had not yet caught up with progress and were influencing younger teachers'.[25]

Nevertheless, by mid-1953, the Dominion Executive of the Institute was discussing with the Department the possibility of publishing a basic minimum core of subject material to be taught in each class, the aim being to provide particularly beginning teachers with a basis on which to stand.[26] This proposal evidently came to nothing. *National Education*, however, continued to hit back at critics of the new teaching methods. In November 1953, an article by the American educator Hollis Caswell reminded teachers that New Zealand was far from alone in having to endure complaints over standards. Caswell warned that public education everywhere was encountering criticism of 'unusual intensity and scope', with organised groups 'carrying on systematic attacks on public schools'.[27] With public and political concern in New Zealand continuing, the Labour member for Eden, D.M. Rae attempted in August 1955, to allay the

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[23] F.C. Lopdell, "Report of the Chief Inspector of Primary Schools", Post and Post-Primary Education, *AJHR*, E-2, 1951, 1.
[24] F.C. Lopdell, "Report of the Chief Inspector of Primary Schools", Post and Post-Primary Education, *AJHR*, E-2, 1951, 1-4.
[25] *NZPD*, vol. 298, 1952, 1772.
[26] "Basic Core Wanted for Primary Classes", *National Education*, vol.xxxv, no.379 (1 July 1953). 196.
[27] H.L. Caswell, "The Great Reappraisal of Public Education", *National Education*, vol. xxxv, no.383 (2 November 1953), 358.

fears of parents and public over the new primary school methods. In so doing, Rae highlighted the continuing staffing, resourcing and curriculum difficulties many schools at this time faced in coping with the huge increase in the school population.[28]

Despite the change of government, however, concern within the National Party over educational standards was becoming widespread. In August 1956, the Annual Conference of the National Party held in Auckland expressed strong reservations over what it termed 'the play-way' system of education. The Conference passed a remit calling on the Minister of Education to undertake a complete review of the education system. In parliament, National MPs drew upon this remit to demand that the Minister do so.[29]

As critics of modern education became more vocal, so too did its defenders. Within the education sector, there appears to have been a growing sense that the battle for the hearts and minds of the public was being lost. In late 1957, a *National Education* editorial gloomily observed that there was 'no doubt that publicity of the wrong kind [had] done much in the past to discredit progressive methods of education in the eyes of parents and the public'. The editorial concluded that that children probably worked harder at school than did their predecessors and that there was a great deal of formal teaching taking place; 'Unfortunately, the public [did] not seem to know all this'.[30]

With Labour about to return to the Treasury Benches, *New Zealand Parent and Child* published a lengthy article by J.F. Johnson, senior inspector of primary schools in Canterbury. Somewhat optimistically, Johnson believed that, once the terms 'new' and 'old' education were fully understood, there would be 'few, if any, points on which we are ultimately likely to disagree'. He painted for his readers a depressing picture of his own unhappy schooldays, with its narrow curriculum and harsh classroom discipline, where many had left school at 15 labelled as failures, never having completed standard three.[31] The 'new' approaches were 'not an attempt to discard the solid, tried and proven things of education, and substitute something else'. Citing the Director of Education's most recent report that asserted standards to be fundamental to education, he warned that charges from critics that children could no longer spell or do simple arithmetic were 'stock examples of the loose, irresponsible kinds of generalisation that come from a knowledge of a few isolated cases'.[32]

Johnson devoted much of his article to a comparative analysis of standardised scholastic attainment tests in spelling, arithmetic and reading. In spelling, using the identical English-derived test, the performance of Canterbury students in 1931 and 1951 respectively had demonstrated no decline, with the results comparing favourably with that achieved by most Australian students. The old Proficiency tests, used with a small sample of New Zealand students from 1947, 1953 and 1956, had demonstrated a steady improvement in attainment, despite the introduction and subsequent spread of social promotion.

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[28] *NZPD*, vol.306, 1955, 1446-1448.
[29] *NZPD*, vol.309, 1956, 1731.
[30] "Today's Children Work Hard At School", *National Education*, vol.xxxix, no.423 (1 July 1957), 201, editorial.
[31] J.F. Johnson, "A Defence of New Zealand's Education", *Parent and Child*, vol.5, no.8 (November-December 1957), 37.
[32] Ibid., 383-39.

