

‘Tell me about your school’: Researching local responses to New Zealand’s National Standards policy

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Abstract

This article introduces the Research, Analysis and Insight into National Standards (RAINS) project, a study of how six schools are enacting the National Standards introduced into New Zealand’s primary and intermediate schools from October 2009. The article provides some background to the National Standards and the RAINS research before concentrating on findings from the first year of the study (2011). The most important of these findings were that the RAINS schools’ responses to the National Standards had been largely incremental and strongly influenced and shaped by school-specific contextual factors. Through brief accounts of each of the six schools, the article illustrates how crucial it is to take into account the contextual features of schools in order to begin to make sense of the range of responses they have had to the National Standards. We conclude by considering the implications of these findings and how the RAINS research will continue to build an understanding of how schools are grappling with the National Standards.

New Zealand’s National Standards were introduced in 2009 and involve schools making and reporting judgements about the reading, writing, and mathematics achievement of children up to Year 8 (the end of primary school). These judgements are made against a four-point scale (“above”, “at”, “below” or “well below” the standard) and are made after 1, 2, or 3 years at school in the junior school and then at the end of each year level from Years 4 to 8. The policy matches existing curriculum levels (and associated numeracy stages and literacy progressions) to the above times at which assessments need to be made against the National Standards. This means that teachers are supposed to consider students’ achievement against what is required for the curriculum levels, and use that

understanding to then make Overall Teacher Judgements (OTJs) about achievement against the National Standards. OTJs are intended to be “on-balance” judgements made by using various indications of a child’s level of achievement, such as teachers’ knowledge of each child from daily interactions, exemplars (examples of student work, with accompanying notes to illustrate learning, achievement, and the calibre of the work in relation to curriculum levels), and data produced by using assessment tools, tasks and activities. The definition of an OTJ from the New Zealand Ministry of Education (the “Ministry”) is as follows:

An Overall Teacher Judgement (OTJ) is a judgment made about a student’s progress and achievement in relation to the National Standards. 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. (Ministry of Education, no date)

OTJs are expected to be moderated within schools or informally in local clusters of schools.¹ They are required to be used to report to parents twice a year about a child’s achievement against the National Standards. Schools do not need to use the wording of the four-point scale in this reporting (i.e., “above”, “at”, “below”, or “well below” the standard), but they are expected to report against the scale when they report annually to the Ministry of Education about student achievement levels in the school.²

The National Standards policy has been one of the most controversial school-level developments in New Zealand for decades. Although there are many reasons for this (Thrupp & Easter, 2012, p.10), a key issue has been the way National Standards represented such a sharp break from longstanding approaches to primary-school assessment in New Zealand. During the decades prior there had been an emphasis on formative assessment in schools supported by a wide range of national assessment resources and reinforced after 1995 by the National Educational Monitoring Project (NEMP) at the University of Otago (see www.educationcounts.govt.nz/topics/research/nemp). This project provided a national overview of achievement by sampling all areas of the curriculum over consecutive 4-year assessment cycles. There had also been a tradition, especially up

until the 1980s, of sector representatives such as teachers and principals being heavily involved in the development of curriculum and assessment policy and resources.

New Zealand had therefore managed to avoid the high-stakes approach to assessment found in countries such as England and the United States with its associated curriculum narrowing and other effects of performativity (Au, 2009; Alexander, 2009; Ball, 2003; Hursh, 2008; Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Stobart 2008). As Ball (2003, p. 216) describes it, performativity:

employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of ‘quality’ or ‘moments’ of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement.

The key point about performativity in schools is that it often leads to perverse cultural responses where meeting the high-stakes target, standard, or test score is incentivised to be more important than authentic teaching and learning. For instance schools may seek to manipulate student intakes, programmes, or achievement data, to give the appearance of improved performance.

