

THE POLITICS OF BEING AN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER: MINIMISING THE HARM DONE BY RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT *Researchers have an obligation to reflect on the politics of their research and of whose interests it serves in order to take steps to minimise it being used in damaging ways. This article uses the problem of the “politics of blame”—the way governments attempt to construct student or institutional “underperformance” or “failure” as the clear responsibility of schools and teachers—to illustrate the importance of researchers stepping back from specific research agendas to consider the overall positioning of their research. The case of the politics of blame illustrates the importance of researchers taking an independent stance rather than being steered too much by what is fashionable to research or what has political support from government. The article makes some suggestions about how researchers can take steps to pre-empt their research being used in damaging ways.*

KEYWORDS

Research, politics, education policy

INTRODUCTION

One of the most interesting aspects of doing educational research and being an educational researcher is that there are so many possibilities. For instance, anyone who has spent time around university schools of education or who has attended large education research conferences will be aware that some researchers stick very closely to empirical evidence while others are more theoretically oriented. Some prefer small-scale qualitative research while others relish large-scale statistical analyses. Some educational researchers stick to fairly narrow concerns while others take a much broader view of what constitutes education and what impacts on it. Some researchers do a lot of contract research and some do hardly any.

While there are many such choices of how to do educational research and be an educational researcher, all involve political decisions of one sort or another. Although the popular conception of research is that it should be “neutral” and “objective”, in fact it is an inherently political act. There are a number of ways in which this is self-evidently the case. Starting with the choice of what to research, it is clear that the popularity or otherwise of research agendas is coloured by the wider politics of their time. Decisions around methodology and theory also involve political stances when they open up or shut down certain ways of relating to

research participants and the chances of particular kinds of research findings. Most obvious perhaps, research findings may be used to support some kinds of policies and practices over others. This is very much the case in education as a relatively applied field where researchers are often doing research in order to directly or indirectly inform education policy and practice.

Yet while university ethics committees encourage researchers to find ways to “do no harm” to research participants whilst they are undertaking research, the same scrutiny is rarely given to the harm research can do once it is published and able to have an influence on policy and practice. One reason for this is that because there are such a lot of different influences on policy and practice, many more immediate than research (Levin, 2001), it is rarely certain that any perceived potential for harm being caused by research will be realised. Another reason is that whether or not research findings are perceived to have the potential to do harm is often contested, depending on what political perspective they are viewed from.

Nevertheless I want to argue in this article that researchers have an obligation to reflect on the politics of their research—of whose interests it serves—in order to take steps to minimise it being used in damaging ways.¹ This understanding is very much related to my own experience of being an educational researcher. Like many others concerned with the sociology and politics of education, I have spent much of the last two decades researching and writing with concern about the inequitable effects in education of markets, managerialism and performativity; neo-liberal policy technologies, as Stephen Ball (2003) has called them. But while I was doing this I gradually became aware that other researchers, overwhelmingly in the areas of school effectiveness, school improvement, school change and school leadership, were busy being politically “on-message” by finding ways to help schools come to terms with those policy technologies. It was not possible to ignore the influence of such researchers and hence my critique of neo-liberal education policy gradually became matched by a critique of the politics of education research and scholarship in the educational management literatures listed above.

In a book I wrote with Rob Willmott, *Education management in managerialist times: Beyond the textual apologists* (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), we critiqued how the work of such researchers acts to textually apologise for neo-liberal reform in education. In other words, we were concerned with demonstrating how such work acts to provide intellectual support for neo-liberal policy technologies and help to naturalise them within the education sector. Some textual apologists we described as *overt apologists* who are uncritically supportive of neo-liberal and managerial reform and barely acknowledge the social justice concerns associated with it. Many more were described as *subtle apologists* who indicate more concern about the context of reform and social inequality, but still provide support to market and managerial education either because their critique is insufficiently critical or not emphasised enough within their overall account to provide any serious challenge. What such researchers don't offer is *textual dissent* that is seriously concerned with challenging neo-liberal policy and structural inequality. Our analysis did not just discuss these positionings in a general way but gave very specific and detailed examples drawing on the work of well-known education management researchers.