In reading, Johnson cited the recent research of Canterbury University College academic, Dr A.E. Fieldhouse, who had demonstrated that 'the average level of attainment is not merely as good in New Zealand as in Australia, but that in some respects it [was] markedly superior'.[33] Johnson concluded his article by emphasising that 'New Zealand [had] adopted a cautious, indeed conservative policy, with the result that the most liberal of our schools would not be recognised as being even moderately progressive in either England or America'.[34]

This last disclaimer was to cut little ice with critics. Now under intense pressure from both the public and the Opposition National Party, as well as some Labour MPs, Beeby presented a lengthy report for the year ended 1957, in which he strongly defended educational changes in both primary and post-primary schooling. Turning to standards in post-primary schools, the Director of Education conceded that the critics were in one sense correct when they argued that academic standards had declined in the past twenty years. This, however, was due to the fact that the composition of Forms III and IV had drastically altered with the coming of universal secondary education and the abandonment of selection by competitive examination. Responding to well-publicised allegations that the unsatisfactory performance of recent young employees proved that basic skills amongst school-leavers had generally declined, Beeby not only reiterated the views of the Thomas Committee and the Department of Education that education was not just for making a living, but asserted that the only test of any value would be to isolate those groups of young workers whose academic attainments had failed to satisfy employers, and trace their performance back through school records.[35]

During early 1958, the controversy over standards continued unabated. In May 1958, a *National Education* editorial observed that primary education in particular, had 'received an unusual amount of press publicity during the past month'. The editorial argued that the Institute had consistently cooperated with the Director of Education to encourage the new methods of education because 'they had proved themselves worthwhile'. Again citing the Fieldhouse research, it claimed that New Zealand children were markedly superior to their Australian counterparts in reading and were at least as good in arithmetic.[36]

Such comments by no means alleviated employer concern, if indeed employers ever read them. For instance, in late March 1958, claiming to be 'appalled' at the low educational standard and high failure rate of electrical and radio industry apprentices in theory examinations, a delegation from the North

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[33] Ibid., 39-40.
[34] Ibid., 41.
[35] C.E. Beeby, Annual Report for Year ended 31 December 1957, *AJHR*, E-1, 1958, 12. A similar exercise to that suggested here was actually carried out in May 1959 following similar allegations from the Auckland Chamber of Commerce. Subsequently, Beeby reported to Algie, by then a member of the Opposition, that the majority of allegedly unsatisfactory young employees whose names were passed to him by the Chamber had 'low intelligence quotients' and were in fact 'social promotions' through primary school. Such conclusions, however, were potentially a double-edged sword for defenders of the new education. See C.E. Beeby to R.M. Algie, 11 May 1959, ABEP, Series 779, Acc W4262, Box 1905, 30/1/27, Primary Education – Standards of Achievement, part 1. Archives New Zealand, Wellington.
[36] "Modern Education under Fire", *National Education*, vol. xl, no.432 (1 May 1958), 113, Editorial.

Island Electrical Worker's Union sought sweeping changes in mathematics teaching across the entire public school system, requesting particularly the introduction of a 'more rapid primary and post-primary curriculum with much more emphasis on the three Rs – particularly mathematics'.[37] Judging by the extent of correspondence to the national press following this meeting, such views struck a deep chord within the community.

Not everyone outside the education sector was convinced that such charges were justified. A *New Zealand Parent and Child* editorial complained that 'the number of people who seem inclined to blame current teaching methods for every social evil seems to be on the increase'. The editor added the wry comment that those inclined 'to write an article, editorial or letter to the editor, should only be permitted to do so after having attended three meetings of his local Home and School Association or Post Primary Teachers' Association'. He likened current concern over educational standards to the contemporary sensationalist furore over juvenile delinquency created by the press.[38]