Yet whether New Zealand’s new system of National Standards would lead to these unfortunate outcomes found elsewhere was not straightforward. Certainly, the National government elected in 2008 legislated for and developed the National Standards system with little consultation with the sector (Thrupp, 2010). The policy also threatened to make primary assessment more performative because student-achievement data would no longer be held just in schools for their purposes, but would be sent to the Ministry of Education for its various purposes. These included possible public release, and while the government vacillated over this issue over 2009–10, by 2012 it went ahead with publishing the data on its Education Counts website, www.educationcounts.govt.nz (Thrupp, 2013). At the same time, the use of standards rather than a national test, and the way teachers were expected to draw on so many sources in making OTJs against National

Standards, was an apparent attempt to avoid the problem of “teaching to the test”. As a senior official at the Ministry of Education put it:

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. (Chamberlain, 2010)

Of course, it remained (and remains) to be seen whether New Zealand's standards system would avoid the pitfalls experienced by other countries. Given how widespread and persistent they are internationally, it was just as likely to not so much avoid those problems as develop a particular variant of them. Given this concern—and a multitude of others³—it is not surprising that teachers, principals, and others found many ways to campaign against the introduction of the National Standards. The methods used included publicity campaigns, use of the social media, submissions, and boycotts. Indeed fuelled by the nature of the policy and its introduction, along with the uncompromising stance of government, the contestation of the National Standards would have to be one of the most extensive campaigns against any education policy to be found internationally in recent years (Thrupp & Easter 2012, pp. 21–26). During the first term of the National government there seemed barely a week went by without opposition to National Standards triggering media debate. In August 2011, 3 months after a deadline for the requirement to put National Standards targets in school charters, nearly a quarter of schools were failing to comply (Binning 2011).

It was against this intense background of claims and counterclaims about the National Standards that the 3-year Research, Analysis and Insight into National Standards (RAINS) Project began to research the impact of the policy in six schools. This article introduces the RAINS research before concentrating on findings from the first year of the study (2011). We conclude by considering the implications of the findings and noting the directions the RAINS research has been subsequently developing.

The RAINS research

At the heart of the RAINS project is the recognition that schools never just “implement” policy. Rather, RAINS is concerned with policy “enactment”: how the National Standards policy is being translated and reinterpreted at the local level by individuals and groups in different ways amidst the messy complexities and uncertainties of diverse school settings and many other educational policies and practices (Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2012). One important reason to think about enactment is that the particular features of the National Standards policy mean that context will be very important in how it plays out in schools. For instance, the general paucity of professional development around the National Standards means schools are likely to draw on their existing approaches to assessment, while the OTJ approach, along with the absence of national moderation, allows for a great deal of local variation in how schools choose to approach National Standards. Another reason for taking an enactment perspective is that, following from the international literature on performativity noted above, New Zealand teachers, principals, and boards can be expected to be looking for advantageous assessment practices and curricula shifts if they want their schools or particular groups of children to perform well in the National Standards. For performativity, new performances will be needed from those in schools as complex social processes are translated into those simple categories of “well below”, “below”, “at” and “above” standard and reported at different levels within and beyond the school. Related to both of the above, a third reason for seeing National Standards as enacted is because it has been such a heavily contested policy. While schools are now apparently mostly complying with the Standards policy, this compliance does not mean that the policy has captured hearts and minds among principals, teachers, and boards. Their varying perspectives and concerns will continue to influence the way that schools approach the National Standards.

These concerns are reflected in the project’s four research questions.

1. How are boards, senior leadership teams and teachers in different school contexts *enacting* the National Standards policy?
2. To what extent is *performativity* apparent in these enactments of policy?

3. How does the evidence on policy enactments and performativity in relation to New Zealand's National Standards compare with the international evidence?
4. What lessons are there from the RAINS research for policy and for practice in schools?

In-depth qualitative research has been required to investigate these questions. The RAINS research design has involved case study research illuminating a wide range of perspectives and practices by drawing on multiple data sources. Case studies are studies of singularities but multiple cases allow for some level of generalisation (Bassey, 1999; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). They are a “prime strategy for developing theory which illuminates educational policy and enhances educational practice” (Sikes, 1999).

