

At the eye of the storm: Researching schools and their communities enacting National Standards.

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Revised notes from Herbison Lecture given at NZARE conference, University of Otago, Dunedin, 28 November 2013.¹

E ngā mana
E ngā reo
E ngā karangatanga maha
Tēnā koutou.

E ngā tini mate
Haere, haere, haere.

Ki te hunga ora,
ki te hau kāinga ki a Ngāi Tahu
ki a tātou i tae ki te hui,
Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou.

Kei te harikoa ahau
ki te haere mai ki waenganui i a koutou.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

It is with enormous pleasure that I deliver the 24th Herbison Lecture. I thank the NZARE Council for inviting me and I acknowledge those in the audience who have previously given the Herbison. Today I'm talking about my research and academic activism around National Standards and there's a nice circularity about giving this lecture in the South Island. It was at the NZARE conference in Christchurch back in 2007 that I gave my first conference paper on the National Standards, little knowing that responding to this policy would consume me for the next six years. But the RAINS project has been a high point of my career and as they say down here in the Mainland – 'good things take time'. The paper I gave back in 2007 was called 'The proposed National Standards for New Zealand's primary and intermediate pupils: Any better than national testing?' It's a question we now have a few answers to I think.

In my lecture today I'm interested in developing the metaphor of the 'eye of the storm' as a kind of refuge, a quiet place where you can get on and do some good work despite the academic and political storm that swirls around. So I offer a case study of someone trying to muddle through various academic issues and dealing with the difficult politics of doing policy-relevant research. And I also want to get to the substantive findings of the final RAINS report that we are launching after my lecture today. I am going to cover:

- The National Standards policy, my responses and the RAINS research
- Preparing for a storm and how RAINS began

¹ A version of this lecture complete with references has been published in the *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies* 49 (1), pp. 6-20.

- A good project as an antidote to academic cynicism and busyness
- Researching amidst the heat and noise of political debate
- Working in and with the schools
- The final RAINS report: 'National Standards and the Damage Done'

The National Standards policy, my responses and the RAINS research

The National Standards policy is already well discussed in the three RAINS reports, which I will call here RAINS 1, RAINS 2 and the final RAINS report (The reports and other project papers can all be found at http://www.education2014.org.nz/?page_id=16). However to explain for anyone unfamiliar with New Zealand's National Standards, they involve schools making and reporting 'Overall Teacher Judgments' (OTJs) about the reading, writing and mathematics achievement of all children up to Year 8. An OTJ is defined by the Ministry of Education (MoE) as:

...a judgment made about a student's progress and achievement in relation to the National Standards and/or Ngā Whanaketanga Rumaki Māori. An OTJ should be based on a variety of evidence teachers already collect, such as the student's work, peer and self-assessment, everyday classroom observation, and assessment activities (both formal and informal). This involves drawing on and applying the evidence gathered up to a particular point in time in order to make an overall judgment about a student's progress and achievement.

Judgments are made against a four-point scale ('above', 'at', 'below', or 'well below' each Standard) and are made after one, two or three years at school and then at each year level from Years 4-8. Schools do not need to use the wording of the four-point scale in reports to parents but they are expected to use this scale when they report annually to the MoE. Data has been publicly released on a Government website and by media outlets since 2012. As mentioned in the OTJ definition above, there is also a Māori-medium version, Ngā Whanaketanga - more about this later.

As part of justifying the introduction of National Standards, the Ministry of Education's Mary Chamberlain claimed in 2010 that the Standards were innovative enough to avoid the problems found in other national systems of high stakes assessment around the world:

...New Zealand has taken a different approach to the rest of the world. We have used our national curriculum to determine the standard of achievement that needs to be reached at the end of each year. Other countries' approach to standards has been to set them in relation to how students have actually performed on national tests. This approach could lead to narrowing the curriculum, and mediocre outcomes. Our approach has been bolder, to look to the future, and to determine what our students need to know in order for them to succeed. It's not just about where we are today – but where we can be in the future.

So this is what I tend to measure the National Standards against – do they really avoid the problems found internationally?

