

## Rationalising national assessment in New Zealand

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*In the 1990s and 2000s, New Zealand governments monitored national educational performance broadly through cyclical 'light-sampling' of primary school students, and the annual proportions of secondary school students who gained formal credentials. In 2008, a centre-right coalition government legislated for national standards of achievement in literacy and numeracy in primary schools. In 2012, individual schools' national standards results were reported publicly for the first time despite professional and popular awareness of their unreliability. To date, New Zealand has not adopted national testing, instead preferring to emphasise the importance of teachers' professional judgments. The paper examines how this uncommon policy position became 'conceivable'.*

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Unlike standards-based assessment in other countries, our standards do not rely on national testing. Instead there is an emphasis on teacher professional judgments, assessment for learning principles and practice, and the importance of information sharing to support student learning. This is a novel approach when compared with other jurisdictions (Sewell, 2011, p. 2).

At the time of writing, New Zealand still has no 'high stakes' testing regime. Given the international ascendancy of such regimes in recent decades, one might well ask why New Zealand should appear to be an exception to the 'no excuses' reform doxa (Bourdieu, 1972); or more specifically, how was it possible for New Zealand's most senior education public servant, then Chief Executive and Secretary of Education Karen Sewell, to make a statement that seemingly cut across the global proliferation of new public management approaches (Boston, Martin, Pallot & Walsh, 1996) and associated policy 'convergence', 'transfer' or 'borrowing' trends (Ball, 2001) in education governance? In this sense, the focus of analysis here is not on the manifest language or ideas in the Secretary's assertion, but in their discursive formation (Foucault, 2002): how is it that this 'particular statement appeared rather than another' (p. 30)?

Partly to sidestep the heated rhetoric that often occurs through the deployment of terms such as 'high stakes' testing, and partly to reflect more accurately the tenor of domestic policy and polity discourse on the topic since the late 1980s, this paper uses the standard term 'national assessment' throughout when referring to New Zealand's vernacular approach to the monitoring of students' cognitive achievements during their compulsory schooling years. In order to try and reveal something of the 'obscure set of anonymous rules' (Foucault, 2002, p. 231) that made possible former Secretary of Education Sewell's assertion, the paper is structured around several distinct but complementary glosses on national assessment discourse in this country.

The first part of the paper offers a cartoon (in the sense of a preparatory sketch) of the value rationality (Flyvbjerg, 2001) for standards-based assessment. In his analyses of the relationships between knowledge and power, Flyvbjerg makes an important distinction between rationality (what should be done) and rationalisation (what is actually done) (1998, p. 3). The remainder of the paper then presents a selective illustration of the practical differences between these two in the contemporary New Zealand national assessment context. The second part summarises the official rationality for New Zealand's vernacular approach to national assessment as a normative cluster of ideas, beliefs and values that has been articulated with increasing self-confidence over time by officials and their preferred academics. The third part, in contrast, explores the political rationalisation of national assessment strategy to include from 2008 a more explicit emphasis on so-called 'standards-based assessment' and the government's struggles to exercise authoritative influence over enactment of the policy.

### **A CARTOON OF STANDARDS-BASED ASSESSMENT**

On the basis of what has occurred internationally, decisions about preferred approaches to national assessment would appear to be informed by values and historico-cultural traditions as much, if not more than they are by rational arguments or empirical evidence of their likely efficacy. Precisely because politicians and, consequently, their officials are required to gauge the appetite for and acceptability of proposed policy initiatives to the wider community, popular cultural texts (e.g. mainstream print and broadcast journalism, talkback, social media and the blogosphere) depict rather well the ideological space within which policy decisions are framed and taken.

Ideology is a matter of 'discourse' rather than of language – of certain concrete discursive effects, rather than of signification as such. It represents the points where power impacts upon certain utterances and inscribes itself tacitly within them (Eagleton, 1991, p. 223).