Six schools were selected for the research—Juniper School, Seagull School, Kanuka School, Magenta School, Cicada School, and Huia Intermediate (for ethical reasons the school names are pseudonyms). Each school is briefly discussed later in this article. They were chosen primarily for their diverse characteristics in terms of the socioeconomic and ethnic makeup of their intakes, school size, and rural or suburban locations. While they vary in their level of support for the National Standards, only one (Cicada School) obviously resisted them. All the schools have had successful ERO reviews in recent years and they all enjoy reasonably favourable and sometimes excellent reputations in their local communities (Thrupp & Easter, 2012).

Within these schools, the first year of the RAINS research (2011) largely involved the authors gaining access to the schools, trying to understand the complexities of the school contexts into which the National Standards were being introduced, how they were being introduced into those contexts, and what people in and around the schools in different roles thought about this development. The research involved boards of trustees, senior leadership teams, individual teachers, children, and parents. The views and approaches taken by Education Review Office staff as they reviewed each school were also examined. Semistructured interviews and other recorded and unrecorded discussions have formed the mainstay of data collection along with observation of classrooms and meetings, and collection of

relevant school documents and student data. An experienced teacher from each school has been involved in the research team. These “RAINS lead teachers” have had an important role in facilitating the progress of the project in their respective schools and providing advice and feedback.

The research informing this article was undertaken in several phases. Gaining access began by preparing written materials and holding meetings with principals over November and December 2010. In three schools we spoke to staff and in one met with the board. Consent forms were distributed to staff and boards. Between December and early February we interviewed each principal regarding the contextual features of their school and each school’s response to National Standards up until that time. In March and April there was another round of interviewing, this time with teachers. In Terms 2 and 3 (May–August 2011) we interviewed more teachers in each of the schools, board chairs and sometimes other board members, reinterviewed principals, and spent a day in each of 13 classrooms with follow-up. The last part of Term 3 and Term 4 (August–December 2011) was largely taken up with interviewing parents and children and getting feedback from schools on draft case studies. In total, we spent 115 half days in the schools (including time on phone interviews with parents) between December 2010 and December 2011, with 26 half days spent in the cohort classrooms. We also amassed 242 recordings of interviews or discussions.

Seeking to get to grips with the context of the schools, we observed and asked questions about the characteristics of the community and intake served by each school, the reputation it enjoys, the way it has approached curriculum, assessment and reporting and professional learning and development (PLD), as well as the way the school is organised, led and governed. At the classroom level, we focused on particular “cohort” classes. For each of these classes, we have accounts from teachers in each school about what they do on a day-to-day basis in their classes, a small amount of general classroom observation (a day in each class) and interviews with children and parents. We chose classes at levels where most of the children will still be in the schools in 2013 so we can have a follow-up interview to see whether their perspectives have shifted and whether the National Standards are looming any larger in their awareness. (As in most intermediates, Huia Intermediate children are only there for

2 years and so at Huia the follow-up research was done in 2012 instead.) Against all of this background we have then explored the introduction of National Standards to varying extents and in varying ways in each school. We have asked questions about the approach to National Standards in each school of principals, boards, lead teachers, cohort teachers, children (where appropriate), parents, and ERO reviewers. In all the schools we have also interviewed most teachers, allowing the project to gather perspectives from across the school.

To summarise, for each school we collected the following data in 2011:

- recorded meetings with lead teachers going into the specific details of curriculum, assessment, reporting and PLD over last few years
- multiple recorded or unrecorded interviews and discussions with principals
- interviews with two cohort teachers in each school (three at Kanuka)
- field notes from a day observing in each of the cohort classes and recorded follow-up discussions
- interviews with some children in each of the cohort classes and some of their parents (discussed further below); short interviews with most other teaching staff in each school
- interviews with the board chair and sometimes other board members
- notes or recordings from some other relevant school meetings
- documents including charters, annual plans and samples of student reports and how these have been changing over recent years
- school websites and newsletters
- photographs of wall displays in each cohort class
- interviews with ERO reviewers for some of the schools (over the 3 years of the project we should have interviews for the others too).