The National Standards policy has been rolled out progressively. Below are the main developments year by year, along with my one word comments in brackets:

- 2007 - Announced by National while in opposition (uneventful)
- 2008 - Legislation passed under urgency (worrying)
- 2009 - Token consultation and launch (ridiculous)
- 2010 - Training (awful)
- 2011 - Schools required to submit National Standards target in charter and resistance to this (inspiring – the resistance that is)
- 2012 - National Standards data sent to MoE in annual reports, first public release of data (awful)
- 2013 – Second public release of data including Ngā Whanaketanga and the development of the Public Achievement Information ‘pipeline’ (uneventful).

These have been just some of the main events. In fact the development of the National Standards been an absolute saga, discussed in more detail for each of the last few years in the RAINS reports. My main involvement in this continuing story has been as follows:

- NZARE conference paper, December 2007 – already mentioned
- Meeting with Anne Tolley, mid 2008 – this was before she became Minister of Education, I expressed my concerns and gave her a copy of the NZARE paper but she said New Zealand’s National Standards were going to be different.
- Writing ‘popular’ articles about my concerns, early 2009
- Joint public letter to the Minister with John Hattie, Terry Crooks and Lester Flockton, November 2009
- Speaker supporting NZEI campaign against National Standards, early 2010
- RAINS research starts, November 2010
- Attacks from Minister, local newspaper and bloggers, 2011
- RAINS first report released, March 2012
- Campaign against league tables and more unpleasantness from blogs, June 2012
- TEU award for academic freedom, November 2012
- Academic articles starting to come out, 2013
- RAINS second report released, May 2013
- More media, favourable and otherwise, 2013
- Final RAINS report, November 2013
- Primary Education conference which links RANS to other international research, being held January 2014.

My most substantial involvement has been the RAINS (Research, Analysis and Insight into National Standards) research. The RAINS project has involved a three-year study focussed on ‘enactment’ of the National Standards policy in six diverse schools. There have been multiple data sources including interviews (with school leaders, teachers, parents, children, reviewers), classroom observation, and analysis of documents. Lead teachers have helped with the research in each school. The case studies coming out of the research are intended to illustrate both the effects of school context on the way the National Standards are approached and shifts in school culture that are related to the National Standards. Of the three reports RAINS 1 (March 2012) set the scene for each school using mainly school leader interviews. RAINS 2 (April 2013) primarily investigated the lack of comparability of National

Standards between schools. The final RAINS report being launched today looks at impact of National Standards on school cultures.

Preparing for a storm and how RAINS began

When I look back over my working life, it is extraordinary how much of it has turned out to be helpful for what I would face with RAINS, although that wasn't always clear at the time! Important preparations have included:

- My own school teaching - six years in secondary schools that taught me first hand about the life of teachers and the conditions they work within;
- Te Ataarangi (an approach to learning Te reo Māori me ngā tikanga) - because the research has sometimes thrust me into Māori speaking contexts;
- My research on school context in New Zealand (my doctoral thesis) and England (the HARPS project);
- My debates with the late Roy Nash and with the School Effectiveness movement – learning how to respond to criticism!;
- My experience of performative education policy in England - being a parent and a school governor in that system for six years;
- My research into performative education policy in England (the REGULEDUC project);
- The networks established overseas;
- Becoming a senior academic - provides more authority with the media and with nowhere much left to go one can hopefully afford to be more generous;
- Previous research for the teacher unions – on ERO and on professional standards, and
- My home life - a busy household with teenagers and pets, a great distraction from the shenanigans I'll be talking about later.

The way RAINS began was that I started to publicly support the NZEI and NZPF campaigns against the National Standards in 2009 and early 2010, including writing articles and presenting at public meetings. For a while there in Feb 2010 I was speaking at several meetings a week. But by later in the year, with the Standards system starting to have a presence in schools, it was becoming clear that in-depth research would be needed. So I raised the idea with the NZEI (no, not the other way around) and found that this organisation was willing to fund research on the National Standards. The NZEI was rightly concerned that research on the National Standards would become framed by narrow Ministry agendas and concerns, rather than be properly open to other issues raised by the international literature. It was also confident that a wide-ranging research approach would vindicate many of the concerns being expressed about the National Standards. The main requirements of the NZEI was that the research be longitudinal, rather than a snapshot, offer a rich qualitative picture, be well informed by existing research and scholarship and that the research would allow for the close involvement of teachers.