Accordingly, popular cultural texts on 'national assessment' help to reveal which ideas, beliefs and values about the assessment of children's achievement at school appear in, or disappear from the New Zealand vernacular context, when and how. More specifically, one may discern the ways in which these ideas are promoted and legitimated, and by whom, and the extent to which they may, or may not, be regarded

as distorted, dissimulating or false. Further, in terms of the concrete discursive effects of these ideas, one may consider to what extent and how the ‘national standards’ policy agenda of the current New Zealand government has gained ideological traction – whether it has, indeed, been tacitly and successfully inscribed in popular cultural texts (Eagleton, 1991, pp. 28-30). This is important because for most of the 1990s and 2000s, successive governments and their officials had very successfully inscribed in both popular cultural and professional educational texts the ideology that New Zealand’s approach to assessment had been both different and better (Absolum, Flockton, Hattie, Hipkins & Reid, 2009; New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2010a).

Instead then of national testing and alongside a contemporary policy emphasis on teacher professional judgments, New Zealand has instituted a national curriculum framework document (Ministry of Education, 1993, 2007), that specifies desirable ‘levels’ of student attainment and learning ‘objectives’ to facilitate curriculum planning, enactment and assessment for each of those levels in all learning areas (subjects) of the curriculum throughout the compulsory schooling years. It has had, until recently, the government funded National Education Monitoring Project, which undertook ‘light sampling’ of student achievement in a cycle of learning areas between 1995 and 2010 (since replaced by the National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement). It also has a national assessment ‘strategy’. This was initially disseminated orally in 1999 through a series of regional assessment seminars hosted by the Ministry of Education. The strategy articulates a range of assessment knowledge, repertoires and tools that ‘professional’ classroom teachers are encouraged to use. It was updated between 2006 and 2011. Between the ‘self-managing’ school administration reforms of the late 1980s and late 2000s there were several unsuccessful attempts to institute a national system of compulsory age-point testing in the curriculum basics of literacy and numeracy, mostly advanced by the political centre-right.

After nine years in opposition, the National Party was elected to government in October 2008 on the basis of supply and confidence agreements with several minor parties. Its election manifesto for education included a ‘literacy crusade’, ‘plain language’ achievement reporting to parents, and the gazetting of ‘national standards’ of achievement in literacy and numeracy. The 2008 election coincided with the peak of the global financial crisis. While the local sovereign debt effects were very modest by the standards of Portugal, Ireland, Greece and Spain, government nevertheless took these events as sufficient justification to cap public spending, undertake a ‘line by line’ review of its inherited government appropriation commitments and to recast its traditional nostrum of smaller government and a more efficient public bureaucracy as the retention of ‘front line services’ at the expense of ‘back office functions’. As part of this, a pan government ‘better public services’ programme was approved by Cabinet in early 2012, including ambitious five yearly service outcome targets in the areas of long-term welfare dependency, vulnerable children (including early childhood education participation rates), skills and employment (including credentialing rates for 18 and 25 year olds), crime, and interacting with government (Satte Services Commission, n.d.).

Within this broader better public services discourse, the introduction of national standards was presented to parents as the provision of high quality achievement information to facilitate 'voice' and 'choice' in discussions about their children's educational progress, to ensure that every child had 'the opportunity to succeed' and to create reliable comparisons of achievement across schools (National Party, 2008a). National standards were presented to concerned academics and educators' professional associations as a robust alternative to national testing regimes that had proven harmful elsewhere (Tolley, 2010a). They were presented to classroom teachers as appropriate recognition of their 'professionalism' because teachers would be able to use whatever assessment tools they wished, whenever they wished, in order to arrive at an 'overall teacher judgment' (OTJ) about a child's achievement in relation to a particular national standard (Ministry of Education, 2009). They were presented from the outset to influential non-government groups and organisations within the wider polity as a key element of the National Party's agenda of 'encouraging success: confronting failure' in the compulsory education system (Key, 2007; Tolley, 2010b).

