



National Standards: A New Frontier of Control in Teachers' Work?

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 9, Issue 1, 16-26, 2012

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ABSTRACT

The National Government is in its second parliamentary term of implementing a policy package of National Standards into New Zealand primary schools. For better or for worse, the Standards will impact on the learning of children. They will also impact on the work of teachers. Whilst the first matter is important, it is the second that is considered here. The state maintains a fundamental interest in controlling and directing teachers' labour. The Standards policy package will intersect the structure of control currently in place. It may replicate the contemporary arrangements that are mediated through arms-length school-based decision making and conceptions of teaching. It could also be constructed in a manner that permits greater incursion by the state into teachers' work. The implementation of the policy package has not gone uncontested and it seems likely that this resistance is not yet over.

INTRODUCTION

On a daily basis around the country teachers expend their labour in our schools to educate children. The state establishes structures of control to harness and direct their labour to deliver desired learning outcomes. Teachers interact with this control imperative with a variety of individual and collective responses ranging from consent and commitment through to withdrawal and resistance (George, 2009). This paper focuses on how the current government project of National Standards, as a potential new frontier of control (Cressey & MacInnes, 1980), fits within that equation. It represents a tentative contribution toward unpacking how the standards might be used to harness and direct teachers' work. The analysis will focus substantially on the structural mechanisms of control and the various permutations the National Standards may take. It will not attempt to analyse the merits, or otherwise, of the Standards themselves. It will not seek to explain in any detail what the subjective reaction of teachers to the standards are or should be. Nor will an attempt be made to predict what the exact final form the Standards package will take. That is an ongoing matter and the result of contestation within the political economy.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NATIONAL STANDARDS

There has been a significant amount of debate from 2008 onward around the implementation of National Standards in the New Zealand primary sector. The National Party campaigned at the 2008 election with the promise to address student under-achievement through a 'crusade on literacy and numeracy'. The central mechanism of this policy focused on setting standards for numeracy and literacy and regular assessment of students against those benchmarks. Schools would be required to periodically report to parents in 'plain English' the progression of children's learning in relation to the standards.¹ Upon gaining power in late 2008 the new government quickly passed this policy into law. Further parts of the package were subsequently, and perhaps rather haphazardly, rolled out including the formulation of a National Standards Advisory Group in 2010, some limited training for school management starting in 2010 and the requirement for school boards to include National Standard targets in their 2011 charters. In 2012, schools will be expected to report progress against these charter targets.²

Whilst much of the debate has naturally centred on how the Standards might affect children's learning, the final form of this package will also have implications for teachers' work. It will intersect with the present structure of control that sits around teachers' work. At the point of intersection it could prove to be a useful tool for teachers in the contextual assessment of children's learning. It could also help schools frame the reporting of student progress to parents and communities. There could also be more at stake however. The Standards, and how they are administered, could provide the Ministry of Education, and de facto the government, with the capacity to assess the performance of schools and teachers against a set of data detached from the contextual environment where learning occurs.

THE NATURE OF WORK – A CONTROL IMPERATIVE

An employment contract establishes a legal exchange of effort on the part of an employee in return for payment from an employer. The initial contract is unable to stipulate the exact quantity of effort that the employee will expend in this work in anything other than very general terms (Braverman, 1974). The amount of actual effort expended on the job must be determined as an ongoing aspect of the employment contract. This is the indeterminacy of labour and the employment contract. The employer has the need to harness and direct (control) the productive capacity of the worker into purposeful and profitable work. This control imperative is an embedded facet of the employment relationship (Thompson, 1983). The demands of production and the arrangements of work are never static. The need to operate profitably and the competitive pressure of the market compel employers to constantly change and update the production process. As Thompson (1990) notes:

¹ New Zealand National Party, Schools Policy 2008: www.national.org.nz/files/2008/schools_policy.pdf

² As per information on the Ministry of Education website: <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Key-information/Information-for-schools>

There is a logic of accumulation which forces capital constantly to revolutionise the production process ... there is a control imperative ... capital need[s] to continually realise control ... [to] revolutionise the labour process and secure value. (pp. 100-101)

As workers, teachers possess this capacity to create value. Whilst a profit imperative is absent from the state education system, and therefore plays no direct role in constantly resetting the labour process, there remains a clear imperative for the state as employer and funder of teachers to secure control over their labour. The state takes care to control the cost of inputs into the education sector and roughly 'balance the ledger'. It is keen to secure value for money and ensure input costs are at least matched with corresponding learning outputs. Input costs must have some realisation in the form of value creation, that is, students' learning.