A good project as an antidote to academic cynicism and busyness

These days I think it's especially helpful for academics to have a good research project to get stuck into. Otherwise we could easily spend too much time fretting

about the state of the academy where there are certainly plenty of things you could be cynical or depressed about. One is the shameless way universities market themselves using any measure they possible can. Most of the universities seem to have a page about their rankings, I know ours does and yours probably does too. When I was on leave recently I went to the University of Bath where the students are the most satisfied in the UK according to the results of the 2013 National Student Survey (NSS). Actually there were specialist higher education institutions that did better in the survey. But this is only mentioned in the fine print and it doesn't stop Bath from marketing itself as No. 1:

The screenshot shows a Google search for "university of bath". The search bar contains the text "university of bath" and a search icon. Below the search bar are tabs for "Web", "Images", "Maps", "News", "More", and "Search tools". The search results show "About 86,500,000 results (0.24 seconds)". The top result is "University of Bath - Number One for Student Satisfaction in the ... www.bath.ac.uk/". The snippet below the title reads: "A leading UK university with an international reputation for teaching and research excellence." It also shows a rating of "4.6" with five stars and "19 Google reviews · Write a review". A location pin indicates "Claverton Down, Bath, North East Somerset BA2 7AY, United Kingdom" with the phone number "+44 1225 388388". To the right of the text is the University of Bath crest, a circular emblem featuring a sun with a human face.

Not everyone can easily claim to be the best, but the times are such that you flaunt whatever you can make a claim to anyway. Our Waikato ranking are everywhere from our Faculty page to huge billboards:

The screenshot shows the website for the Faculty of Education at the University of Waikato. The header is red with the University of Waikato crest on the left, the text "THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato" in the center, and "Faculty of Education Te Kura Toi Tangata" on the right. Below the header is a navigation menu with items: HOME, OUR FACULTY, STUDY, RESEARCH, PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, NEWS + EVENTS, and CONTACT. The main content area features a breadcrumb trail "Waikato Home > FEDU Home" and a list of menu items: FACULTY HOME, OUR FACULTY, QUALIFICATIONS, FACULTY RESEARCH, MĀORI, PROFESSIONAL LEARNING, and STUDENT SERVICES. A large banner image shows a group of children in a swimming pool with a teacher. Overlaid on the banner is a text box that says "Teaching applications close December 1." with a red "Apply Now!" button. Below the banner are two columns: "NEWS" with a link to "Graduate Fellowship Award" and a short paragraph about Wendy Sweet, and "NOTICES" with a link to "Postgraduate Information Evening" and a short paragraph. At the bottom left, there is a logo for "TOP 100 IN THE WORLD QS WORLD UNIVERSITY RANKINGS" and a Facebook logo with the text "Find us on Facebook".



You'll probably also be familiar with the TV advertisement where Steve Maharey, the Vice Chancellor of Massey University, drives around the Albany campus in a supercar. Who would have thought 20 years ago that we would see one of our university leaders in a role such as this? The problem is that the way competition between our universities works there will be one upmanship for sure. Personally I can't wait to see one of our VCs circling over a campus wearing a jetpack.



And what about the aspirational language of universities that makes so many of us feel uncomfortable? Recently I visited Arizona State University – the biggest public university in the US, 75,000 students, in the desert at Phoenix and gradually covering itself with solar panels, which seemed like a good idea. There all this stuff gets to dizzying heights:

Eight design aspirations guide ASU's transformation.

ASU urges its students, faculty, staff and programs to:

01. Leverage Our Place

ASU embraces its cultural, socioeconomic and physical setting.

02. Transform Society

ASU catalyzes social change by being connected to social needs.

03. Value Entrepreneurship

ASU uses its knowledge and encourages innovation.

04. Conduct Use-Inspired Research

ASU research has purpose and impact.

05. Enable Student Success

ASU is committed to the success of each unique student.

06. Fuse Intellectual Disciplines

ASU creates knowledge by transcending academic disciplines.

07. Be Socially Embedded

ASU connects with communities through mutually beneficial partnerships.

08. Engage Globally

ASU engages with people and issues locally, nationally and internationally.