Since National was elected in 2008, popular cultural newspaper editorials, 'blogosphere' and radio talkback commentaries have generally viewed the introduction of national standards favourably as an appropriate and much needed public accountability mechanism for teachers' and schools' 'performance' and as evidence of 'strong government' in the face of organised labour protectionism by teacher unions (e.g. Editorial, 2011; Hosking, 2012). Similarly, the dissenting positions of some academics (including this author) and non-compliant actions of an unusually large fraction of primary school boards of trustees and principals, have typically been rejected in the same media on the basis of parents' 'right to know' (e.g. Cummings, 2012), despite the acknowledged unreliability of the raw data (e.g. National Standards, 2010).

In 2011, the National government was re-elected on a notably more assertive market-liberal manifesto and took this as affirmation of all its economic and social policy agendas including education. In 2012, all primary and intermediate schools were required for the first time to submit data on their students' achievement against the standards to the Ministry of Education and, specifically, to report the proportions of students assessed by teachers to be 'above' and 'below' standard. Controversially, a senior political reporter for one of the main newspaper groups sent an Official Information Act (New Zealand Parliament, 1982) request to all schools for their data in an effort to 'scoop' the Ministry of Education's 'official' release of the data later in the year. An interactive 'School Report' page was subsequently created on the Fairfax Media website (School Report, n.d.) which contained aggregate national standards data together with school contextual information for all the schools which had provided the data, and a covering statement from the lead political reporter on the project which justified the decision to publish incomplete and problematic information as follows:

Of course we want people to look at what we have published here; to talk about it and to debate it. But that does not mean our decision to publish National Standards data was a "business decision". This project has been

led by journalists from the beginning. That has made it subject to our own standards of journalistic rigour. We have not simply dumped all of the new National Standards data online (Hartevelt, 2012, n.p.).

What goes largely unrecognised in all the discursive skirmishes regarding the merits, or not, of publication of national standards data is that the various actors are simply operating according to equally valid but inherently distinct value rationalities. For those who advocate publication, the public's 'right to know' is the essential value asserted in this particular ideological struggle, while for those who oppose publication, it is the child's 'right to learn'. However, in terms of the realpolitik of national standards enactment, successive Ministers of Education have judged that the popular cultural impetus in favour of the standards is sufficiently strong to permit them to dismiss the specific pedagogical concerns of many primary school principals and their representative bodies (e.g. Radio New Zealand News, 2010) and, instead, to remind them of their general duties as public service employees (e.g. Binning, 2010a), while asserting that the right to know and the right to learn are one and the same value rationality (Parata, 2012). By late 2012, the principal focus of concern in popular cultural texts was no longer whether the national standards data should be published, but why the data themselves were so 'ropey' (Tapaleao, 2012). In this regard, one might reasonably observe that the ideological project to tacitly inscribe the merits of national standards in popular cultural texts had thus far proven successful.

## **NATIONAL ASSESSMENT RATIONALITY**

In this part of the paper, two key recent texts will be discussed to illustrate the 'official' story of New Zealand's approach to national assessment and its development. In the section of the paper that follows, I attempt to illustrate that although this official rationality, as Flyvbjerg puts it, 'is open to public scrutiny, [but] it is not the whole story and, typically, not even its most important part. Backstage, hidden from public view, it is power and rationalization which dominate' (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p. 228).

Typically, utterances by officials in New Zealand emphasise the overall quality and effectiveness of evaluation and assessment frameworks, while arguing that persistent inequalities of educational outcomes are amenable to system improvement:

The current education priorities focus on a nationally driven effort to address the education system's major challenges: reducing the achievement disparities within and across schools, particularly for Māori and Pasifika students, improving the education outcomes for all young New Zealanders, and Māori enjoying education success as Māori (Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. viii).

