
Researching amid the Heat and Noise of Political Debate

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the everyday politics surrounding research on a controversial government policy. The research in question is the Research, Analysis and Insight into National Standards (RAINS) project on National Standards in New Zealand primary schools being undertaken by the author. This three-year study was funded by the New Zealand primary teachers' union, the NZEI, an organisation opposed to the National Standards policy. The project was quickly attacked by a cabinet minister and the media but there have also been significant accomplishments in carrying out and reporting the research and in relevant activism. As the article discusses the political setbacks and successes while undertaking the research, it reflects on issues such as research funding, research 'independence', the reporting of findings from controversial research projects, the tensions between being a researcher and an activist and the importance of supportive networks. The article provides a case study of how challenges to the legitimacy of research and academic involvement in public debate may need to be anticipated and addressed by researchers much like other aspects of their work.

Notions such as 'public intellectual' and 'academic freedom' tend to be raised either in the abstract or in connection with high-profile individuals or high-profile cases where an academic's career (or, in some countries, even their life) is under threat because of what they have said or done. But at a more mundane level, ordinary academics working within democracies also face many day-to-day political challenges related to public debate. Such issues often come about because of ideological or management pressures on teaching that make it difficult to pursue politically challenging lines of argument or to 'represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug' (Said, 1994, p. 12). Research also often comes under pressure when it involves the contested territories of political reform. In such circumstances, even taking up a research contract may be controversial, let alone becoming involved in public debate whilst carrying out the research.

Such conditions create pressure on academics to become self-censoring in order to reduce the political heat on their work. But if the situated challenges of being involved in public debate are anticipated and addressed, there is a better chance of academics being successful as both researchers and activists. This article explores the issues by way of a case study of the politics surrounding the author's recent research on a controversial government policy, 'National Standards' in New Zealand primary schools. The Research, Analysis and Insight into National Standards (RAINS) research was funded by a teachers' union, the NZEI, an organisation opposed to the National Standards policy. The research was soon attacked by a cabinet minister, a regional newspaper and bloggers, but there have also been significant accomplishments in carrying out and reporting the research. Discussing the political setbacks and successes of the RAINS research, the article covers issues such as research funding, research 'independence', the reporting of findings from controversial research projects, the tensions between being an researcher and an activist, and the importance of supportive networks.

I begin by explaining the controversy around the National Standards and the nature of the RAINS research itself. The article then goes on to discuss and reflect on my positioning, experiences and responses as the RAINS research got under way, including some sensitive issues that researchers often leave out of their published accounts. I am not trying to present an exemplary and 'tidy' account of the RAINS research so much as a sense of an ordinary academic 'muddling through': trying to respond to political challenges as they arose but occasionally being blind-sided and sometimes enjoying unexpected successes.

As general background it should be noted that there is some legislative protection for academic freedom in New Zealand. Section 161 of the 1989 Education Act defines *academic freedom*, in relation to an institution, as:

- (a) the freedom of academic staff and students, within the law, to question and test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions;
- (b) the freedom of academic staff and students to engage in research;
- (c) the freedom of the institution and its staff to regulate the subject matter of courses taught at the institution;
- (d) the freedom of the institution and its staff to teach and assess students in the manner they consider best promotes learning; and
- (e) the freedom of the institution through its chief executive to appoint its own staff.

Section 162 of the act also characterises New Zealand universities as 'accept[ing] a role as critic and conscience of society'. Despite all of this, academic freedom and the right of academics to 'speak truth to power' have been often challenged in New Zealand, as elsewhere. One indication of this was that in 1999 the then 'Association of University Staff' commissioned Donald Savage, a retired Canadian academic, to write a report on academic freedom in New Zealand. This report, published as part of the edited collection *Troubled Times: academic freedom in New Zealand* (Crozier, 2000), discusses challenges and threats from both within and outside the academy and makes some international comparisons, providing a wider context within which to locate the particular case discussed here.