This approach was controversial, however, there was nothing defamatory in our account. Rather we had simply pointed out how the work of many researchers had the effect of providing support for neo-liberal policy agendas. Questions of intentionality—whether or not the researchers concerned had intended to provide support for neo-liberal reform—were deliberately left aside, especially in the case of the subtle apologists where it was rarely clear why the researchers had not taken a more critical approach. Again it must not be assumed that all researchers think the same and that all would regard policies and discourses as problematic even if they seem quite clearly unjust. For instance, Townsend (2001) responded to criticisms of school effectiveness research on social justice grounds by saying that “one could argue that most left-wing policies in education could be construed as ‘harming’ those in privileged positions” (p. 124). While those pursuing a social justice agenda may be left speechless by such stances that privilege the powerful over the powerless, Townsend was correct in noting that genuine solutions to educational inequality are likely to often be redistributive in one way or another.

Education management in managerialist times (Thrupp & Willmott, 2003), along with related work on the politics of research (Angus, 1993; Ball, 1997, 1998; Fitz, 1999; Grace, 2000; Morley & Rassool, 1999; Slee, Tomlinson & Weiner, 1998; Thrupp 2001), provides the broad context for what is being argued here. However, in this article I also want to provide a local example of the kind of research politics I am concerned about. I will do this by concentrating on what I think is an important political challenge for New Zealand educational researchers at the present time: to avoid providing support for the politics of blame. Through this particular concern, this article will illustrate the importance of researchers stepping back from specific research agendas to consider the overall positioning of their research. The case of the politics of blame also illustrates the crucial importance of taking an independent stance rather than being steered too much by what is fashionable to research or what has political support from government. I will conclude by making some suggestions about how researchers can take steps to prevent their research being used in damaging ways.

THE POLITICS OF BLAME

I use the term “politics of blame” to refer to the way governments attempt to construct student or institutional “underperformance” or “failure” as the clear responsibility of schools and teachers (Thrupp, 1998). The politics of blame have often involved uncompromising stances on the part of politicians and policymakers where the quality of student achievement is seen as the result of school-based factors and any reference to wider contextual issues, such as socio-economic factors, are ruled out as excuses for poor performance. The net effect is to hold teachers and schools responsible for problems beyond their control. The politics of blame are often implicit in policy but sometimes expressed more overtly too. Today some governments are making more effort to recognise the impact of school context. Yet if the ability of policymakers to get to grips with context is inadequate, this just intensifies the trend towards teachers becoming scapegoats. Supposedly sound judgments can be wide of the mark yet teachers and schools find themselves

without recourse to contextual arguments. For instance, any claim that “our results reflect our intake” would have little traction because supposedly intake features have been taken into account.

The politics of blame are one kind of political response to a common-enough problem of education systems around the world: that they are much better at reflecting social inequalities than systematically addressing them. When the wider social inequalities which undoubtedly underpin many achievement issues are so difficult to address, it is much easier and cheaper for governments to ignore Basil Bernstein’s famous concern that “education cannot compensate for society” (Bernstein, 1970) and focus on schooling anyway. As David Tyack and Larry Cuban put it

The utopian tradition of social reform through schooling has often diverted attention from more costly, politically controversial and difficult societal reforms. It is easier to provide vocational education than to remedy inequities in employment and gross disparities in wealth and income. (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, pp. 3–4)

Yet while the political appeal of social reform through schooling is obvious enough, in neo-liberal times we have also seen governments focusing especially on school effectiveness and teacher quality. Back in the 1970s when Bernstein was writing, policymakers were more prepared to acknowledge that educational inequalities reflected wider social inequalities, and they tried to address these through compensatory and redistributive policies including bussing, comprehensive schooling and the like. But as neo-liberalism took hold in the 1980s, the emphasis in policy shifted to how to make educational institutions more effective. The shift to managerialism meant policymakers began to see decontextualised business practices holding the answers in education, and governments became more animated by setting targets for achievement than exploring the reasons why a large proportion of students failed to meet them anyway. Today the politics of blame are a central plank of the neo-liberal public sector reform agenda that continues to spread around the globe.