THE WIDENING CONTROVERSY OVER STANDARDS

Such sensationalism was now to come to the fore in the columns of *The Evening Post*. The occasion was the publication of a long and angry letter by Mr C. Parks of Taita. In the letter, Parks, a father of several school-age children, described the child centred 'playway' system as 'a cancer'. Parks revealed that, 'as my older children enter their teens I have made the worrying discovery that they have learned very little at school of the basic subjects and precious little of anything else'. His 12 year old had not yet started on work he himself had mastered as a school boy in England, one reason for this being that his son had already been on a week-long class camp in the ranges, justified by the school concerned as a mere extension of 'playway'. Subsequent meetings with the school's headmaster had resulted in Parks allegedly being dismissed as 'ignorant of modern educational developments'.[39] Given the extent of public interest in schools, the Parks letter was almost bound to have political ramifications. Just the day before, the national press had reported that the Minister had now publicly acknowledged a prima facie case for an inquiry into the teaching of arithmetic in primary schools and core mathematics in secondary schools on the grounds that 'in this scientific age every endeavour should be made to raise the standard of our mathematics achievements'.[40] The Parks letter discernibly raised the pressure, attracting considerable reaction from the teachers, university staff, employers and the public at large, culminating in a strongly worded *Evening Post* editorial. Observing that opponents of 'playway' were not actually suggesting a return to the rigid teaching techniques of the past, the editorial nevertheless emphasised that the

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[37] "Union Takes Case to Minister. Too Little Time on Maths, Too Many Fail", *The Evening Post*, April 1, 1958, 15.
[38] "A Second-Rater's Paradise", *New Zealand Parent and Child*, vol.6, no.2 (March-April 1958), 1. Editorial.
[39] "'Play-Way' System at School. Father Describes it as a 'Cancer", *The Evening Post*, April 2, 1958, 10.
[40] "Minister Agrees There is a Case for Inquiry", *The Evening Post*, April 1, 1958, 15.

basic subjects were now more important at every level of activity than ever before, and especially in cases of limited intellectual capacity, 'free-and-easy methods [were] most likely to fail'. The editorial asserted the urgent need for an inquiry, but issued a strong warning that there was a marked difference in outlook between Education Department theorists and the supposedly more practical views of the community. As a result, 'any inquiry should be in the hands of a composite group which would give full consideration to all viewpoints and which would bring down a report that would be more objective than one simply recording the opinions of "experts"'.[41]

Two essentially contrasting elements that would also be common to future standards debates are immediately detectable here. First, theory and practice were held by critics to be different, and oppositional, entities. Hence it could be claimed that, as supporters of current educational theories, many within the state education sector had a vested interest in affirming the status quo. It therefore followed that any inquiry would require the 'objectivity' only those from outside the sector could provide. Second, given the degree of emotion that now surrounded the whole standards issue, it was virtually inevitable that any official response would be highly political and strategic – precisely the opposite of the independent across-the-board inquiry demanded by critics.

Initially, therefore, both Minister and Department were to push for an internal rather than a full public inquiry. Under the circumstances, however, its scope rapidly expanded to cover standards in all the basic subjects, whilst also contracting to focus on academic achievement at upper primary school level only. Immediately following the annual Conference of Senior Inspectors in April 1958, Labour's Minister of Education, Phil Skoglund, asked the Chief Inspector of Primary Schools, W.E. Campbell, to ensure that the report to him from the inspectorate on standards of achievement in primary and intermediate schools covered English as well as arithmetic, with the former to include reading, oral and written language, and spelling. A memo from Campbell to senior inspectors of primary schools emphasised that the New Zealand Council for Educational research (NZCER) was to be fully involved in the selection and application of a range of tests derived from Australian and British sources that might facilitate comparisons between past and present cohorts of students. Reports from each education district and from the Maori School Inspectorate, accompanied by a full summary of results and opinions on the significance of the data collected, were to be in the hands of the Minister no later than the end of the second term.[42]

In his memo, Campbell set out in some detail both the form the reports should take, and the questions the inspectors should bear in mind when constructing their reports. While the basic question was to be: 'How good are our scholastic standards in English and arithmetic in our primary and intermediate schools?', Campbell emphasised that relevant measures of

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[41] "Play-Way Far From Popular", *The Evening Post*, April 11, 1958, 10. Editorial.