Drawing on all of this data and further research in the schools over 2012–13 (see Thrupp 2013), the RAINS project aims to provide rich descriptions of how schools are enacting the National Standards. It is generating internal validity through a “chain-of-evidence” approach that allows readers to make their own judgements about the plausibility of research claims. A chain-of-evidence approach provides “a tight and

interconnected path of recording evidence so that the reader who was not present to observe the case can follow the analysis and come to the stated conclusion” (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p. 159). For the RAINS project, data are being collected to refute or support existing theories and to add to them if possible. This requires comparative analysis within and across schools, and also provides many themes to structure the analysis. At the same time, the analysis has needed to be sensitive to differences between New Zealand and the overseas contexts that have produced many of the previous research findings and to be open to considering the implications of these differences.

In relation to research ethics and quality assurance, the RAINS project has benefited from both a national advisory group and an international reference group (see Thrupp & Easter 2012). Another kind of quality assurance was provided through the RAINS lead teachers and principals (and in some cases others in the schools) commenting on drafts of the case study of their schools until an agreed version was reached. While this was a time-consuming process, it was also very helpful for correcting inaccuracies and ensuring those closest to the cases could recognise their schools in the text. As noted above, the RAINS research has taken place against the background of intense contestation of the National Standards and the project itself has also been controversial because it was funded not by government but by the primary teachers union, the New Zealand Educational Institute. Consequently the politics of the research are more to the fore than in many studies and are being explicitly discussed in project reports (Thrupp & Easter 2012, Thrupp 2013).

An incremental and contextualised response

A key finding of the RAINS research in the first year was that the changes in the six schools around National Standards over 2009–11 were typically incremental, rather than representing substantially new departures from what the schools had already been doing. Reasons for this rate of change included the way the National Standards policy was not yet particularly “high stakes” in terms of reputation, change in schools being tempered by what already busy teachers could deal with, and schools already having a major focus on numeracy and literacy as a result of policy over the last decade. Just as Cowie and colleagues found that the New Zealand

curriculum “did not arrive in a vacuum” (Cowie, et al., 2009, p. 7), the same was true of the National Standards. The effect was that even the most obvious responses to the National Standards, such as report formats, tended to involve modifications of what the schools had already been doing.

Along with an incremental approach, the RAINS schools’ approaches to the National Standards were, “intimately shaped and influenced by school-specific [contextual] factors” (Braun, Ball, Maguire, & Hoskins, 2011, p. 585). Such contextual factors included intake differences (such as socioeconomic make-up, ethnicity, transience, the proportion of pupils from migrant families or with special needs) and other school and area characteristics (urban/rural location, market position compared with surrounding schools). There were also important internal contexts, such as the history of approaches to teaching, assessment, and school organisation as well as past and present reputational and recruitment issues and significant staffing changes. This argument that contextual factors are very important is not an argument that leadership and teaching can’t make an important difference. Instead, it recognises that internal school factors, especially historical ones, can advantage or weigh heavily on schools even if there is little that schools can do about them (Lupton & Thrupp, in press).

The following discussion illustrates incrementalism and the effects of context across the six RAINS schools. While there are much more detailed accounts of each school available (see Thrupp & Easter 2012, Thrupp 2013), the intent here is to summarise how the features of each of the RAINS schools have set the scene for very different responses to the National Standards: how each school has quite a different story to tell. The observation is made about a number of the schools that they were strongly focused on literacy and numeracy. In fact, this is probably true of nearly all New Zealand primary and intermediate schools in terms of how the school day is now used. A recent OECD report has noted that New Zealand schools already had a curriculum that was narrowing towards numeracy and literacy before the introduction of National Standards such that this policy could extend an existing imbalance:

While the national curriculum emphasises the development of broad competencies, the introduction of Standards increases the risk of a narrower focus on numeracy and literacy in primary schools. Such a trend already exists, as it is far more common for schools to identify low achievement in literacy and numeracy than in other areas (ERO, 2007). As standards are presently limited to these domains, their introduction may contribute to accentuating of such a trend. (Nusche et al., 2012, p. 53)