In 2011, the New Zealand Ministry of Education published a 'position paper' on assessment: 'It outlines our vision for assessment and describes what we believe the assessment landscape *should look like* if assessment is to be used effectively to promote

system-wide improvement within, and across, all layers of the schooling system' (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 3) (original emphasis). The paper aimed to promote a 'shared philosophy throughout schooling' (p. 3) with a broad intended audience that included the 'wider assessment community' such as professional development providers, writers of resource materials and researchers (p. 3). In Flyvbjerg's terms, this is the side of policy development that is open to public scrutiny; in Eagleton's, the paper is also tacitly inscribing the appearance of a shared philosophy and common position. The position paper is targeted at both external and internal Ministry audiences. A major purpose is that, internally, the position paper should 'sit above policy and to underpin the more detailed advice the Ministry will give, over time, to successive governments' (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 6). Externally, the authors also hope to shape the discursive engagement of 'commentators and opinion makers':

It is important that those who choose to publish and comment on assessment information understand the nature of the assessment landscape required to promote better learning and have some level of assessment capability. This is important if they are to interpret assessment information accurately and meaningfully and present it in a manner that is appropriate and will clarify and actively support positive outcomes for all (p. 7).

Various statements in the position paper envisage the schooling system as an integrated 'learning system' that is based on normatively appealing social democratic principles of egalitarianism and participatory citizenship (p. 3). What is missing, though, is an acknowledgement of the empirical evidence that centrally mandated assessment practices, however benevolent in their intent, have the potential to distort the nature of teaching and learning relations within the classroom. The text goes to considerable lengths to tacitly inscribe a positive view of assessment and of the ideal 'landscape' that is sketched out for the school sector as a learning system (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 16), supported by benign school level 'governance' and system level 'stewardship'. On the one hand, this is achieved by providing a sanitised summary of the way in which New Zealand has over two decades developed an integrated assessment for learning policy complex (pp. 9-12). On the other hand the authors explicitly cite a commissioned report by New Zealand assessment 'experts' to buttress the official rationality on assessment for learning that is presented in the paper (p. 6).

According to official national assessment rationality (pp. 9-12), New Zealand's position has been based on assessment for learning principles since at least 1990 when the final report of a ministerial working party on assessment was published, *Tomorrow's Standards* (Ministerial Working Party on Assessment for Better Learning, 1990a). The basic position was followed by a handbook for school level policy development, *Assessment Policy to Practice* (Ministry of Education, 1994), the National Education Monitoring Project in 1995 (National Education Monitoring Project, 1995), and then *Assessment for Success in Primary Schools* (Ministry of Education, 1998) which recommended 'that new diagnostic assessment tools be developed, including additional diagnostic tests, more national exemplar material,

new externally referenced tests (comparing performance at national and group levels), and more comprehensive national summary information' (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 9); a 'National Assessment Strategy' was introduced in 1999 focused on 'improved assessment capability in the sector through availability of assessment tools and professional learning targeted at building assessment capability' (p. 9). The paper states that a review of the Strategy commenced in 2006, a major report of which, *Directions for Assessment in New Zealand* [DANZ] (Absolum, et al, 2009) endorsed the existing policy focus on assessment for learning, but emphasised 'the importance of building student assessment capability so that students become autonomous learners and lead their own learning' (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 10) and the need for assessment information to support system-wide continuous improvement. Directly quoting the DANZ paper, this process was described, cybernetically, as 'a system that learns' (p. 10).

The following section of the position paper is devoted to standards-based assessment. The text states that 'National Standards' are being implemented but does not attempt to locate their provenance within the assessment for learning chronology outlined in the previous section. Instead, the position paper goes to some lengths to explicate the abstract rationality for them. It explains, for example, how the chosen approach: (i) uses 'verbal descriptions that are deliberately broad' (p. 12); that (ii) 'No one tool, task, activity, learning conversation, or observation will be able to fully provide the information needed across all dimensions of each standard' (p. 12); and (iii) that the skill of the classroom teacher is essential to ensure accuracy and completeness of holistic assessment against the standard. The narrative states that national standards are derived from the national curriculum achievement objectives and standards:

However, unlike the achievement standards, they specifically and definitively link to a period of time (after one, two, or three years at school) or year level (end of year 4, 5, 6, 7, or 8). They provide reference points of expected achievement which can be used nationwide to consider progress and achievement. They describe what students should be aiming for, or beyond, as they move through years 1–8 of their schooling (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 12).