We are also all encouraged to make a business of ourselves at the level of individual academics. Again some of us embrace this much more comfortably than others, I'm not very keen on it myself. Although I finally decided I should put a bit of stuff on my university website last year, I can think of colleagues, both more and less established, who even have both a university website and then another one that markets themselves and their achievements a bit more. As another indicator, look at people's email signatures. I saw one recently that ran to twenty lines including various roles and new publications. On one level it's all jolly impressive of course, but I think it's too much as well. Mine just has my position as professor of education, and my institution, the University of Waikato. That's enough don't you think? Why would you want more? Whatever happened to self-praise being no recommendation? Amongst Maori, to boast too much is to be whakahihi but we are all cheapened when we talk ourselves up too much. It also creates distance between academics and practitioners, whereas I think our work often involves trying to be on the same page in order to increase our understanding.


Something else to be cynical about as an academic is the relationship between research and policy. It's clear that policy is often informed by market ideology more than research findings and in the US academics are frequently working against the influence of the right-wing think-tanks. Chris Lubienski, a professor at University of Illinois who was working with me at Waikato last year as a Fulbright scholar, has written about how these groups operate in self-referential ways that leave out so much good research. They attack good research as well. I'm thinking about Gene

Glass, the USA's answer to our own Ivan Snook, long retired but still very involved in educational debate. Gene has had a very distinguished career in education research, and earlier this year co-authored a critical review of 'virtual' charter schools. In response one of these right-wing think tanks, the 'Foundation for Educational Excellence', set up a website to ridicule Gene at <http://geneglass.org/>. It's a kind of compliment to him I suppose – it's not often that researchers get whole websites devoted to deriding their work.

Gene Glass of NEPC: A track record of inaccurate data and agenda-driven conclusions

NEPC Watch

Gene Glass of the The National Education Policy Center is one of the nation's most outspoken critics of school choice options. While maintaining he and his fellow academics housed at NEPC are disinterested researchers, Glass and his cohorts have a track record of using flawed and inaccurate data to support agenda-driven conclusions. As detailed on this website, there is ample reason for members of the media and policymakers to take pause when considering the opinions and research of Gene Glass and the other NEPC critics of school choice options.



Education Next News: Widely Publicized Critique of Virtual Schools Seriously FlawedFebruary 5th, 2013

Educational politics in this country can be ludicrous too. After release of the regional National Standards data on 18 July 2013, several National MPs put out media releases on 19 July entitled “[Insert MP’s name] welcomes regional information on education results” These all went on to use exactly the same ‘could do better’ wording:

I’m happy to see [insert percentage figure] of students in the [insert region] achieved the national standard in reading. While these are great results, we want to see our primary students do even better, and this data will help schools to focus resources to better support kids.

Clearly this template release was the National Government’s PR machine in action. But what was disturbing rather than comical about it was the way it signalled the start of a target-setting regime in which schools and teachers would always be expected to do better, regardless of how well they were already doing. The problem is there is absolutely no basis to it. The MPs concerned just don’t know enough about the situation of the schools or the nature of their intakes so they actually have no way of knowing if the schools in their regions should do better or could do better. It reminds me a bit of our family dog. Being part Labrador he hoovers up any food he’s given, but he’s also getting arthritic and needed to lose weight so we got him some special diet food. Over the last four months he’s lost 5 kg so we are very pleased with him. But what would these politicians probably say? Oh, but he could do better!



Another example of very loose claims around National Standards achievement data is that when the data was released on 11 June this year, the Government's publicity around the release of the Ngā Whanaketanga data did not make it clear that nearly half of Māori-medium schools had not actually submitted any Ngā Whanaketanga data. This only became public in August. Some schools were not forwarding data for 'capability reasons' but most simply refused. Among those who have objected most to Ngā Whanaketanga are those kura kaupapa Māori who have been following the Te Ao Matua philosophy, This holistic Māori world-view expected to underpin the curriculum of kura kaupapa was passed into legislation under the Education (Te Aho Matua) Amendment Act 1999. Te Rūnanga Nui o Ngā Kura Kaupapa Māori, the national body of kura kaupapa Māori and the kaitiaki (guardians) of the Te Ao Matua philosophy have been firmly opposed to having Ngā Whanaketanga dominate the curriculum in kura.