[42] W.E.Campbell, Minister's Request for a Report on Standards of Achievement in Primary Schools. Memo to Senior Inspectors of Schools and Senior Inspector of Maori Schools, Department of Education, Wellington, 23 May 1958. ABEP, Series 7749, Acc W4262, Box 1905, 30/1/27, part 1, Primary Education-General. Standards of Achievement 1958-65. Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

goodness might well include past New Zealand standards, standards in other countries, and 'some more or less ideal standard'. Whilst he observed that they would be 'looking particularly for evidence on trends in standards in New Zealand during the past quarter century or so, i.e., since the last years of the Proficiency Examination', Campbell conceded that 'very precise conclusions [would] never be possible', given the difficulty of exactly matching cohorts of students across time, given the changing composition of particularly Standard VI classes, in widely differing educational contexts. Acutely aware of the impending political and policy ramifications that would inevitably follow from the public release of the results, Campbell conceded that there were solid grounds for believing that standards in basic subjects could be raised still further. He added, however, that it would not be necessary to tell the Minister at any length that this is partly a matter of a longer training period for teachers, smaller classes, and so on. But it will be useful to draw attention to specific weaknesses about which more might perhaps be done under present conditions.[43]

At the opening of the New Zealand Educational Institute's 75th Annual Meeting in May 1958, Skoglund took the opportunity to announce publicly that a Commission of Inquiry into education would be set up towards the end of 1959. Nevertheless, an indication of the importance which the Department ascribed to the internally prepared report on standards was further underlined when early the following month, a second detailed memo to senior inspectors from Campbell described how a series of meetings between himself and NZCER had initially focused on the data derived from the application of standardised tests given in the 1930s to fairly large groups of standard five and six New Zealand students, that might be directly compared with results from the same tests administered to similar student cohorts in 1958. Deemed most useful in this respect were Ballard's tests in mechanical arithmetic, arithmetical rules, and problem solving, together with Burt's Spelling test number 6, all of which had been administered in several regions during the 1930s and again in the immediate post-war years.[44]

By August 1958, with the release date for the report fast approaching, Institute president, D.R.Blyth, provided a strong defence of developments in primary education. Drawing attention to what he termed 'the reactionary and anti-progressive statements' of the Rev. Callaghan, whose views had once again recently featured prominently in the national press, Blyth claimed that whilst there remained in the profession 'the occasional die-hard who teaches by methods current when he was a pupil and there is the odd fanatic who goes to extremes in the other direction', all primary teachers had adopted a modified form of progressivism.[45] Hence there would be no return to older methods. Meanwhile, Campbell was warning Skoglund that 'because of recent press controversy in the press, it (was) possible that questions of scholastic standards in primary schools (would) be asked during the debate on the Education

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[43] Ibid.

[44] W.E.Campbell, Memo to Senior Inspectors of Schools and Senior Inspector of Maori Schools, Department of Education, Wellington, 13 June 1958. ABEP, Series 7749, Acc W4262, Box 1905, 30/1/27, part 1, Primary Education-General. Standards of Achievement 1958-65. Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

[45] D.R. Blyth, "The President Comments. A Case for the Primary Teacher", *National Education*, vol.xl, no.435 (August 1, 1958), 241.

Estimates'. Campbell emphasised that the data already available from applications of standardised tests of scholastic attainment to New Zealand students revealed that New Zealand standards not only compared favourably with those of Britain and Australia, but also with those attained in New Zealand over the past 30 years. Acknowledging that the Minister would 'doubtless desire to make some public statement on the results and his feelings about them', Campbell hinted that he 'may wish to discuss such a statement with me and perhaps ask for one to be prepared for your consideration'.[46]

By October 1958, however, the pressure on the public schools was manifesting itself in pointed attacks on teachers who had broken ranks to side with critics in the debate. A *National Education* editorial on professional loyalty noted the appearance in the press of letters from teachers or retired teachers who had chosen to take sides with those members of the public who had critiqued public school standards and teaching methods. It was asserted that other professional organisations did not tolerate such conduct and that the Institute's code of ethics classed as unprofessional conduct any public statement by teachers liable to bring the profession into disrepute.[47] A siege mentality within education – yet another feature of future educational standards debates – was thus foreshadowed.