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 one, two or three years at school in the junior school and then at each year level from Years 4 to 8 (that is *by the end* of Year 4, Year 5, etc.). The policy matches up existing curriculum levels and assessment stages and progressions with the National Standards and so, in practice, teachers are supposed to consider students' achievement against what is required for those levels, progressions and stages and use that understanding for then making overall teacher judgements (OTJs) about achievement against the National Standards. OTJs are therefore 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 the quality of work required to meet each standard) and assessment tools, tasks and activities. The National Standards policy also requires schools to report to parents about a child's achievement against the National Standards twice a year in writing. Schools do not need to use the wording of the four-point scale in this reporting, 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.[1]

The National Standards policy has arguably been the most controversial school-level development in New Zealand for decades. Although there are many reasons for this [2], a key issue has been the way National Standards represented such a sharp break from earlier approaches to primary assessment because New Zealand had previously avoided high-stakes approaches to assessment and the associated perverse effects such as curriculum narrowing and the commodification of children that have been found in other national settings (Nichols & Berliner, 2007; Hursh, 2008; Stobart, 2008; Lingard, 2010; Comber, 2012). During the decades prior to the election of the Key government in 2008 there had been an emphasis on formative assessment,

backed up after 1995 by the National Educational Monitoring Project (NEMP), which provided a national overview of achievement by sampling all areas of the curriculum over consecutive four-year assessment cycles. There had also been a tradition of sector representatives such as teachers and principals being heavily involved in curriculum and assessment policy development. But the National Standards were legislated for and developed by the Key government with little consultation (Thrupp, 2010a) and threatened to take New Zealand down a high-stakes path that most educators had been pleased to be avoiding.

Yet the question of whether New Zealand's system of National Standards actually would lead to the unfortunate outcomes of high-stakes assessment found elsewhere was not straightforward. As can be seen from what has already been described, teachers were going to be asked to draw on many sources for their judgements in an apparent attempt to avoid teachers 'teaching to the test'. As a senior official at the Ministry of Education put it in 2010:

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 to be seen whether New Zealand's National Standards could avoid the pitfalls experienced by other countries. It was just as likely to not so much avoid those problems as develop a particular variant of them. Given the concerns already noted and a multitude of others [3], it is not surprising that teachers, principals and others found many and various ways to campaign against the introduction of the National Standards. They 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 the 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.[4] During the first term of the Key government it seemed that barely a week went by without opposition to the Standards triggering media debate. In 2011, 15% of schools were 'civilly disobedient', refusing to put National Standards in their charters.

The RAINS Research

It was against this often intense background of claims and counter-claims about the National Standards that the three-year Research, Analysis and Insight into National Standards (RAINS) project began to research the impact of the policy in six schools from late 2010. 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 Standards policy will be being translated and reinterpreted at the local level by individuals and groups in different ways amid the messy complexities and uncertainties of diverse school settings and numerous other educational policies and practices (Ball et al, 2012). One important reason to think about enactment is that the idiosyncratic 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 can be expected 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 the Standards. Another reason for taking an enactment perspective is that the National Standards can be expected to require new performances by 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. Based on the international literature on performativity noted above, New Zealand teachers, principals and boards can be expected to be looking for advantageous assessment practices and curricular shifts if they want their schools or particular groups of children to perform well in the Standards. Related to both of the above, a third reason why it is important to see how the National Standards policy has been enacted is because it has been such a heavily contested

policy. Even if schools are now apparently mostly complying with the Standards policy, this does not mean it has captured 'hearts and minds' amongst principals, teachers and boards. Their varying perspectives and concerns will continue to influence the way schools approach the National Standards.

These concerns are reflected in the project's 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 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. The ways in which the Board of Trustees, the senior leadership team and individual teachers in the six RAINS schools are enacting policy as well as responses of children and parents are all being investigated. The views and approaches of other education professionals, such as Education Review Office reviewers, are also of interest where they are in contact with the schools in relevant ways during the period of the research. Semi-structured interviews and other recorded and unrecorded discussions form the mainstay of data collection and there is also observation of classrooms and meetings and collection of relevant school documents and student data. The six schools in the study are all well-regarded schools that were chosen primarily for their diverse characteristics (relating to decile; whether urban or rural; and ethnic composition). While they vary in their level of support for the National Standards, only one has obviously resisted them. Another feature of the research has been the involvement of an experienced teacher from each school – the RAINS 'lead teachers' – in the research team. These teachers were chosen by the schools and have a role in facilitating the progress of the project in their respective schools and providing advice on matters such as the contexts of each school, the best areas to explore and questions to ask, and whether emerging findings fit with their experiences in the setting under discussion.