Something else to worry about as an academic is the intensification and fragmentation of our work. Things have changed a lot even since I have become an academic about 20 years ago. The methodological and theoretical complexities of being an academic have increased considerably. Greg Dimitriadis in his (2012) book 'Critical Dispositions: Evidence and Expertise in Education' talks about a proliferation of fields and subfields in the academy in the USA that 'in large measure' results from a constant need to reposition due to a sharp decline in resources. This situation is compared to the 'tragedy of the commons' where self-interested behaviour subverts the interests of all over the long term. In particular, the increased demarcation and

incommensurability of fields has the effect of fragmenting and containing the work of researchers and scholars.

More generally there are so many more journals to write in and so many more conferences to attend. When it comes to conferences some people just parachute in briefly, even those doing keynotes. Academic processes have also often become impersonal, for instance there are those automated article review emails now rather than a cheery personal request. And our class numbers have increased markedly too.

Greg Dimitriadis also talks about a growing gap between the academy and schools as academics chase particular kinds of research outputs and teachers chase higher test scores for their respective promotion prospects. It seems the idea that schools and faculties of education might service the professional needs of schools and other educational institutions is increasingly becoming mere rhetoric. So going back to the screenshot of our Faculty website with teacher education and the university rankings, there's actually a huge tension between them!

There's no doubt the PBRF is now a big part of New Zealand academic life and this causes various problems. For instance although many 'outputs' are recognised, others - such as writing in more 'popular' ways or supporting public events - are not. It leads universities to appoint academic 'stars' but they seem to be often short-lived - better described as 'shooting [off] stars' perhaps. Also the academic generosity I noted earlier tends to disappear as the PBRF encourages senior academics to get terribly important and international. For instance it has been difficult to get such people along to NZARE conferences in recent years. But in some ways it is a mythology around the PBRF that feeds such behaviours rather than the reality. There is no AAA PBRF rating for academics, one can only be an A. And to get an A an academic only needs a few publications a year and a few good ones over an assessment period so while we can admire those who are more prolific, it is somewhat pointless and just feeds the academic busyness industry. You can also be an A but only go overseas say once a year over the whole PBRF period. So it's a shame that many of our 'top' academics spend so much time internationally where actually the academics are also fighting their local battles, just in a bigger pond. It takes energy out of the battles we need to have over education in this country.

So how does having a good project help with all this? Well it provides a focus - there is not so much of a sense of fiddling while Rome burns 'out there'. It gives purpose and connection - academic life seems less absurd when one can respond to some of the things that we might otherwise be cynical about. It also provides a lift, when a researcher is lucky enough to work in schools or centres as many of us do, it's much harder to be cynical because the children make it worthwhile. I know that principals often feel much the same: when they get hammered politically they find their purpose back with their children and teachers in their schools. A project doesn't always have to involve a lot of funding, in fact if such funding comes with many strings attached it may be better off not to apply. A good project will capture a researcher's commitment in a way that will never happen with research that is framed up too tightly.

Researching amidst the heat and noise of political debate

There are many different elements to this, some of which I have written about previously, both in relation to the RAINS project and other work. University managers

were cautious about committing to RAINS lest it threatened other funding streams and the University's reputation more generally. But they did allow it to go ahead and good on them for that. But as soon as the research was announced in February 2011, there was criticism of its 'independence' by right-wing bloggers, 'Whaleoil' and 'Kiwiblog' (i.e., Cameron Slater, and David Farrar) as well as an editorial in the *Waikato Times* that described me as a 'union hired gun'. The *Waikato Times* editorial followed an article in the same paper in which I was criticised by then Minister of Education, Anne Tolley. It has also been suggested at times that a 'health warning' should accompany my public comments about education policy because the NZEI have funded my research. Unfortunately this stuff goes with the territory, to some extent researchers have to get used to it. (Although I also think bloggers should take more responsibility for providing an outlet for often abusive and usually anonymous followers). This year I realised that I must have developed some perspective because while I was being criticised in a Herald editorial, I found myself more preoccupied with putting out a piece about Fairfax and their willingness to publish flawed data.