By now, the Department was in a position to place a nine-page, two-part memo in the Minister's hands, outlining the major findings. Part I of this document consisted of a statement from Campbell on the results of the application of the various standardized tests, and included both a summary of the main findings and the collated opinions from the inspectors of all eleven education regions. Part II, highlighted the broad conclusions that had been reached, observing that the material presented 'constitutes the largest body of fact and informed opinion on primary school standards in English and arithmetic that have been assembled for very many years'. In what was intended as a clear message to critics, it was asserted that, 'conclusions clearly supported by it must therefore carry considerable weight – vastly more than judgement based on isolated observations'.[48] In reading, standards were claimed to be higher than ever before, especially in reading for meaning. Students were markedly superior in oral English, while in written expression there had been a marked increase in both volume and variety, with standards of formal correctness changing little over the years. It was conceded that arithmetic had proved more difficult to evaluate. There was 'some factual evidence to suggest that in some areas standards have been fully maintained or have actually improved during the past ten years or so, but comparisons with Proficiency days (were) harder to make'. Inspectors, however, remained divided over whether arithmetical standards had slightly declined, held firm, or slightly improved.[49]

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[46] W.E. Campbell, Scholastic Standards in Primary Schools (21pp), memo to Minister of Education from Director, 20 August 1958, 21. ABEP, Series 7749, Acc W4262, Box 1905, 30/1/27, part 1, Primary Education-General. Standards of Achievement 1958-65. Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

[47] "Professional Loyalty", *National Education*, vol.xl, no.437 (1 October 1958), 337.

[48] W.E. Campbell, Standards of Achievement in English and Arithmetic in Primary Schools, memo to Minister of Education, 6 October 1958, 1-2. ABEP, Series 7749, Acc W4262, Box 1905, 30/1/27, Part 1, Primary Education-General. Standards of Achievement 1958-65. Archives New Zealand, Wellington.

[49] Ibid., 3.

The Campbell memo of 6 October concluded with a lengthy analysis by the Director of NZCER, G.W. Parkyn. On the basis of the evidence, Parkyn felt able to state that, 'the level of attainment in the fundamental skills of arithmetic and spelling are approximately the same in New Zealand as in Australia and Britain, while the standard in reading is considerably higher.'[50] The public release of results, together with an accompanying press statement from Skoglund, did not actually take place until early February of the following year. Summarizing the findings, the Minister emphasised that 'there was much in the findings of which primary teachers could be proud'. He went on point out that, notwithstanding basic skills being allocated a smaller share of school time, 'the evidence suggested strongly that all the gains of a liberalised curriculum had been secured without general losses in the basic skills, some of which in fact seemed stronger than ever'.[51]

This ringing endorsement of modern classroom theory and practice, however, was by no means to end the controversy over standards. *The Dominion* was but one newspaper among several to seriously question the validity of the results – 'Because the authors of the reports have been parties to the established system of primary education, most people, we are sure, will regard their findings, regardless of what merit may be in them, as worthless'. Likewise Napier's *Daily Telegraph* saw the fact that the authorities responsible for the preparation of the report were lacking in independence as a serious weakness, especially given that those who were now inspectors had played a significant role in promoting the new education. Contrasting Skoglund's announcement with the 1948 view of McCombs that levels of achievement in English and arithmetic were then lower than in pre-war times, the *Daily Telegraph* dismissed the Minister's claim that the gains of the liberal curriculum had been secured with no corresponding losses in basic skills. The claims were held to be based on views, 'which a large section of the community will find it impossible to accept. In particular, employers, university staffs, and even large numbers of teachers in the secondary schools, will not be convinced that the complaints have no substance'.[52] The distrust of data presented by those within education was, in fact, to become a notable feature of future standards debates, but the call for an 'objective' inquiry would ultimately prove impossible to satisfy. As a contemporary editorial was to sagaciously observe, 'This august assembly would be composed in equal parts [of] Adamski's suave Venusians and other people's little green men from flying saucers'.[53]

Pressure for a full public inquiry into education thus intensified rather than diminished after the public release of the test results from schools. Addressing a Teachers' Refresher Course at Masterton in March 1959, for instance, E.W. Evans cited recent critique of arithmetic standards by the various chambers of commerce, those in charge of trade training, and daily newspapers

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[50] G.W. Parkyn, Standardized Test Results, in Campbell (Ibid.), 4.

[51] "No 'Decline' in N.Z. Schools, Ministerial Report's Reply to Critics*", The Dominion*, February 6, 1959.

[52] "The Three Rs, 1929-1959", *Daily Telegraph*, February 6, 1959, editorial.