The state purchases teacher labour through an arms-reach agency of school Boards of Trustees and through various mechanisms directs that labour into the purposeful activity of educating children. As with any employer, the state will not simply leave the important arrangements of education in the hands of the producers, in this case teachers. As various sectors of society place competing demands on the skills and social values delivered by the education system (Simpkin, 2004), the state is thrust into the position of attempting to balance these demands and broker some consensus around the content of education. It plays a central role to filter and arrange them into some hierarchy, advancing some whilst relegating others, and set broad parameters of agreement. Given the value placed on education by society and the subjective emotion that can arise over what constitutes a good education the government of the day, as custodian of state affairs, has significant incentive to ensure that its interests, notionally the interests of society, are faithfully represented by teachers. It retains the prerogative to determine matters even to the point of reaching into schools to direct or redirect assessment and reporting, as the National Standards package may permit.

A CONTROL IMPERATIVE IN EDUCATION

Reid (1997) identifies three elements that link together to create a regime of control to harnesses the labour power of teachers – the curriculum, systems of audit and evaluation, and mechanisms to elicit compliance and consent. The curriculum instructs teachers what to teach whilst training and professional development equips them with the skills of how to teach. Systems of appraisal and evaluation harvest information about teacher performance and student achievement to ensure that the curriculum is being delivered faithfully. Compliance and consent mechanisms activate (or compel) teachers' creative engagement in their work. Smyth, Shacklock and Hattam (as cited in O'Neill, 2005) add the following contemporary items to this list: competitive education markets; a 'teacher proof' curriculum; career hierarchies and salary differentials; the injection of managerial and corporate discourse into education; and, the creation of emotion and identity cultures.

When combined, these elements create a structure of controls around teachers' work. Self-managing schools embed the market discipline of choice at

the heart of contemporary education. Schools act as competing providers of education whilst parents were elevated to the position of education consumers (Gordon, 1997). The interests of teachers are aligned with the interests and demands of parents. The Education Review Office periodically audits schools to determine their efficiency and quality against measurable and recordable indicators. The competency and performance of the teacher is continually assessed and managed. A framework of benchmarks and competencies exist in the form of the New Zealand Teachers Council 'Satisfactory Teacher Dimensions' and the Ministry of Education defined 'professional standards', set within a system of appraisal and performance management. Trust is not placed directly in people as responsible professionals but in the accountability secured through contractual arrangements and transparent systems of administration (Robertson, 1999).

NATIONAL STANDARDS AND POLITICAL MOTIVATIONS

The pressure that falls on the state to revolutionise and update the education system, and the labour process of teachers, comes in at least three forms – economic, social and political. Economic pressures include the direct financial position of the state to fund education and extend or retrench services. It also flows through changes in the economy and changing patterns of economic development that reformulates the skills and knowledge required in the workforce to maintain a 'competitive edge'. Social pressures reflect the changing demands placed on the education system as public attitudes and mores shift. Such matters may include sexual and racial equity, environmental awareness, and religious or ethnic identity. The political dimension has a number of manifestations. Some change has support across the political spectrum, or is of sufficient urgency to pass uncontested. Other change is contestable and this dimension of the political process is evidenced in the three year election cycle. Political parties must garner enough support from voters to form a government. Policies which are out of step with the economic and social mood of the electorate will not prevail. Certain change may be largely political in nature and with a view to the election cycle.