As well as dealing with perceptions arising from involvement in public debate about the National Standards prior to starting the RAINS research, there have also been continuing decisions to be made about how much to speak out on matters related to National Standards. An implication of the criticisms already discussed is that academic researchers should be silent on matters that involve their expertise if they are researching in the area. But the costs of this approach are high, arguably too high. In practice in a small democracy like New Zealand it would leave whole areas of social and political life without relevant academics to comment on developments. This suggests that where there are tensions between 'different' aspects of academic life, such as advocacy and research, these will often need to be considered and managed rather than any part of the role dropped altogether.

There are a multitude of specific decisions involved. For instance, I have sometimes turned down speaking engagements in areas where the RAINS research was being undertaken. There was no specific requirement to do so but it seemed sensible from a research perspective to avoid my views dominating the discussion space in the RAINS schools. On the other hand in 2012 there were new announcements around the public release of the National Standards data that I considered needed my urgent response as an academic and also something that would be taking effect long after the RAINS research finishes. For the two months leading up to the release of the data I was frequently in the media, jointly spearheading a large group of academics who publicly opposed the release of the data, was again writing 'popular' articles, and again supporting the NZEI as a speaker at public meetings. Yet it did not seem prudent or appropriate to pull out lots of in-progress findings from RAINS during this campaign. So I tended to avoid talking much about RAINS, or kept my comments about it to passing references.

The political context of the research has also had implications for writing it up. The reports have needed to be armoured against both the criticism of a forgone conclusion that had been levelled against the project and against potential misuse of the findings. One kind of response to these concerns has been to provide plenty of background about the National Standards and the nature of the research. Hence the reports have provided much more context than most do, including being explicit about the politics of the research. Another response in the first report was to say much more about the authors than most reports do: more like a disclosure statement

than any typical 'About the Authors'. In terms of the substantive content of the report, case study material has been reviewed by the schools and it is being made available one way or another so that people can draw their own conclusions.



I also want to mention the importance of supportive networks. Although I have been the academic mainly responsible for the RAINS research, significant support has been provided by a broad group of organisations and individuals: academic colleagues in my faculty and university and others nationally and internationally, teacher groups of various kinds and education lobby groups such as the Quality Public Education Coalition. New Zealand's Tertiary Education Union has also taken a continuing interest in the academic freedom issues around this project. Usually it has been encouragement or information that has been offered but sometimes advice or participation. In a few cases it has been the significant silence of those who could put obstacles in the way of the research or activism that has been most valued. Overall the RAINS experience illustrates that academics who put their 'heads above the parapet' can not only meet resistance or apathy but also a great deal of support, and sometimes from unexpected quarters.

Working in and with the schools

Perhaps surprisingly, none of the media coverage mentioned above caused any problems for carrying out the research in the schools. Where the media coverage was mentioned, it tended to be dismissed as 'political mischief' rather than something that needed to be taken seriously. The role of practitioners involved in the research – in this case the RAINS lead teachers – as advocates and allies when a researcher comes under political attack is not often considered but is worth noting here. Theirs is usually a trusted perspective from within the organisation; whether or not a researcher has this support can really make a difference when 'in the field' at times of adversity.

More generally the RAINS research has involved repeated interviews with many people in each school and generally a lot of time 'hanging around' the schools and their classrooms, especially in the larger and more complex schools. I want to stress the importance of spending time in schools and classroom. It allows more opportunities for research subjects to reflect and express themselves and has also provided a better chance to get past the 'professional face' staff present to outsiders in the context of the 'performing school'. Researchers have to become reasonably familiar with and become known within the school setting if they want to understand the outlooks of teachers and principals and make sense of the day-to-day examples they provide. Spending even a little time in classrooms allows researchers to better connect with the experiences of teachers (and children) and develop some rapport. Indeed the RAINS research became more 'bottom up' as the project progressed. The two earlier reports drew mainly on the perspectives of the senior leaders in each school but the final report is based more on the experiences of teachers and children.

The final RAINS report: 'National Standards and the Damage Done'

The final report provides an overview discussion of the pros and cons of the National Standards policy as experienced by staff, children and parents in the RAINS schools. It summarises the policy and methodological background to the research and the findings of the two previous RAINS reports. The report will eventually be accompanied by school case studies and other data files. And while this is the final report for NZEI, it can be expected that other papers will come out of the project.