The politics of blame often find support in the educational management research traditions discussed above, especially school effectiveness research (SER) (e.g. Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). SER has been widely criticised because it rests on such a partial account of the history of educational research, because it has little theory to draw on, and because it is easily turned to the cause of neo-liberal school reform (see Morley & Rassool, 1999; Slee et al., 1998; Thrupp, 2001). SER has ignored earlier findings and theory within the sociology of education about the powerful relationship between family background and student achievement. As Laurie Angus once put it, the SER response to those studies was “was simply to deny them, assume that schools do make a difference to student outcomes, and search for indicators of this difference” (Angus, 1993, p. 335). Another problem with SER is that it treats family background as a “given” when of course it is not really a “given” at all – it is socially constructed, and can be made worse or better through housing, health, employment and taxation policies, all of which will therefore affect levels of student achievement. But this failure to question

underlying social inequality and the nature of policy that impacts on it leads SER to overemphasise school solutions. For school effectiveness researchers, this often occurs not in the body of their analyses, where they are usually quite honest about the small size of school effects versus family background effects, but in the *sheer weight of discussion* given over to the effects of schools rather than broader social structures (Thrupp, 2001).

THE POLITICS OF BLAME IN NEW ZEALAND

A decade ago, it was schools and their principals that were the focus of New Zealand's version of the politics of blame (Thrupp, 1998). The 1990s saw many Education Review Office (ERO) reports on failing New Zealand schools, but these were invariably low socio-economic schools clustered in low socioeconomic parts of the country (ERO, 1996, 1997, 1998). ERO had little time for contextual constraints on schools. Although ERO's review methodology wasn't reliable enough to be sure that some schools were more effective than others, this didn't stop it using an exemplary schools argument

It is commonly asserted that there is a strong link between school failure and the degree of disadvantage in a socio-economic setting. There are however, some 20% of the schools in these two districts that provide an effective education for their students. Their boards, principals and teachers have, with varying degrees of success, met the challenges of their students' backgrounds and concentrated on teaching and learning to the benefit of their students. (ERO, 1996, p. 4)

This idea that there are exemplary schools in low socio-economic areas which perform considerably better than others came from SER where it was popular in the US in the 1970s. However, it was not long before other US researchers were pointing out that the performance of students in so-called exemplary ghetto schools was still a far cry from that of students in middle class suburbs, and the exemplary schools claim was shown to be overblown.² SER continues to have an influence on more recent New Zealand education policy; for instance, a recent report by the Government's Education and Science Select Committee

The 2003 PISA report said that a disadvantaged home background and parental occupation are powerful factors influencing performance. These issues are not in control of schools and the education system, and are outside the scope of our enquiry. Raising the general standard of teaching so that it is in line with the best is the quickest means of bringing about improvement in the achievement of students. (Education and Science Select Committee, 2008, p. 15)

Here there is the same desire to treat poverty as a "given" as SER does. There is recognition that family background is a powerful determinant of achievement and yet the desire to focus only on the promise of improved teaching for the relatively spurious reason that it is what is seen to be within the remit of the sector.