Juniper School

Juniper School was a small Year 0–6 school of about 50 mainly Pākehā (European) pupils. It was in a rural location and served families that were from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds but nearly all involved in farming in some way. Described by one teacher as a “school in a bubble”, perhaps the most important sense in which this was true had to do with Juniper’s staffing. In this small school the board of trustees had taken it upon itself to fundraise enough to employ an extra teacher to keep the experienced principal from having to be a teaching principal, allowing her much time for working on the National Standards at the level of the whole school, supporting the three classroom teachers and individual children. Few schools would be nearly as favourably positioned in this way as Juniper was, and the principal was also a self-confessed enthusiast for assessment. As a result, assessment and reporting were already very highly developed at Juniper School before National Standards was introduced.

Reflecting these advantages, Juniper School soon made many changes to policy and practice to make sure it was “on top” of National Standards. Indeed it was in many ways the kind of school that the Ministry and ERO would probably regard as exemplary in relation to National Standards (although the principal and staff would quickly reject the exemplary tag and were quietly critical of many features of the policy). While obvious changes in the balance of the curriculum were not required (since this school already had a curriculum that was strongly focused on literacy and numeracy), changes included modifications to student portfolios, assessment rubrics, reports for parents and the school charter. In reporting to parents, Juniper used careful wording to avoid the four-point scale. (The Ministry regards this reporting style as good practice,

but the complexity—linguistic gymnastics—of avoiding the scale is not attempted in most schools). Yet, in some respects, Juniper was jumping the gun by using artifacts that were “in development”. For instance it was using a “mathematical strategies” chart that was acknowledged as being pitched incorrectly for the National Standards but still in use for the time being.

Juniper also illustrated how small schools may be under particular pressure to give way to parents over the National Standards to keep the peace with influential locals. It gave way to a parent’s request to put some more “hard data” in reports where it would have otherwise taken a different approach. As the principal put it, this data inclusion was “no skin off our nose”. Juniper used the widest range of tools and practices of any of RAINS schools and also demonstrated the most rigour, largely because of the principal’s enthusiasm and ability to give time over to OTJ processes. For instance, the Juniper principal supervised key tests across the whole school to ensure consistency, and also heavily supported many other school-wide processes and procedures.

Seagull School

Seagull School was a large Year 0–6 suburban school drawing on mainly middle-class Pākehā (New Zealand European) and Asian families. Seagull was a popular school, with a roll that was consistently oversubscribed, transience was negligible, and there were few children with serious special needs. Seagull had a very experienced senior leadership team (SLT) and stable staffing, and had spent many years fine-tuning highly developed processes including those around any children at risk of not progressing well. It had a broad curriculum as well as a substantial focus on literacy and numeracy, and long before the National Standards were introduced it was already doing sophisticated target setting and assessment. Seagull’s reports to parents offered a wealth of information centred on information from assessment tools such as the STAR reading test and asTTle tests in reading and mathematics in which most of its students performed well compared to national norms.

Given this situation, the staff, SLT, and board at Seagull School saw the National Standards as a retrograde step compared with what the

school was already doing, although they did not see any point in overt resistance to the policy. Hence while they pursued what they thought was worthwhile, such as moderation of writing samples across the school to achieve more consistent practice, in many ways Seagull School treated National Standards as something bolted on to existing practices, rather than replacing them. For instance, the reporting of National Standards was done in the most minimal way through an A5 sheet given out in addition to existing report formats. Perhaps because it was a large school Seagull used the four-point scale to report to parents rather than try to report using different language as at Juniper School. Seagull also demonstrated the most obvious concerns of any of the RAINS schools about the labelling effects of the “below” and “well below” categories as well as the most anxiety around being misjudged. Concerned that other schools would not be assessing realistically, it was taking steps to avoid being found wanting in comparison with other schools by pulling back highly aspirational targets to levels that would be more readily achieved.