The report is called 'National Standards and the Damage Done' after the well-known song by Neil Young. That song describes the addiction to heroin of musicians he had known but in this case we are talking about the impact of a growing addiction to data. Here's the opening paragraph of the report:

The National Standards were introduced into New Zealand primary and intermediate schools in 2009. Four years later an official fixation with the data generated through the Standards is becoming abundantly clear. The public release of the data for each school on the Government's 'Education Counts' website was done only crudely in 2012 but the data released in 2013 is in a more consistent format, broken into year levels. There is also the beginning of a target-setting culture around the National Standards data with the announcement in 2013 of a national target of 85% of primary students at or above the National Standards or Ngā Whanaketanga And suddenly in 2013 there are also over a hundred infographics related to the National Standards for anyone who wants to look at them: national, regional, territorial, some just about National Standards or Ngā Whanaketanga and some linking these to the wider Public Achievement Information programme, all published online and some in newspapers. New Zealanders are suddenly swimming in National Standards data, as much as anyone could want—and more!

The report goes on to note that although the RAINS schools' trajectories have been very different, they are converging towards the National Standards agenda, whether the schools were early adopters, have come to the Standards over time, or have been forced to engage because of intervention from the Ministry or ERO. One school has managed to get by with a more tepid response but this positioning remains vulnerable.

The report considers why those in the RAINS schools, many of them sceptical or dismissive of the Government's National Standards agenda at the outset, have mostly come around to engaging with the Standards with more effort and attention. Reasons for falling in line with the National Standards include professional identities, pressure from central agencies, and incrementalism. There has been little evidence so far of market pressures related to the public release of data.

National Standards are having some favourable impacts in areas that include teacher understanding of curriculum levels, motivation of some teachers and children and some improved targeting of interventions. Nevertheless such gains are overshadowed by damage being done through the intensification of staff workloads, curriculum narrowing and the reinforcement of a two-tier curriculum, the positioning and labelling of children and unproductive new tensions amongst school staff. These problems are often occurring despite attempts by schools and teachers to minimise any damaging impact of the National Standards.

One important area discussed in the report is the positioning and labelling of children. There are quotes from some children that indicate the National Standards are having a negative impact on their view of themselves as learners. Meanwhile teachers report struggling to emphasise progress to parents when they are fixated on the 'well below'/'below'/'at'/'above' categories, while other parents report not sharing reports with their children because of their concerns about the impact of the Standards. Also relevant are the development of wall displays in the classrooms in some schools that create a visual hierarchy of children's abilities in relation to the Standards and underlying levels or stages.



Evidence that the National Standards are harming the culture of schools needs to be taken seriously because it has surfaced while New Zealand's version of high stakes assessment is still in an embryonic stage. National Standards are not going to avoid problems that have been found internationally, they represent a variation on the theme. The Government has taken some steps to reduce harm by masking the published data for some individuals, groups and schools. Yet what needs to have been taken more seriously is the potential for National Standards to have a detrimental impact on day-to-day processes and relationships in and around schools long before the data gets published, as well as any subsequent effects of publication.

There will only be a shift in teacher preoccupations and use of energies away from the damaging excesses currently emerging when a different way to be a 'good' New Zealand teacher becomes sanctioned by policy. It is not going to be enough to promulgate a different story about the existing National Standards. Based on the study, the report recommends:

- Abandoning the crude four-point National Standards scale ('above', 'at', 'below' and 'well below'), instead reporting whichever underlying curriculum level a child has reached. This would allow a more constructive focus on progress.
- Allowing teachers to discuss age-related expectations of children and any other matters that parents want to discuss, but only in ways that are mindful of the potential for harm such as lowered expectations.
- Leaving it up to schools how to determine student achievement against curriculum levels while informing their decisions through high quality professional development.
- Abandoning the nationwide collection and public reporting of primary achievement data, instead gathering system-wide information through a national sampling approach.
- Continuing with ERO reviews but with different policy informing review teams practices.

These proposals do not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Schools already base most of their assessment work around curriculum levels. The aim must be to remove the harmful bits of policy and by changing the policy to reach back into the culture of schools and repair the damage being done.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, kia ora tatou katou.