At the same time an important shift is represented here because New Zealand's politics of blame over the last decade have come to centre on assertions about the power of quality teaching. A number of school effectiveness researchers have been giving renewed attention to the importance of teachers and teaching rather than the effectiveness of schools as a whole (Hill, 2001; Rowe, 2007; Cuttance, 2000) and the Ministry of Education has followed this trend with new claims for the power of teaching. The argument then becomes that although schools may not make much difference, teachers do. Indeed a badly advised former Education Minister spent several months saying in speeches and press statements that "research indicates that effective classroom teaching can explain up to half of a child's educational achievement" (Mallard, 2003a). After being publicly corrected, he started to make it clear that he was talking about the sort of school effects research that ignores rather than includes social variables and began to add the crucial qualifier, "within the school" (see Nash, 2004).

In Ministry of Education papers on quality teaching there is also too much enthusiasm to stress the power of teaching. Being able to put a figure on the size of teaching effects is no doubt powerful in the policy domain, but it seems that the bigger the better from the Ministry's point of view

Our best evidence is that what happens in classrooms through quality teaching and through the quality of the learning environment generated by the teacher and the students is the key variable in explaining up to 59%, or even more, of the variance in student scores. (Alton-Lee, 2003, p. 2)

If the Ministry were more even-handed on this issue it would do less celebrating of research that finds very large teacher effects, and seek to provide a more balanced perspective. Even John Hattie, whose work has been criticised for putting too much emphasis on teacher effects (Nash & Prochnow, 2004), quite clearly argues that student background is more influential

Schools account for about 5–10% of the variance in student achievement outcomes. Schools barely make a difference to achievement ... Teachers account for about 30% of the variance. It is what teachers know, do, and care about which is very powerful in this learning equation ... Students account for about 50% of the variance in achievement. It is what students bring to the table that predicts achievement more than any other variable. (Hattie, 2003)

Another source drawn on to support the power of quality teaching is analysis of international student achievement data. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows high within-school rather than between-school variance and this is interpreted by the New Zealand Ministry of Education as indicating a lot of variation in the quality of teaching. This may be what is going on, but it may not be too. Without more detailed studies we can only guess. Harry Torrance (2006) points to the danger of reading too much into large-scale international comparisons of educational attainment:

Far from providing unequivocal evidence, large scale studies which are not also well theorised simply provide data which can be presented in any number of ways and which can be cherry picked by media and policymakers alike to support whatever is the current agenda. (p. 833)

There are wider issues to think about than the quality of teaching. For instance blaming teachers for underachievement distracts from addressing the effects of child poverty. Here are a few of the issues New Zealand is grappling with

- In the last decades of the 20th century New Zealand had the fastest growth in income and wealth inequality in the OECD;
- Using the 60% of median income line, the New Zealand child poverty rate is currently among the worst in the OECD;
- For families supported by benefits, increased family assistance has been offset by a range of benefit cuts, leaving many simply “no worse off” than they were before the family assistance changes;
- New Zealand children have higher rates of preventable illness and deaths from injuries than children in almost any other OECD country. They have comparatively high infant mortality rates and low immunisation rates;
- The single most important determinant of health is income. A child growing up in poverty is three times more likely to be sick than a child growing up in a higher-income household; and
- Transience is a significant problem for the many thousands of low-income families in private rental accommodation, and has high costs for children’s socialisation, education and health. (St John & Wynd, 2008)

Because child poverty has been getting worse in New Zealand, we need to be sure that teachers are not being asked to address issues better addressed by wider government policy. It is ironic that the Ministry of Education constantly stresses the importance of quality teaching when the Ministry of Social Development has been putting out reports which indicate that New Zealand schools will be under increasing pressure because, by the Government’s own analyses, New Zealand’s poor are getting poorer (e.g. Jensen, Krishnan, Hodgson, Sathiyandra, & Templeton, 2006; Ministry of Social Development, 2007). The danger becomes that school-based solutions are overplayed, turned from what Jean Anyon has called “small victories”, into what she calls “large victories” which are seen to provide the solution to educational and social inequalities (Anyon, 1997).