Kanuka School

Kanuka School was a large Year 0–6 suburban school catering mainly for low socioeconomic Māori families and with about 40 percent of children in total immersion Māori or bilingual Māori- and English-medium classes. At this school there were a wide set of social problems to be addressed, transience was a significant issue and there were high levels of special needs. The school had seen improvements in local reputation, student behaviour, parental involvement, and recruitment of staff, but in all of these areas had come off the low base typical of low socioeconomic schools. Kanuka School had also been in transition under a new principal since about 2009, creating the element of a new broom sweeping clean. Before the introduction of National Standards, the school already had a strong focus on numeracy and literacy, used a range of assessment tools, and was experimenting with the uncompromising graphs that used colour coding to indicate whether students were achieving well. These graphs would come to dominate the reporting of National Standards at this school. Interviews with the SLT revealed an emphatic stance that student achievement was the responsibility of schools rather than society. For instance, the deputy principal said “[At] the end of the day if kids aren’t

learning it's my responsibility. It's not the parents, it's not anybody else's, it's my responsibility".

Of all the RAINS schools, Kanuka School was the one that most embraced National Standards, using it as a basis for refashioning reporting and bringing new urgency to the issue of accelerating students which was undoubtedly a considerable issue at this school when so few of its students arrived school-ready compared to those in middle-class communities. National Standards was also part of a new drive for consistency within the school. In short while the National Standards policy was harnessed to the task of reforming and improving this school, the support seemed to come as much from perceived wider organisational or cultural benefits to the school as from the merits of the National Standards per se. As well as National Standards, Kanuka School was also using Ngā Whanaketanga, the Māori-medium assessment system which has had more consultative processes and more flexibility, providing National Standards with a more positive slant in this school compared to the others.

Also giving National Standards a more positive slant in this school, and in line with its concerns about deficit thinking, Kanuka decided not to use the "well below" category either in terms of data it would provide to the Ministry or in terms of internal discussion within the school. (It was not until mid-2012 that a Ministry senior advisor told the school it must use "well below", which it was starting to do by late in the 2012 year.)

Magenta School

Magenta School was a full primary Year 0–8 school with a mainly Pākehā intake in a rural location about 30 minutes' drive from the nearest city. It served a mainly middle-class community, with parents comprising a mix of commuting professionals on lifestyle blocks and local farmers. The school had little transience, no students with serious special needs and no problems recruiting staff. Magenta very much demonstrated a broad primary school curriculum rather than a narrower one. By 2008, this curriculum reflected growing interest in key competencies and values education. At this school much was made of the local response to *The New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)* (Ministry of Education, 2007), the "Magenta Curriculum".

Given this background, Magenta School was the school in our study most seeking to see National Standards as naturally linked to and part of *NZC*. But as the 2011 year progressed, it became clearer that the National Standards could not be incorporated into the school in that way. For instance, the principal was disappointed mid-year when the Ministry rejected the school's charter because it was not explicit enough about National Standards. Magenta tinkered with report formats and worked with a local cluster of schools on moderation of writing samples and maths. Yet a central problem for developing National Standards at this school was that its commitments already lay elsewhere, that is, with *NZC*.

Cicada School

Like Kanuka, Cicada School was a large Year 0–6 suburban school with a low socioeconomic intake. Cicada was ethnically diverse, with few Pākehā children. About 80 percent of students had English as a second or third language, and Cicada also had considerable special needs provision including a unit that catered for about 15 children with very serious needs. The roll was stable, but Cicada was less successful in recruiting staff than Kanuka. Indeed, about 80 percent of teachers were provisionally registered (i.e., inexperienced). On the other hand, the principal was unusually experienced for such a school, with the leadership of three successful high socioeconomic schools already behind him. For several years before the introduction of National Standards, he and key staff had been attempting to improve the teaching and learning culture of the school, strongly focused on literacy and numeracy, drawing on high-quality external advice and professional development, and dealing sensitively but firmly with some underperforming staff.

