



## Five beginning teachers' reflections on enacting New Zealand's national standards



Lee A. Smith <sup>a, \*</sup>, Vivienne Anderson <sup>b</sup>, Keely Blanch <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Otago College of Education, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

<sup>b</sup> Higher Education Development Centre, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

### HIGHLIGHTS

- National standards reporting is a challenge for New Zealand beginning teachers.
- Beginning teachers identify both risks and benefits of National Standards.
- National standards reporting fails to recognise individual progress and strengths.
- National standards reporting can foster discussion about students' learning needs.
- National standards reporting can be seen as a threat to student wellbeing.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 28 June 2015

Received in revised form

20 November 2015

Accepted 26 November 2015

Available online 18 December 2015

#### Keywords:

Beginning teachers

National standards

Standards-based assessment

New Zealand

### ABSTRACT

This paper draws on interviews with five beginning teachers, who were part of a larger qualitative study, to consider the implications of national standards for teachers, parents and students in New Zealand. Twice a year, New Zealand primary and intermediate (Year 1–8) schools must report on students' learning against national standards in reading, writing and mathematics, positioning students as 'above', 'at', 'below' or 'well below' the relevant standard. The teachers in our study described enacting the standards as a key challenge and/or an area where they needed professional development, noting a tension between accountability and care imperatives.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, schools sector reforms in the UK, USA, Canada, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Asia have been marked by the development and implementation of accountability systems, including the measurement of student achievement against pre-determined 'standards' (Barber, 2004; Volante & Earl, 2015). While a focus on accountability and measurement in schools sector education can be traced to Margaret Thatcher's 1980's UK social reforms, its enactment in both policy and practice has varied from country to country (Volante & Earl, 2015). For example, in the USA,

the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act has mandated States' development of standards and introduction of standardised testing (Volante & Earl, 2015). Teachers (and schools) may be sanctioned or rewarded based on students' test scores (Kohn, 2000). In the UK, students' performance is measured against national standards at 11, 14 and 16 years, with test results made public via league tables in local and national newspapers (Volante & Earl, 2015). Since 2008, Australia has instituted the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 (<http://www.nap.edu.au/naplan/naplan.html>). School 'performance' in terms of NAPLAN results can be compared on the *My School* website (<http://www.myschool.edu.au/>).

In New Zealand, the introduction of national standards in primary and intermediate schools (Years 1–8) was facilitated by the 2008 Education (National Standards) Amendment Act (Gilmore,

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [lee.smith@otago.ac.nz](mailto:lee.smith@otago.ac.nz) (L.A. Smith), [vivienne.anderson@otago.ac.nz](mailto:vivienne.anderson@otago.ac.nz) (V. Anderson), [keely.blanch@otago.ac.nz](mailto:keely.blanch@otago.ac.nz) (K. Blanch).

Crooks, Darr, Hattie, Smith & Smith, 2009).<sup>1</sup> The Act consolidated changes begun during the 1984 educational reforms known as *Tomorrow's Schools*, which had involved decentralising school governance, repositioning schools as self-governing entities in a competitive 'education marketplace', and establishing external regulatory bodies for schools sector education (Codd, 1999). Following the 2008 Act, in 2010, all English medium schools, and in 2011, all Māori medium schools, were required to implement national standards in reading, writing and mathematics (<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards>; Poskitt & Mitchell, 2012; Smaill, 2013; Thrupp & White, 2013). Students' competency in these curriculum areas is now assessed against set levels of achievement, which are designated nationally by the New Zealand Ministry of Education for students at each year level.

What the standards 'look like' varies depending on the curriculum area and year level in question. However, by way of an example, after completing their first year of school, level one students are expected to be able to "use their writing to think about, record, and communicate experiences, ideas, and information to meet specific learning purposes across the curriculum" (<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Reading-and-writing-standards/The-standards/After-one-year>). Students at this level also need to write stories that include, where appropriate:

- an idea, response, opinion, or question
- several sentences (including some compound sentences with simple conjunctions such as 'and')
- some key personal vocabulary and high-frequency words
- attempts at transferring words encountered in the writer's oral language or reading to their writing (<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards/Reading-and-writing-standards/The-standards/After-one-year>).

Based on these criteria, students are deemed to be 'above', 'at', 'below' or 'well below' the standard.