The RAINS project is reporting annually, and the most important finding of the first report was that schools' approaches to the National Standards had been largely incremental and strongly influenced by school-specific contextual factors (Thrupp & Easter, 2012). While there may be few surprises in these findings on the basis of other studies of how policy plays out in schools, they challenge the government's account of National Standards assessments becoming increasingly uniform in schools by stressing how much the trajectory of their development in any school will reflect its particular situation and emphases. Over 2012-13 the research was continuing to build the school case studies against the backdrop of further policy developments, including public release of the National Standards data on the government's 'Education Counts' website in September 2012. There has been wide acknowledgement, including from the government, that these data cannot be used for any sound comparisons of school performance, but advocates of publication have still seen their release as a useful step. At about the same time, some media (i.e. Fairfax Group and the *New Zealand Herald*) also released the data in newspapers, and in the case of Fairfax, a search-and-compare online database. In the struggle to legitimate their involvement in the face of fierce criticism, the newspapers have so far avoided ranking the schools (Thrupp, 2013).

The Politics of the RAINS Research

In this section I begin to discuss the various issues in the RAINS research that are likely to have been more challenging than usual because of the politics surrounding the National Standards, how those challenges were addressed (or not) and significant sources of support.

Getting Funded

By 2010, with the National Standards starting to have a presence in schools, it was becoming clear that in-depth research would be needed but there seemed little chance of getting funding for such

research through conventional channels. With no equivalent of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funding in the UK, Australian Research Council (ARC) funding in Australia or the multitude of funding opportunities in the USA, educational research in New Zealand is heavily dependent on funding provided by the Ministry of Education ('the Ministry').^[5] However, over the last two decades the Ministry has also become increasingly instrumental in the way it funds New Zealand educational research. As Wylie (2003, p. 4) put it:

The economic and structural changes which started in the mid-1980s have made it difficult to develop and sustain research capacity, since most research is funded through short-term contracts. Tertiary institutions, NZCER [New Zealand Council for Educational Research], and a few private firms and individuals compete against one another for limited opportunities, usually tendered and funded by the Ministry of Education. There is little private or philanthropic funding of research in New Zealand. Among other recommendations, the OECD reviewers [i.e. OECD, 2001] identified the need for more concentrated strategic or basic research ... [and] increased spending on research, including research capacity and infrastructure ... [A]lthough the Ministry of Education increasingly endorses the usefulness of educational research, the funding of research continues to be largely on a contractual basis, linked to current policy initiatives, and is at much the same level as the mid-1990s. (Wylie, 2003)

In line with its concern with 'strategic research priorities', the Ministry did put out a tender for evaluation of the National Standards policy, the 'School Sample Monitoring and Evaluation Project 2009-2013'. But this contract, won and undertaken by Maths Technology Ltd (MTL; see e.g. Thomas & Ward, 2011), seemed designed most to fine-tune the National Standards rather than speak to the wider debates around the policy since the substance of it was not up for debate.

Given this situation, I tentatively raised with the NZEI the idea of funding a much more wide-ranging project and was pleased to find it was receptive. The NZEI did not have much history of funding educational research so a decision to fund the RAINS project was a significant one in the sense of getting into new territory. But the concern of this organisation was that research findings about the National Standards would otherwise come to reflect only the limited scope of the Ministry's research, whereas the NZEI was sure that a wider-ranging research approach would vindicate many of its deeper concerns about the National Standards. As discussed below, there was also an established relationship between myself and the NZEI centred on shared concerns about the National Standards. This gave the NZEI some confidence in unfamiliar terrain and meant it was willing to give me a great deal of latitude in designing the study.