[53] "Our education standards are proved as high as ever", *Standard*, 11 February 1959 (The *Standard* was a left-leaning newspaper no longer published and not to be confused with the *Manawatu Standard*). George Adamski (1891-1965) was a Polish-American ufologist. The author of several publications claiming close encounters with aliens, Adamski was at this time in New Zealand on a lecture tour.

regarding the lack of ability to complete basic arithmetical computations. Hence the freedom offered teachers through the abolition of Proficiency had proved illusionary. Whilst the primary teacher had hitherto 'provided a bulwark of commonsense against the theoretical extremist … no sooner was the old pilot, the examiner, dropped, than the progressivists romped inboard with so many diverse steering directions it [was] little wonder that the teacher kn[ew] today neither where he [was] or how real [were] the rocks of public criticism'.[54]

With little real common ground between critics and defenders, it was hardly surprising that a *New Zealand Parent and Child* editorial expressed grave doubts as to whether this was indeed the best time to conduct an educational inquiry, given 'that feeling of ferment which characterises the field of education – and indeed, of our whole way of life, nationally and internationally – at the present'. Moreover,

> in the field of education, only those whose minds are unchangeable – who have the fixed idea that things are not as good as they were – seem to possess any firm idea of what ought to be done. But the best policy they can offer consists of simply putting the clock back, a solution which would by no means satisfy the rest of us, who are well aware that the clock was not moved forward out of mere whim.[55]

Publicly at least, Labour was still attempting to allay public and press concern. In July 1959, Skoglund reminded the House that he had already specifically asked about the impact of so-called play-way methods upon academic standards in primary schools. Responding to newspaper criticism, he had asked inspectors for a report. It was found, however, that reading for meaning was better than ever before, and standards of correctness in written English was better than twenty years previously. In arithmetic, however, Skoglund conceded to the House that he had not been quite so satisfied. However, the introduction of new texts for Form II, the appointment of a Departmental mathematics officer to assist teachers of senior primary and post-primary classes, and in-service courses for teachers, would improve the situation.[56]

With pressure for a full public inquiry continuing unabated, Skoglund went on to announce a commission on education to be formally convened in February 1960, to be chaired by the then Vice-Chancellor of the University of New Zealand, Sir George Currie. The Currie Commission (as it was soon to become known) was charged with considering the entire public education system in relation to the needs of the country, both present and future. Whilst educational standards were not explicitly part of its brief, one of the major questions the Commissioners were asked to inquire into concerned 'the aims and purposes of the curricula, and the methods and internal school organisation used to achieve them'.[57] Between May 1960 and June 1961, the Commission held public hearings in numerous centres, collecting and collating a

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[54] E.W. Evans, "How Much Arithmetic is There in Primary School Number?" A Talk to the Teachers' Refresher Course held at Masterton, 19th and 20th March, 1959.
[55] "Education in Ferment", *New Zealand Parent and Child,* vol.7, no.2 (March-April 1959), 1.
[56] *NZPD*, vol.319, 1959, 512.
[57] New Zealand Department of Education, *Report of the Commission on Education in New Zealand*, Wellington: Government Printer, July 1962, 1. Henceforth cited as the Currie Report.

considerable amount of both oral and written testimony. During the course of the Commission's work National replaced Labour on the Treasury benches and its final report was submitted to the new National Minister of Education, W. Blair Tennant, in June 1962, being published a month later.

David Scott has demonstrated the extent to which the Currie Commissioners were 'captured' by the Department, consequently presenting a document that endorsed most the Department's past, present and future directions.[58] Unsurprisingly therefore, the Report was all that an embattled Department of Education could have wished for. Under the heading, 'Modern methods and their Critics', the Commissioners provided a spirited but largely uncritical endorsement of modern teaching methods and their underlying philosophy. Arguing that the real problem lay not with pedagogy, curricula or standards but in effective communication with a largely ill-informed public, the report divided critics into two main groups. First, there were those concerned with largely practical factors such as class sizes and resources; criticisms for which the Commissioners had considerable sympathy. Second, there were those who were for various reasons unhappy with the underlying philosophy of modern education. Here, the Commissioners observed that while there had been 'countless oral references to new education and new methods of teaching, and although there ha[d] been new syllabuses of instruction from time to time, there ha[d] never been a full authoritative statement on primary aim and method from the Department of Education'. Hence, any recommendations the Commissioners were prepared to make were 'designed purposefully to allay public disquiet'. In particular, it noted that:

> The idea of some form of national evaluation to be made at regular intervals has a great deal to commend it and the Commission notes that in other countries, notably Great Britain, the same idea is being put into practice. Such testing serves a double purpose. If it reveals success, it allays natural anxieties, and it also enables directing authorities to assess the effectiveness of any measures they may have taken affecting the basic subjects.[59]

Observing that public concern over primary schools was less evident at secondary level, Commissioners observed that the Thomas Committee had in effect asked secondary schools to assume 'exactly the same function as we have already seen the primary schools adopt'. As with primary schools, the solution to these problems was deemed to lie with improved teacher quality leading to a wider acceptance of teaching as a fully-fledged profession, rather than with improving academic standards.[60]

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[58] D.J. Scott, "The Currie Commission and Report on Education in New Zealand, 1960-1962", doctoral diss. University of Auckland, 1996.
[59] Currie Report, 37.
[60] Currie Report, 45-46.

SO WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM HISTORY?

Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from past debates over educational standards in New Zealand is that such debates are ultimately unresolvable. In the historical example we have examined, the fact that the Currie Report's warm endorsement of the new education and reassurance concerning standards did not end controversy, simply highlights the impossibility of reconciling the divergent and competing views of education that had emerged during the immediate post-war period. These views remain in place today, despite significant social, economic, political and technological changes that have profoundly impacted upon New Zealand.

In the historical example we have examined, this impasse could ultimately be shrugged off by those working within education due to the nation's comparative prosperity. This happy situation helped to engender an atmosphere within the education sector whereby any direct links between the schools and the economy could be downplayed in favour of more explicit social objectives. Focussing on the 1970s and beyond, Colin James has argued that up until then the links between education and the economy continued to be neglected despite a progressively deteriorating economic environment.[61] In fact, a number of educational critiques in the 1970s and early 1980s were to highlight this dysfunctional relationship as a major reason for radically reforming the entire system. Harvey Franklin, for instance, in an influential critique of New Zealand society published in 1978, argued that the school curriculum had helped to create the cultural mentality of a now largely discredited welfare state.[62]

Hence, the seeds were already being sown for successive debates over standards. In the early twenty-first century this has culminated in renewed debate over literacy and numeracy achievement levels. That the differences in the various positions remains as unresolved today as it was in the past is illustrated both by a newly elected National Government's introduction of the Education (National Standards) Amendment Act, 2008 with the support of many employers, and the correspondingly emphatic defence of the educational status quo from the teaching profession and its supporters. As we have seen, however, such debates are simply unresolvable. Ultimately, this is because debates over standards resemble overlapping, cyclical discourses where games of truth, power and knowledge are played out for particular ends.[63]

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[61] C. James*, New Territory. The Transformation of New Zealand, 1984-92*, Wellington: Bridget Williams, 1992, 80.

[62] S.H. Franklin, *Trade Growth and Anxiety. New Zealand Beyond the Welfare State*, Wellington: Methuen, 1978, 383-397.

[63] See R. Openshaw and M. Walshaw, *Are Our Standards Slipping? Debates over Literacy and Numeracy Standards in New Zealand Since 1945*, Wellington: NZCER, 2010, p.7. See also Y. Nozaki, R. Openshaw and A. Luke (eds*), Struggles Over Difference: Curriculum, Texts, and Pedagogy in the Asia-Pacific*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.

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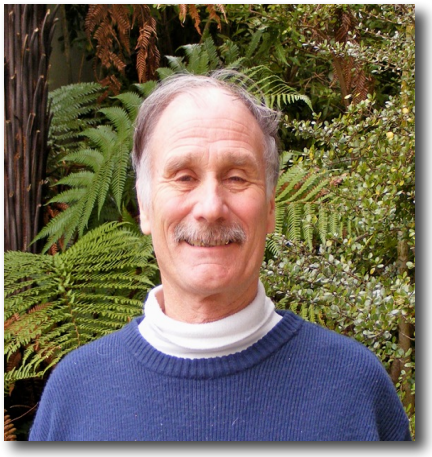

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