New Zealand’s politics of blame have been intensifying under the National government elected in 2008. Minister of Education Anne Tolley has argued that poverty is too often used as an excuse for underachievement: good teachers are clearly expected to win through irrespective of the socio-economic contexts they operate within.³ Meanwhile, Associate Minister Heather Roy has been promoting school choice (Roy, 2009) in a way that ignores how middle class schools provide students with more positional advantage: “places in education which provide students with relative advantage in the competition for jobs, income, social standing

and prestige” (Marginson 1997, p. 38). This means they are nearly always more popular than low decile schools (Lauder et al., 1999).

THE POLITICS OF BLAME AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHERS

Educational researchers support the politics of blame when they overemphasise the power of teaching. There are various reasons why researchers might do this. They may genuinely believe they have stumbled upon some “silver bullet”, comforting themselves that even if they do prove to be too optimistic, they are at least providing encouragement and motivation to teachers. Many educational researchers probably don’t think enough about the effects of social structure on teaching and learning in any case. There are also more opportunistic reasons for researchers to stress the power of teaching. New Zealand does not have much education research funding apart from that provided by the Ministry of Education, and with the Ministry as keen on quality teaching as it has been for the last decade, to emphasise this in research or professional development projects is to be “on-message”. There are research contracts to be won, personal and institutional statuses to be improved, salaries to be increased, and political and professional influence to be gained.

Recent media coverage of primary principals resisting the introduction of National Standards has highlighted the link between the politics of blame and educational research. In criticising the principals’ stand, newspaper editors and columnists often seemed to be assuming that schools in any decile could come out equally well in National Standard results providing their teachers were performing well.⁴ Research was thought to support this view. An editorial in *The Dominion Post* argued “research project after research project shows that it is teacher expectations and teaching methods that have a greater effect on children than the homes they were born into and the decile rating of the school they attend. The NZEI might ask Auckland and Waikato universities to look at the evidence” (“Better to make it plain,” 2009).

This mistaken understanding, used as a part of a clumsy attempt to criticise primary principals and teachers for not wanting National Standards, illustrates how easily claiming too much from research may be used to fuel the politics of blame in this country. As well as being unfair to teachers, this sort of sentiment could easily lead to discourses of (false) salvation, such as performance pay and privatisation, if policymakers become frustrated that teachers are not delivering. But why did the *Dominion Post* editor single out the Universities of Auckland and Waikato as those who could support the view that teacher quality holds the answers? It seems likely that it is because these universities have had some high-profile projects that have made a point of stressing how teachers can make the difference.

Auckland had the Picking up the Pace project earlier this decade that emphasised the importance of teacher expectations. This project was used by then Minister Trevor Mallard to argue that “the research is saying loud and clear that all learners—whatever their background or learning needs—can do well when their teachers have the right kind of professional support” (Mallard, 2003b). More recently, John Hattie’s influential book *Visible learning* (Hattie, 2008) mostly leaves out socio-economic issues. There is a chapter on “The contributions from the

home” but it only provides a thin and somewhat fragmented discussion of particular correlations (not just socio-economic status but the links between student achievement and divorce or television-watching or home visiting by teachers) rather than providing any extended or well-theorised account of how family background and social structure influences education. To be fair, Hattie is aware of this limitation as he says in the preface that

[This] is not a book about what cannot be influenced in schools – thus critical discussions about class, poverty, resources in families, health in families, and nutrition are not included – but this is NOT because they are unimportant, indeed they may be more important than many of the issues discussed in this book. It is just that I have not included these topics in my orbit. (Hattie, 2008, pp. viii–ix)

Nevertheless this qualification serves to re-emphasise that Hattie puts most weight on the effectiveness of teachers and teaching even though, as noted earlier, he recognises these are not the biggest influences on student achievement.