Neilson (2006, 2011a) describes the transfusion of a neo-liberal discourse across the global economy from the mid-1980s onward. A transnational neo-liberal economic blueprint has been systematically overlaid across nation states to attune their economic, financial and social policies to this discourse. Nation states 'bend or are bent' to the neo-liberal project (Neilson, 2011, p. 3). Whilst the focus of Neilson's analysis is economic, it is a concept that can be usefully applied to education policy. The education dimensions of the neo-liberal discourse include some form of standardised testing template. The template is flexible enough to allow regional variations so that the particular form it takes in various jurisdictions may vary. The National Standards package is different from the standardised testing regimes as they exist in countries such as Britain and parts of the United States. However, the formula of standardised benchmark 'targets', reporting requirements and the flexibility to add teacher accountability measures, places it broadly within the neo-liberal standardised testing template. Despite claims that it is pragmatic rather than ideological in its

policy prescriptions,³ the National Government operates within this neo-liberal discourse (Neilson, 2011b).

The government's desire to implement the Standards policy package raises a host of professional and pedagogical issues for teachers. Although the educative merits of the Standards are under debate, a significant driver of the package ignores that matter and instead appeals to the cycle of election and re-election. That is, irrespective of the educative merits of the package, there is a political dimension to its implementation. During the run in to the 2008 election the National Party was described as being 'Labour-lite', similar in significant areas to the outgoing Labour government. This label captured the deliberate political strategy of National to present a moderate public face and appeal to the swinging or centrist voter. It accepted a number of key innovations of the incumbent government whilst simultaneously being careful to neutralise controversial aspects of its former policy. Few detailed policies were released for public scrutiny during the election campaign and what policy announcements there were amounted to broad aspirations and general statements of intent. This deliberate imaging of moderation left the National Party with few positive points of differentiation to appeal to the voters sitting in the centre of the political spectrum.

A key policy plank that it did use to mark itself out was the proclaimed crusade on literacy and numeracy, and National Standards. This was, as much as anything, an exercise in political framing. The government therefore has a strong ongoing political attachment to the policy, not only in retrospect assisting its election in 2008 and 2011, but also in prospect looking toward its campaign for re-election in 2014. It was a point of differentiation in 2008 as a committed promise to raise education outcomes. Implementation of the package represented a key 'success' to promote in 2011 how it had faithfully delivered on its 2008 promise. Successfully bedding in the Standards and being able to point to improvements in learning outcomes will be a matter of some importance for the government looking forward.

NATIONAL STANDARDS – A NEW FRONTIER OF CONTROL?

The existing regime of control by and large fulfils the needs of the state. Periodically politicians may bemoan the quality of teachers and across election cycles attention will focus on the relative success or failure of student achievement. However, the contemporary structure of control ensures that the curriculum is being implemented and the state's interests are being served. The government can set policy and mandate outcomes without being highly directive over teachers' work. That is not to say that such arrangements are set in stone. Clark (2004) describes how 'education myths', narratives outlining the intent and function of state education, are torn down and new ones built. The 'myth' regarding the function of education as being a public good, expressed in the Fraser-Beeby statement from the late 1930s, was replaced by a neo-liberal 'myth' of the 1990s that reframed education as a commodity reducible to

³ John Key has described his intention to run a 'moderate, pragmatic government' devoid of 'radical right wing agendas':
www.johnkey.co.nz/archives/341-SPECIAL-John-Key-statement-on-Roger-Douglas-and-Act-audio.html

economic terms. The modes of control that underpin teachers' work are similarly reformulated and renegotiated. It remains to be seen whether the current project of National Standards will fit within the present structures of control or reformat them.

The final shape of the package will determine its value as a tool for assessment, how any assessment data are collated and how the information is used. There will be a consequential impact on how teachers' work is ordered and directed. The package may roughly follow the current arrangement of contextual child assessment and help to map their developmental journey through the curriculum. If so, the standards will form part of a teacher's toolbox but will not impose any direct logic of behaviour in their own right. Education priorities will continue to be determined by schools locally and significant decisions regarding curriculum matters will stay in the hands of teachers. Whilst the standards may have some influence over teachers' work, conception of tasks would continue to reside within the school and within the classroom. This would replicate the contemporary structures of control. This implies no assumption on the actual veracity of the Standards as an assessment tool. The job of making the Standards workable, flawed or otherwise, would still remain. The more accurate the Standards are, the easier it will be to align them with the curriculum and current methods of assessment.