Unlike the other schools in our study, Cicada School was openly opposed to National Standards so it did nothing towards them until September 2011. Then, 3 months after the deadline, it finally handed in a charter with some National Standards targets included, accompanied by a disclaimer that they were being included only because of the requirements of the Ministry. Instead Cicada used newsletters and other communications with parents to express concern, and the school also initiated meetings with Ministry officials to discuss why it did not want to comply with the National Standards policy. Context helps to explain why Cicada was

more willing to oppose the National Standards than the other schools. In the mix of relevant school-specific factors at Cicada were a very experienced and confident principal, a supportive board and trusting parent community, serious concerns around poverty, special needs and ESOL provision because of the intake, and a cluster of local schools that were also opposing the policy and provided support.

Huia Intermediate

Huia Intermediate was a large ethnically and socioeconomically diverse suburban intermediate (Years 7 and 8, aged 11–13) with an intake that drew from nearly 50 primary schools. About half the students were from ESOL backgrounds, and Huia also had a small number of children with serious special needs. It was a popular school with an experienced SLT and stable staff. Huia had long offered a broad curriculum with more emphasis on many areas other than literacy and numeracy than the other RAINS schools. In part, this reflected the school being an intermediate, where children were exposed to the offerings of specialist teachers in technology (information and communication technology, food technology, materials technology) and the arts (visual arts, drama, music, dance). Before the introduction of National Standards, the school had been working on improving curriculum and pedagogy; it was these areas rather than assessment that preoccupied the SLT.

By the end of 2011 Huia Intermediate had made a few changes towards the National Standards, including some minor changes to reporting. In 2011 the school timetable was also changed to require children to always be in their own classroom from 9 to 11 each day and for that to be uninterrupted time spent on literacy and numeracy. This was a significant change in the school day as it meant children could no longer be with specialist teachers or doing PE or other activities in the first block each day. But in general Huia Intermediate represented a school where there was a great deal of preliminary work to be done before teachers could start working with the National Standards in some way that reflected curriculum levels and OTJs based on a range of evidence. As the deputy principal put it during 2011, “our biggest issue at present is actually getting teachers’ content knowledge up”. Many of Huia’s specialist teachers were not used to focusing on literacy and numeracy as a significant part of what they taught. At this school,

reports on achievement against National Standards as given to parents and forwarded to the Ministry were based solely on an AsTTle score, as the SLT argued that teachers were not yet ready to make OTJs.

Implications and future directions

The variability of OTJs is often assumed to be a problem related to individual teacher practice. For instance, a research programme on the National Standards commissioned by the Ministry of Education (Ward & Thomas, 2012) offers only a decontextualised discussion of how teachers and schools may take different approaches to making OTJs. This is clear from the methodology used which is centred on artificial “assessment scenarios”. The problem with this kind of research is that it does not illuminate the reasoning behind the different approaches to making OTJs being taken by schools. It is not clear to what extent they reflect some long-term and situated thinking about how assessment and reporting should be done in particular schools and communities or are simply a matter of the personal preference of the principal (or someone else on staff who has influence), perhaps carried over from another school or a chance conversation with a colleague who “does it that way”.

In contrast, the initial findings about the RAINS schools reported here emphasise that the detailed specifics of National Standards assessment practices are occurring within schools that are contextually dissimilar and which were already set on different trajectories which cannot be easily set aside. To us it matters greatly, for instance, that the Juniper principal was released to spend much more time on her enthusiasm for assessment than would be the case in most schools, that Seagull had already been fine-tuning its assessment processes for years, that Kanuka saw the National Standards as a opportunity to get staff more focused on acceleration, that Magenta was preoccupied by its local response to NZC, that Cicada was opposing the National Standards in what it considered the best interests of the intake of that school, and that Huia teachers were such a long way from making OTJs.