A Waikato project that has stressed the power of teaching is Te Kotahitanga. This project works primarily with teachers and it could be argued that it is intended to address the 30% variance in achievement contributed by the teacher. However, the project has made larger claims for its impact,⁵ and project reports and some academic publications associated with the project have strongly dismissed sociological arguments about the impact of socio-economic status on Māori achievement as “deficit theorising” (Bishop, Berryman, Tiakiwai, & Richardson, 2003; Bishop, 2005). More recently there has been acknowledgement of the effects of poverty on education, described as the effects of “structural impediments, such as socially constructed impoverishment” (Bishop, Berryman, Cavanagh, & Teddy, 2009, p. 740; see also Bishop, 2008). However, such recent discussion is limited and the politics of blame have already been supported by Te Kotahitanga through the way it has denied the impact of poverty over the last decade. The project also continues to actively prevent teachers from thinking about socio-economic issues through the requirement that they “positively and vehemently reject deficit theorising as a means of explaining Māori students’ educational achievement levels”.⁶ There is overt ideological work being done here. Black (2008), writing in the *NZ Listener*, has described this Te Kotahitanga requirement as a “vaguely Orwellian approach—acting as though all the other influences in a child’s life do not exist”.

One reason this approach may be flawed is that there is evidence that low decile schools make the best progress when they fully acknowledge and respond to the cultural backgrounds from which their students come (Smyth & McInerney, 2007). Culture is of course not just a matter of ethnicity, it also has social class dimensions and to highlight the former and seek to ignore the latter will be counterproductive. Telling teachers they must ignore socio-economic issues also removes any resort to the contextual claim that they otherwise might fall back on when faced by the politics of blame. For instance in a situation where a government agency is unfavourably comparing the performance of schools dominated by low-socio-economic students with more middle class schools, the teachers in the former

would be unable to reject culpability for student failure even where this was patently unrealistic. Hence the paradox of Te Kotahitanga is that its enthusiasm for the power of teaching could help to support a situation where “poorly performing” schools are publicly castigated, find it difficult to recruit teachers and could even be shut down—and where those schools will invariably be low decile schools, many will have large numbers of Māori students. To the extent that teachers serve communities, including remote and disadvantaged communities, then support for the politics of blame can be expected to have wider consequences than for teachers alone.

PRE-EMPTYING RESEARCH BEING USED IN DAMAGING WAYS.

I began this article by noting that one of the most interesting aspects of doing educational research and being an educational researcher is that there are so many possibilities. This diversity extends to whether or not researchers choose to engage with other researchers who hold different views than their own. While some researchers are very open to debating their ideas, others adopt the “high ground” strategy of never getting “bogged down” in debate with other researchers. (Ignoring other researchers with different points of view is not as hard as it sounds—it is often possible to have different networks, attend different conferences and read different books and journals.) And yet the problem with this “high ground” strategy is that it precludes important possibilities for gaining other perspectives, including other views of the politics of one’s work and how it might have unforeseen consequences. Moreover this stance fails to recognise that the high ground is often illusory because researchers are nearly always compromised in some respect. For instance Ball (1997) has noted that

Critical researchers, apparently safely ensconced in the moral high ground, nonetheless make a livelihood trading in the artifacts of misery and broken dreams of practitioners. None of us remains untainted by the incentives and disciplines of the new moral economy. (p. 258)

Engaging with one’s critics is crucial for building a healthy climate of academic debate. Indeed I would argue that researchers hold a privileged position, and being seen as authoritative on various matters and being able and willing to respond to challenges from academic peers goes with that privileged territory. Of course there are limits too. My own rule of thumb is that when someone goes to print with some criticism of my work I will reply once, or maybe twice if the issues are really interesting. Beyond this, there may be little to be gained. Nevertheless even a short exchange will have clarified the issues and provided a chance for reflection in a way which would not have occurred without it.

The manner of engagement is also important. My exchanges with SER researchers (see Thrupp, 2001, 2002) have taught me that if motives aren’t clearly established, those criticised will often be dismissive, for instance attributing criticisms to ignorance or arrogance: “Maybe the criticisms reflect, firstly, simple ignorance. Many of them appear to come from people who have read very little

school effectiveness research (Reynolds & Teddlie, 2001, p. 104) ... It may be that school effectiveness is simply victim to academic snobbery (p. 105).”