Finally, given the ongoing controversy surrounding the government's decision to make assessment against the national standards reliant on teachers' professional judgment, and the considerable political capital made of this from the outset by opposition politicians (e.g. New Zealand Parliament, 2009, 2010a, 2010b), it is worth quoting in full the official explanation of the teacher's expected role in gathering and making sense of the required assessment data from the classroom:

Teachers are expected to make professional judgments about student progress and achievement in relation to what is expected by the appropriate standard of reference. These qualitative judgments are termed overall teacher judgments because they are "on-balance" judgments made across

a range of information and across the range of skills, knowledge, and understanding expected at any given reference point. They make use of tacit information held by the teacher as well as a range of explicit information collected by the teacher from multiple sources. This information is considered alongside, and guided by, a verbal description of expected performance and concrete examples that show what different levels of achievement look like (p. 12) (footnotes in original deleted).

While only four scholarly papers on assessment are cited throughout, this particular passage makes several detailed footnoted references to a conceptual argument developed decades ago by Royce Sadler (1987). The rationality here represents a major departure from the 2008 National Party election pledge that 'all schools will be required to choose tests that have been benchmarked against National Standards' (National Party, 2008b). This footnoting would therefore appear to be an attempt by the 2011 position paper's authors – following several years of very public 'antagonistic confrontations' (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p. 231) between the Ministry and teachers' and principals' groups, and lobbying both inside and outside the polity by assessment experts, to present a defensible abstract rationality for the subsequent decision to adopt national standards in the form of verbal descriptions and to permit their assessment through teachers' qualitative judgments as theorised by Sadler (1987, p. 191), but without the obligation to use approved 'tests' as originally specified by the National Party.

While the 2011 position paper makes occasional references only to research evidence to support the national assessment rationality, this is not true of the advice provided to the Ministry in the earlier DANZ paper (Absolum, et al, 2009). The latter represents an explicit incorporation of selected scholarly expertise into the Ministry's review of the strategy that was instituted in 2006 by the previous Labour government (i.e., before 'National Standards' as they now exist emerged in policy discourse). The DANZ paper was the capstone publication from the review. Its stated purpose was 'to provide broad advice to the Ministry of Education to guide and inform the design of new and improved strategies, policies, and plans for assessment' (p. 4). The first phase of the Ministry's review had involved a 'stocktake' of the 1999 strategy. For the second phase, the Ministry drafted a revised strategy, 'identified several areas where further evidence was required and contracted a number of assessment experts to provide this evidence in a series of review papers; and contracted the writers of this document to propose appropriate future directions for assessment' (p. 4). The DANZ authors state that they were 'informed' by the 16 review papers, but chose not to quote them. The majority of review papers were written by a range of university academics and consultants with current or previous experience in delivering or evaluating Ministry of Education contracts. The five DANZ authors were employed by a mixture of private, parastatal and public sector entities which have had significant involvement in Ministry of Education contracts of one sort or another in the broad area of school assessment during the 1990s and 2000s (O'Neill, 2011).

The point here is not to question in any way the expertise or independence of the individuals or organisations concerned, but merely to note that in terms of the official rationality of the revised National Assessment Strategy, the DANZ and contributing papers exemplify the tactical contracting of ‘preferred’ academics and other assessment ‘authoritative’ actors as part of a closely managed review of a policy text that is, nevertheless, open to public scrutiny. In this regard, the DANZ authors endorse the key elements of the existing assessment strategy: ‘setting specific and challenging goals with students; fostering partnerships in learning; using information to improve learning; developing high quality assessment tools; developing teachers’ assessment literacy; informing strategic planning’ (p. 4). The main thrust of the authors’ recommendations is the development of what are referred to as students’ assessment capabilities (pp. 19-21). In effect, this involves persuading students to adopt and value the ideologies of (self-) assessment that are integral to the success of a panoptic (Foucault, 1997) national assessment strategy:

The most important measure of the success of a national assessment strategy will be found in the answer to the question: ‘How effectively do all students use and interpret assessment information in ways that further their own learning?’ This answer will be found in a variety of evidence, including: student involvement in the assessment and interpretation process; student access to their own learning records; student-mediated conversations with parents about learning and progress; student self-assessment information and data from other appropriate sources feeding into learning; peer assessment skills driving real change; defensible student interpretation of test scores and task performance; student use of learning stories; student awareness of their own achievements, gaps, and strengths and where to head next in terms of learning (Absolum, et al, 2009, p. 35).

Indeed, the paper’s recommendations for further development of the strategy are framed almost exclusively in these terms (p. 44). For example, two specific recommendations relevant to the present discussion are that all assessment data gathered should be ‘demonstrably compatible with educative purposes’; and that ‘standards be developed for both achievement levels and rates of progress’ (p. 44). As will be shown in the next section of the paper, it is, effectively, the perceived tension between these two imperatives that has dominated the political rationalisation of national assessment in New Zealand since 2008.

The issue of national standards is also rehearsed in the DANZ paper, consistent with its overarching focus on building assessment capability among students and their teachers:

Because interpretations are as critical as the assessments, a system that is based solely on the use of tests is not defensible. National testing, ‘league tables’ and the like fail to take account of the most important factor in

the teaching and learning process: the quality of the interpretations that students, teachers, and school leaders make (p. 33).

The paper's authors argue strongly that for New Zealand to adopt testing and reporting of student achievement against 'normative descriptions of what students at a particular age or stage of schooling should know and be able to do' (p. 33) would 'seriously undermine the directions for assessment that we are recommending' (p. 33). Instead they argue for (i) the selective use of nationally standardised tests, particularly those which provide information 'to support teaching and learning' (p. 33), in order to satisfy parents' need to 'know where their child stands in relation to others' (p. 33); (ii) the collation of 'multiple sources of information, typically including a standardized test' (p. 34) to determine achievement and progress; (iii) the provision of contextual information and qualifications 'when scores from standardized tests are reported for whole-school or class groups' (p. 34); and (iv) a well-conceived and consistent basis for determining student progress, whether for teaching or reporting' (p. 34). The authors' view is that such progressions did not yet exist but that 'all progressions should be derived from and closely reflect the knowledge and understandings identified in the learning area statements (pages 18–33 in *The New Zealand Curriculum*) and that they should embody, as appropriate, the values and key competencies' (p. 34).

In other words, the authors' position is that normative comparisons, national standards and standardised testing may be compatible with a philosophy of assessment for learning, but are not in any way a defensible substitute for it. Such a discursive stance both permits the development of national standards assessment and reporting mechanisms, and constrains them. Most particularly, it encourages a pragmatic accommodation between the National Party's 2008 electorally-motivated crusade to introduce national standards and associated tests, and a longer standing polity-motivated assessment ideology that during the 1990s and 2000s had relied for its successful enactment both on teachers' beliefs that their professional learning and judgment were held in some esteem by the state, and the credibility provided by periodic warrants of fitness from influential assessment professionals. In short, what is evident throughout the DANZ paper is a discursive attempt to present national standards as educationally rational, culturally defensible and apolitical.