The influence of what was already in place can be seen both in the RAINS schools that had significant concerns about National Standards and those that were more supportive, such as Kanuka. It is not only pre-

existing policies that are influential, but teaching and learning discourses, including those around NZC and Māori education: New Zealand schools operating within a kind of “policy soup”, as discussed by Braun, Maguire and Ball (2010). The responses of the schools, which are more nuanced than the debate over National Standards tends to suggest, also often make sense when seen against their contexts. Each school’s school-specific factors cumulatively create more or less advantaged positionings within which National Standards gets enacted and mean that schools “contest” or “comply” with National Standards from positions of relative strength or weakness. Context will also affect comparisons of school performance in the National Standards, the issues here being both the unfairness of such comparisons and the fact that those in schools are usually quite aware of this unfairness. Their awareness is likely to legitimate for schools the kinds of game-playing around the National Standards seen in high-stakes systems elsewhere. Those schools operating from disadvantaged positions, such as Huia Intermediate, can be expected to take shortcuts—measures that will improve National Standards performance even if these do not authentically reflect the rest of school life. For those in the most advantaged contexts there can be the “fear of falling”, particularly if they are concerned that other schools are less rigorous in their assessments. Indeed, Seagull School was taking steps to avoid adverse perceptions of its performance.

The incremental nature of changes around the National Standards may have supported a further early finding of the study that teachers and school leaders often preferred to think their practice was not being “directed” by policy even if it might be. This was indicated by the way they were often keen to emphasise “no change”, but then went on to raise various changes in their schools related to the National Standards. The significance of incrementalism was to allow the argument that a school was heading in a particular direction anyway such that National Standards wasn’t making much difference. But this was a complex issue with other dimensions to it, including the way that strong demands from the Ministry around charters often led school leaders to feel more directed over 2011; the way that professional reputations were being made and being put at risk through the National Standards (for instance with 4–5 year return times becoming the gold standard for ERO reviews, getting a

3-year return because of non-compliance with the standards system may affect promotion prospects), the self-managing ideology of Tomorrow's Schools and the reality that there are some ways that the schools were "mediating" policy. For instance, the schools did exercise some choice in how explicitly they reported against the National Standards, and teachers reported various ways in which they "softened" and distracted from the judgements against the National Standards.

The RAINS research is continuing to build on the initial findings about the schools' incremental and contextualised response to the National Standards signalled here. During 2012 we have been considering the schools' approaches to making OTJs in more depth, viewing this against what we already know about the culture of each school. The way ERO has been making sense of the schools during its reviews has also continued to be investigated. Finally, we have been concentrating on the case of Huia Intermediate, while keeping abreast of developments at the other five schools which will be the focus of more detailed research in 2013, the final year of the study. All this continues against the backdrop of further policy developments including public release of the National Standards data in September 2012. No doubt these and other future policy developments will continue to influence the RAINS schools, and we expect the responses of the schools to continue to be incremental and contextualised also.

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Notes

- 1 At present there is no national moderation although in 2014 the Ministry will be bringing in a national online platform that teachers will use in the process of making OTJs, the Progress and Consistency Tool (PaCT). The details of this assessment tool are unclear at the time of writing but it is to be mandatory from 2015.
- 2 Further detail about how the New Zealand standards system is intended to work and be progressively 'rolled out' can be found on Te Kete Ipurangi (TKI), the Ministry's portal website, see <http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards>.
- 3 Other concerns were that the New Zealand standards system would undermine the *New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) a broad and generally progressive policy that had just been launched after many years of consultation; concerns that the policy was being introduced too quickly, without trialling, and without sufficient consultation or training; concerns about the mismatch between the standards system being applied to nearly all New Zealand children and the Key government's claim that it was mostly needed to address the problem of the mainly Māori and Pasifika children who make up New Zealand's so-called "long tail of underachievement"; concerns the Key government was operating with simplistic notions of poorly performing teachers needing to be made more accountable through the standards system; concerns about advisory services for teaching the arts, science, and physical education being withdrawn at the same time the National Standards were being introduced; concerns about many problems in terms of aligning the National Standards with existing tests, progressions, expectations and levels; and concerns about various practical problems that brought complexity and workload that schools could do without.

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