Ideally researchers would separate personal from substantive research issues but in reality their personal investment in their work means that academic criticisms will often be received defensively. The challenge is to give and receive critique in a way that makes it clear the concern is to engage with substantive arguments and set issues of personality and motive aside.

Another challenge to researchers is to think ahead to how research might be used harmfully and write or speak in ways that help to avoid this. For instance, presenting findings as overgeneralised statements is often an invitation for any qualification to be ignored by users of research such as policymakers and practitioners. A good example is again provided by school effectiveness research where

The intention of the [early studies] was not to pillory or deride schools that did not appear to be as successful as others ... however by the 1990s the school effectiveness research had been hijacked by politicians who used evidence which indicated that some schools with similar intakes of students appeared to be doing better in GCSE league tables, or at key stages, to castigate less effective schools. (Tomlinson, 1997, pp. 13–14)

While this may be the case, the way SER reports have often provided simple lists of school effectiveness factors and separated these from important qualifications (e.g. see Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995) encouraged such hijacking. Clearly there are ways of writing up or speaking to research findings which more strongly emphasise any qualification of the findings and which therefore make it more difficult for research to be used to support simplistic prescriptions for policy and practice. On the other hand researchers often want—or need—to be relevant. Decisions about acceptable ways to write up research findings will ultimately need to be based on assessments of the risk of them being misused. Such assessments need, in turn, to be informed by debate about the politics of research as discussed above.

CONCLUSION

This article has looked at the potential for misuse of research findings, an aspect of doing educational research and being an educational researcher that is rarely discussed. Nevertheless nearly all researchers in a relatively applied field like education face important decisions about the way their research could be taken up. Research support for the politics of blame provides a good illustration of the kinds of problems which even well-intentioned research can cause. To minimise such problems, researchers need to actively engage in debate about the politics of their work and write up or speak to their research findings in ways that recognise their potential to cause harm.

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¹ Of course research can also inform policy in a constructive way or even pre-empt damaging policy. For instance, in New Zealand Wylie’s regular surveys of “self-managing schools” (e.g. Wylie 1997) have often been used to highlight resourcing and other problems in the school system. A good New Zealand example of research pre-empting damaging policy is provided by NEMP, the National Education Monitoring Project, which started in 1995 and for over 20 years satisfied the needs of policymakers to monitor school achievement. By doing this NEMP helped New Zealand avoid national testing and its perverse effects as experienced by countries such as England and the US over recent decades.

² Purkey and Smith (1983) argued that “unusually effective” schools serving predominantly low-income and minority students may, in fact, have considerably lower levels of attainment than white middle class suburban schools because of the pervasive influences of social class on achievement and the possibility that even the “typical” suburban school has some important advantages over the relatively effective inner-city school. They argued—along with Rowan, Bossert and Dwyer (1983) and Ralph and Fennessey (1983)—that “exemplary” schools had often been incorrectly identified for other reasons. These include measurement error, the use of data that is contradicted by other sets of contemporaneous data and follow-up studies, and the apparently widespread problem of data tampering within schools.

³ This argument was used by the Minister in a Radio New Zealand *Insight* programme on National Standards, 26 April 2009.

⁴ E.g. “Govt mustn’t give way on league tables” (2009), “Better to make it plain” (2009), “Hide and seek” (2009), Coddington (2009), Tamihere (2009). See also Minto (2009).

⁵ Openshaw (2007) notes that it was claimed in a *20/20* documentary screened on TV3 on 23 April 2007 that Te Kotahitanga was on its way to solving the problem of Māori underachievement, and in less than a generation.

⁶ This is the first point of Te Kotahitanga’s “Effective Teaching Profile”.

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