As the initial rollout of the Standards package heads toward the phase of reporting initial progress on charter targets, the picture of how it is playing out in schools is a little murky. Thrupp and Easter (2012) report a varied pattern of implementation. The Ministry of Education has made some attempt to provide teachers with some flexibility in the exact form and terminology they use to report student achievement to parents. There has also been some emphasis in the later part of the rollout to acknowledge the need for teachers to utilise their 'overall teacher judgement' to review a wide spectrum of learning evidence to best gauge student development. It is clear that school moderation is necessary to create some shared agreement of assessment parameters and properly reconcile individual teacher judgements of learning progress. Thrupp and Easter (pp. 133-134) do point out, however, the perception that mixed signals are coming from the Ministry as to the exact terminology that reports to parent must use – the four scales set out in the Standards or some variant preferred by teachers. Whether the Standards package retains sufficient flexibilities to allow teachers to utilise their craft skills to assess and plan learning outcomes and how exactly student development is to be reported to parents seems as yet an unanswered question.

The potential exists for the Standards to be used as an instrument to harvest broad aggregated achievement data across a whole cohort of children. A comparative snapshot of achievement could be taken across an age level using the standards as a backdrop. How far and wide this information could be shared is an open question. It may stay privileged to state institutions or it may be made available for public consumption and perhaps even media comparison. Who has access to this information and how it is used may have a determinative effect on how the curriculum is delivered. Were the information disseminated widely enough and in a form that facilitates comparison, a flow-on effect might centre on a narrowing of the curriculum with increased emphasis of enhancing achievement rates in numeracy and literacy. Schools may feel pressure to use favourable data, or even manipulate data, to position

themselves as desirable learning institutions. Whatever the final outcome may be, whilst the arms length nature of state control may not change, the Standards will become a significant feature in the way work is structured and directed. Teaching will take place under the shadow of the Standards and public scrutiny. New pressures will emerge which schools will be forced to interpret and act on (Edwards, Collinson & Della Rocca, 1990).

Drilling deeper still, it is feasible that the data could be interrogated to identify subsets of children who are falling below the expected developmental track. With the necessary levers in place, schools and even individual teachers who are deemed responsible for these failures could be pin-pointed and made accountable: teachers who deliver the prescribed outcomes rewarded whilst those delivering subpar results penalised or dispensed with altogether. Over time, systems of performance pay and benefits could be tied to the Standards and incorporated into the current arrangements of performance management and appraisal. Feasibly, even registration criteria could be linked to National Standards results. With the necessary material incentives in place, principals might be encouraged (or compelled) to comply with these arrangements. At one point during the 1990s a pay increase for principals was conditional on implementing an appraisal system in their schools. On another occasion a supplemental pay component was made available only to principals who chose individual employment contracts and not to those who chose coverage under a collective contract. Irrespective of what exact options the state chooses, whether they leave it in the hands of principals to implement or take a more directive approach, the control imperative over teachers' labour will be intensified.

CONCLUSION

It is suggested, then, that the direct impact of the National Standards package over teachers' work will rest on at least three factors – the final shape of the standards as an assessment tool, which groups will have access to any data that are generated, and how those data will be used. The conception of assessment and the reporting of learning progress may remain a school-based matter. This maintains the current arms-length regime of control. Cross-school comparative use of data and public reporting of this information, perhaps through some form of league tables, reinforces facets of control secured through school competition and consumer choice. Teachers' work becomes aligned with the promotion of image management around Standards data. Even if not desired by schools, image becomes an important focus and the structure of work is, at least partially, arranged backward from that point. One step further, mechanisms that permit the data to be used as the basis for the assessment of individual performance extend and intensify the current control structures of appraisal and performance management. Careers, pay and perceptions of competency could become conditional on Standards-based assessments of student achievement.