In New Zealand, no one measure is used to assess students' levels of achievement. Instead, based on their professional experience, and in consultation with colleagues, teachers determine where students are 'at' against the relevant standard, based on an overall teacher judgement (OTJ). OTJs are informed by daily observations of, and conversations with students, as well as students' work and achievement in assessment tasks, including tests (<http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Overall-teacher-judgment/Making-an-overall-teacher-judgment>). Teachers must use 'plain language' in twice yearly reports to inform parents of their child's performance in relation to the standards (Gilmore et al., 2009; <http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Overall-teacher-judgment/Making-an-overall-teacher-judgment>). Schools must produce an annual report for the Ministry of Education that quantifies where all of their students are positioned in relation to the four-point scale (Thrupp & White, 2013). However, aggregated data for individual schools are currently not available publicly.

Internationally, proponents of standards-based assessment and reporting systems argue that they provide better information about children's progress and school performance for parents, promote

raised expectations for students, help to 'clarify the mission' for teachers, enhance teachers' knowledge of 'best practice', and promote more willingness to invest in education (Barber, 2004). Other arguments include that standards focus attention on student learning, ensure all students' participation and success, and provide a guide for educational improvement (National Academy of Education, 2009). However, critics argue that a focus on pre-set standards and standards-based assessment results in a narrowed curriculum, "defensive teaching" (McNeil, 2000, p. 11), an individualisation of success and failure, the entrenchment of inequalities, and reduced attention to broader factors that disadvantage some students and schools (Johnson, 2011; Kohn, 2000; National Academy of Education, 2009).

In New Zealand, the introduction of national standards at primary school level has been one of the most controversial developments in the history of New Zealand education (Thrupp, 2013; Wylie & Bonne, 2014). While the New Zealand government argued that national standards would provide a means to increase student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics, and identify students who were 'falling behind' (<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/National-Standards>; Smaill, 2013), many of New Zealand's leading education scholars, principals and teachers' unions, school trustees associations, and individual principals and teachers opposed their introduction (see Clark, 2010; Wylie, Hodgen, & Darr, 2009). Concerns included that the standards would likely have significant flaws due to their rapid implementation, lack of piloting, and lack of input from teachers and assessment specialists (Thrupp, Hattie, Crooks, & Flockton, 2009); that negative labelling (for example, the description of students as 'below' the standard) would likely have a negative effect on students' self-confidence, future application and levels of attainment (Thrupp & White, 2013; Wylie & Berg, 2013); and that the national standards would impact negatively on teachers' work and the quality of classroom programs (Clark, 2010). Echoing criticisms articulated elsewhere, some were also concerned that a shift to standards-based assessment risked increasing heavy teacher workloads and reducing teacher creativity, narrowing the curriculum, fostering assessment-driven teaching, and promoting a focus on the measurement of outcomes rather than students' learning progress (Clark, 2010; Wylie et al., 2009).

In this paper, we focus on five beginning teachers' accounts of implementing and grappling with the national standards, and the implications of the standards as they saw them. The teachers were interviewed in 2014 as part of a larger comparative study involving six New Zealand-based and 13 Malaysia-based teachers, which aimed to examine the teachers' first-year teaching journeys in relation to their respective education policy contexts. The interviews explored the teachers' early teaching experiences, including the joys and challenges and 'critical moments' that they had experienced, and their advice for prospective teachers and teacher education providers. The study was not focused on national standards per se, however, during the interviews, five of the New Zealand teachers identified implementing the national standards as a key challenge. In their interview accounts, the teachers seemed to be grappling with a sense of tension between national standards reporting imperatives and their professional commitment to recognise students' progress, support their wellbeing, and build their self-confidence. At the same time, the teachers also acknowledged some opportunities associated with national standards implementation and reporting.

In the remainder of this paper, following Ball, Maguire, Braun, and Hoskins (2011a), we consider how the teachers spoke as policy workers who worked "within/against" national standards assessment and reporting imperatives (Lather, 2006, p. 41): policy subjects whose work was shaped and constrained by standards-

<sup>1</sup> In New Zealand, most children begin school on their fifth birthday, although the school year runs from January to December, and attendance is compulsory from 6 years. Public schooling is free for all New Zealand citizens and permanent resident visa holders. Schools are organised by year level: primary schooling is from Years 1–8, although some students attend intermediate schools for Years 7 and 8. Secondary schooling includes Years 9–13, with most students finishing school at around 18 years of age. Currently, assessment against the national standards is required for students in Years 1–8. Secondary school students are subject to other standardised assessments that are beyond the scope of this article.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6850883>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6850883>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)