## **NATIONAL ASSESSMENT RATIONALISATION**

For most of the 1990s and 2000s relatively 'stable relations' (Flyvbjerg, 1998) existed among the main assessment actors (i.e., government, Ministry, Education Review Office, professional development facilitators, teacher support services, preferred academics). Sufficient fractions of the professional and scholarly education communities were persuaded that the principles and framework for national assessment originally set out in the 1990 *Tomorrow's Standards* document had struck a utilitarian bargain between the various imperatives that assessment policy was intended to address: children's learning, teachers' professionalism, schools' performance and monitoring of system effectiveness as a whole. Moreover, the 'wisdom' of New Zealand's vernacular

approach to school assessment in this period had been commended internationally for being ‘characterised by a high level of trust in schools and school professionals’ (Nusche, Laveault, Macbeath & Santiago, 2011, p. 9). The realpolitik challenge facing the incoming National-led coalition government, therefore, was how to give effect to its national standards legislation in schools and classrooms in such a way as to avoid what Flyvbjerg (1998, p. 232) calls ‘open antagonistic confrontations’:

In such confrontations, use of naked power tends to be more effective than any appeal to objectivity, facts, knowledge, or rationality, even though feigned versions of the latter, that is rationalizations, may be used to legitimize naked power (p. 232).

In the event, this has proven far too difficult a task to date for two Ministers of Education and has led to a shift in overt political stratagems from persuasion in 2008 to coercion by 2012. There are several reasons for this.

First, a major historico-cultural conundrum facing the National party prior to the 2008 election was how to advance national standards without appearing to undermine what was widely held to be an enlightened, progressive approach to national assessment (e.g. New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2008). The somewhat casuistic solution, as articulated by then opposition leader John Key (2007), was to promise the development of a battery of national tests, benchmarked against the proposed standards, from which teachers could choose, thus sidestepping the charge that National planned to introduce compulsory national testing in primary schools, a proposal that had been roundly rejected by educators and the community when National was last in government (Ministry of Education, 1998). The political conundrum faced by the National coalition government after its election was identified in the formal briefing to the incoming minister: ‘The ministry also advises that engagement with the sector in order to seek support for the proposed standards would be desirable’ (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 20).

However, during the election period, the National Party launched an ‘action plan’ for its first 100 days in office, which included amendment of the 1989 Education Act (New Zealand Parliament, 1989) to permit the Minister of Education to set national standards in literacy and numeracy (Key, 2008). Key was sworn in as Prime Minister on 19 November 2008. *The Education (National Standards) Amendment Act 2008* (New Zealand Parliament, 2008) received Royal assent on 16 December, having been introduced and passed all its readings under urgency on 9 December.

Second, from early 2009, professional opposition to the introduction of standards mobilised virally through a range of traditional and social media. Unusually, primary school principals and representative groups were highly vocal and active in their public opposition to the standards (New Zealand Principals’ Federation, n.d.), eventually expressing a collective vote of no-confidence in them (Principals Federation Vote, 2011). Similarly, a significant minority of school boards of trustees (comprising

elected parent representatives of the community) refused to incorporate targets for national standards in their revised school charters for 2011 (Binning, 2010b). This left the government and Ministry of Education threatening to take formal action against the boards (Neale, 2011). By the end of 2011, the school charter had effectively become a narrow public accountability undertaking by the individual school board to the Ministry, to include annual targets for improvement in national standards results, rather than its original form as a mutually negotiated set of obligations within a social democratic model of local schooling (Planning and Reporting, 2011).

Third, scholarly opposition to the standards, and in particular their hurried development and implementation as a natural experiment, without a development and trial phase, was also mobilised from the outset. Notably, concerns were expressed by the most respected assessment researchers within the country, including, ironically, the same charismatic academic policy entrepreneur whom the government had cited to justify the need to introduce the standards. The initial concerns were twofold: first, that any standards should be developed consistent with the assessment for learning principles and tools that already characterised New Zealand's vernacular approach (New Zealand Assessment Academy, 2009; New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 2008); and second, that without government agreement to a trial, the manifest flaws in the standards would cause educational harm (Thrupp, Hattie, Crooks & Flockton, 2009). More importantly, perhaps, as the implementation timetable progressed, monitoring and research reports from government and independent sources alike appeared to confirm the major problems foreshadowed by academics and professional groups (Ward & Thomas, 2012; Thrupp & Easter, 2012) and, most ironically for government, the decision to base assessment against the standards on OTJs.