The possibility of the state immersing itself further in the control of teachers' labour, via a highly directive implementation of the Standards, raises a question, almost as an aside, about the enigma of self-managing schools and state control. The logic of a government exercising greater hands-on management of teachers' work might seem counter intuitive to the notion of

local school autonomy. This seeming contradiction would be more pronounced should the government, on the one hand, tighten its grip on the levers of control whilst, on the other hand, divesting itself of certain conditions of teachers' employment. Delegating authority to schools for matters such as direct resourcing of salaries and pay negotiations would force downward significant responsibility for employment matters. On first glance it may not appear congruous for the state to devolve itself of certain aspects of the employment relationship whilst simultaneously intensifying control in other areas. If anything, a move from the government to take firmer control of some matters strengthens the argument for it to shoulder greater responsibility in other areas such as resourcing and teacher welfare. The arms length relationship between state and school does clearly have limits however. To emphasise the point, there are some matters which the state will simply not leave in the hands of teachers and school boards to determine. The state will not quickly relinquish its prerogative to secure and maintain control over teachers' work. A control imperative lies at the heart of the employment relationship.

This line of reasoning could be viewed as a strategic argument however. It may hold little place in the National Standards debate. The definition of what is logical or contradictory is an arguable matter depending on the ideological lens applied to change. There is no immutable law which dictates that workplace change is always logical or free of contradiction, nor should assumptions be made that it is necessarily coherent or rational change. Even where a coherent and rational plan exists, there can certainly be some difference between the intended strategy and the final outcome. Strategies are about intention, they do not automatically imply realisation. Successful implementation cannot simply be read off as inevitable (Littler, 1990). Because the government may have a plan does not mean that the planned outcome is inevitable. Thrupp and Easter (2012) argue that the National Government conflates the political implementation of the Standards package with its successful enactment in schools. The one does not automatically assume the other. Enactment necessitates, amongst other matters, mediation through teachers' subjectivities and their active agency to reject or modify what they disagree with (George, 2009).

The success, or otherwise, of any government strategy to intensify control over teachers' work via the package of Standards will centre on the agency of the parties involved, what they perceive their interests to be and how they act on these interests. Thrupp and Easter (2012, pp. 22-23) provides an extensive list of interactions, involving a range of organisations, around the Standards roll out. The Standards package has been actively contested. Given the interactions to date it might be anticipated that this resistance will continue. Thrupp and Easter prefer the term 'contestation' over resistance; however, in the context of this paper the terms can be interchangeable to denote action which challenges the control imperative exercised across teachers' work. This implies no assumption on the exact form or intensity such resistance might take. It can be collective or individual in nature, overt or hidden, directly oppositional or take a more oblique form (Edwards, Collinson & Della Rocca, 1995; George, 2009). Thrupp and Easter see further potential opportunity for both public and covert contestation over the Standards package. Whilst public action to date has not stopped the rollout it has called into question a number of aspects contained in the package. Teachers still express a variety of concerns. Covert

contestation may involve schools publicly implementing the package whilst engaging in various ‘fiddles’ and ‘creative non-implementation’ in an attempt to maintain more ‘authentic’ experiences of teaching and learning (Thrupp & Easter, 2012). This is a logical conclusion given that industrial sociology literature is rich with examples of workers creating their own interpretations of work. Within the parameters of production, workers are self-organising to create their own patterns, rules and routines (Burawoy, 1979). Attempts by employers to secure conformity in certain areas often results in opposition taking on new and less traceable forms. This can include ‘misbehaviours’ and other ‘off-task’ activities denoting the difference between ‘doing the job’ and some deeper engagement in work (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999).

What is in the mind of the National Government as to where the Standards package fits into the present regime of control may be revealed shortly. Primary teachers head into negotiations for a new Collective Agreement in the latter half of 2012. The new Minister of Education, Hekia Parata, is making noises about wanting to ‘develop performance measures for teachers’ and ‘rewarding them accordingly’.⁴ Paying ‘good teachers more’ necessitates some criteria and some mechanism to determine who is ‘good’ and worthy of ‘more’ and who is not. Attempts on the part of the government, should they arise, to link Standards reporting and results to teachers’ pay or career progression might set the parameters around the next phase of contestation.

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⁴ <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/education/6629986/Rewards-for-quality-teachers>, retrieved 25 March 2012.

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