Fourth, in the face of concerted, determined opposition to their introduction, the Minister and Ministry simply failed in their efforts to tacitly inscribe the official rationality for national standards within any of the evolving popular, professional or scholarly strands of national assessment discourse. This is both despite and because of the fact that the shift from 'tests' (Key, 2007) to OTJ (Chamberlain, 2010) as the basis for assessment, reflected key concerns of educators expressed throughout the extraordinarily hasty development phase for the standards.

The standards were developed in the first part of 2009 by 'consultative' groups of educators, assessment and domain experts. Carefully managed consultation meetings on the draft standards were held with a small sample of parents in selected schools between May and July 2009. The standards were distributed to schools in late 2009 supported by 'web seminars' and regional 'information sessions'. They came into effect in 2010 with schools required to report twice annually to parents using the standards. School boards were required to incorporate improvement targets using the standards from 2011, and to report progress against these from 2012 (Tolley 2009; Ministry of Education 2010b, c). The fact that the development phase was rushed and that schools were expected to develop and moderate overall teacher judgments 'in

real time' ensured that there would be huge variation in interpretation, assessment and reporting of the standards. In effect, their implementation varied from school to school according to its existing assessment culture (Thrupp & Easter, 2012). This in turn created two related policy legitimisation difficulties for the Minister and Ministry. First, the 'ropey' (Shuttleworth, 2012) quality of the publicly reported data, and second, the need to develop a means of moderating OTJs while maintaining the commitment not to introduce compulsory testing. The Ministry's solution to the latter was to tender a contract for the development of a Progress and Consistency Tool (PaCT), effectively a 'means of correct training' (Foucault, 1997) to ensure that over time teachers would make nationally consistent assessment decisions against the standards (Supporting Professional Judgments, 2011). Thus, in order to establish the public credibility of the data, the Ministry would have to constrain teachers' capacity to make independent judgments about their students' achievement – a classic exercise in realpolitik or policy rationalisation.

## CONCLUSION

In many ways the claim that New Zealand has introduced standards-based assessment without resorting to national testing (Sewell, 2011) is accurate, up to a point, and may be explained by several historico-cultural factors. Notably, existing approaches to assessment of student achievement in primary schools had been developed in non-partisan fashion over nearly two decades and broadly reflected the values, ideas and beliefs of significant fractions of the education, polity and parent trustee communities. Thus, if national standards of achievement in literacy and numeracy were successfully to be inscribed by the Key government and its officials, they would need to demonstrate continuities with the ideology that New Zealand's approach to assessment was both different and better.

In an attempt to achieve this, the government was apparently persuaded by officials and influential assessment academics and professionals to base classroom assessment against the standards on overall teacher judgment. While this went some way to maintaining consistency with the rationality of the national assessment strategy, it created concrete discursive problems when after several years of openly antagonistic relations between the government and the sector, the data that eventually appeared in the public domain in 2012 were incomplete and unreliable. This has left government with the considerable ideological challenge of persuading principals and teachers that achieving greater consistency in classroom assessment in future will not come at the expense of their freedom to make professional judgments about the progress of their students.

In order to ensure that the ambitious political timetable for enactment was met, significant policy shortcuts were taken, most particularly the decision by government not to trial the standards themselves, nor to ensure the prior availability of the requisite standardised tests, nor to sufficiently prepare schools and teachers, thereby gaining greater acceptance from, if not the trust of, the education sector.

As events unfolded, successive Ministers of Education became publicly embroiled in increasingly shrill exchanges with a resistant and well-informed sector, while successive Secretaries of Education were forced to formally instruct dissenting school principals and parent boards of trustees in their statutory contractual obligations. As a result, by 2012 policy enactment was characterised by regular public displays of 'the use of naked power' (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p. 232) and the populist rationality of 2008 had largely been replaced by the crude realpolitik rationalisation of national standards.

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