Although I was pleased to have a potential funder for the research, politics continued to intervene since the prospect of the NZEI funding a research project caused concern at my university where the research would be based. Although nothing explicit was ever said, it seems that the context of the NZEI being in dispute with the Ministry over the National Standards and the Ministry being almost the only funder of New Zealand education research and teacher education was making the university's senior managers cautious about committing to the research lest it threatened other funding streams and the university's reputation more generally. This concern manifested itself in a request to me to do the research on internal funding, but this was hardly worth considering since it was only about 5% of the value of an external contract. I responded that research would just not be feasible on such limited funds and that as the chances of getting future funding through the Ministry for such research were slim I shouldn't be asked to pass up this opportunity. I also said I was uncomfortable with the idea that NZEI couldn't be a worthy funder of research when the university did so much research for the Ministry despite it being a controlling research funder in many ways. I noted that the university was also effectively delivering the National Standards for the Ministry through its professional development activities and suggested that doing work for NZEI would add balance and help boost its credibility with the teaching profession. There was never any response to these points from senior management but the contract was allowed to be prepared and went ahead.^[6]

Criticisms of the Independence of the Research

As soon as the RAINS research was announced in February 2011, there was criticism of its 'independence' by right-wing bloggers 'Kiwiblog' and 'Whaleoil' (Farrar, 2011; Slater, 2011).

Unfortunately, a press release was written up by a media outlet as the NZEI funding 'independent' research although this was never claimed in the project press release or on any other occasion.

There were two parts to the 'independence' criticism. One was that I had previously been publicly critical of the National Standards, raising the problem of an academic beginning to research something that they have already shown a strong stance on. It was certainly true that I had been outspoken about potential risks in the National Standards policy. I raised a range of concerns in a 2007 research conference paper (Thrupp, 2007), discussed them, prior to the election in 2008, in a meeting with Anne Tolley, the then opposition MP who would become Minister of Education in the Key government, and wrote a number of 'popular' articles warning about the National Standards (e.g. Thrupp, 2009, 2010b).

My main response to this criticism has been to argue that pursuing some conception of 'independent' research that requires academics to jettison their contributions to public debate would involve paying too high a price. Academics are often uniquely positioned to speak out and need to remain willing to put their view forward regardless of how popular it might be with the government of the day. I have also challenged the implication that a more naïve or 'neutral' researcher would do better research. I have stressed that it was my understanding of prior research around the lived effects of policy in schools that gave direction to the RAINS research. As will be clear from the above description of the research, RAINS does not start from a research-naïve position but has sought to understand the impact of New Zealand's somewhat idiosyncratic National Standards reforms in the light of what has been found in other countries.

The other part of the initial criticisms was that I was 'in the pocket' of the NZEI as I had been previously supportive of its campaigns against the National Standards. Certainly I had previously blogged supportively of the NZEI's campaign on its website, been part of an 'experts group' assembled by the NZEI, been one of a handful of academics from that group who had written an open letter to the Minister raising concerns (Thrupp et al, 2009) and presented at numerous public meetings arranged by the NZEI. The bloggers 'outed' some of this work by providing weblinks and used it to argue that the findings of the RAINS research could be dismissed as a foregone conclusion. Also relevant here was an editorial in the *Waikato Times* in April 2011 which described me as a 'union hired gun' (*Waikato Times*, 2011a).

I have had a variety of responses to all this. One has been to note that I approached the NZEI about funding the RAINS research rather than the other way around and was publishing concerns about the National Standards long before any involvement with the NZEI on the matter. Second, that if academics were going to be called 'hired guns' simply for doing external research contracts then we had legions of such individuals at every New Zealand university. Third, that it could not be implied that people doing contracts for alternative funders would be any more shaped by the requirements of those funders than they would if they were doing research for the Ministry. Ministry RFPs (requests for proposals) tend to have some fairly specific requirements and there are also stronger contractual requirements around permission to publish, which do not apply in the case of RAINS.[7] Finally, I have stressed that RAINS has to meet the usual quality assurance processes of university research projects including project management in a research institute and an advisory group (national and international groups in the case of RAINS).

The criticisms also ignore the particular difficulties around 'independence' in a small country like New Zealand. New Zealand's few educational researchers create networks within which it is impossible to be very independent and these networks are heavily influenced by the only major educational research funder, the Ministry of Education. For instance, Maths Technology Ltd, that is doing the Ministry-funded evaluation of the National Standards, is described in a Ministry fact sheet as 'an independent evaluation company' (Ministry of Education, 2010) but actually develops and operates a maths website on a ministry portal, and its principal researcher, Gill Thomas, has been heavily involved in developing the National Standards. Most of those on the advisory group for the RAINS project have taken up a range of roles for the Ministry over the years. Researchers in larger countries usually have access to more funding streams and would be less dependent on any of them. An alternative would have been for the NZEI to have sought an overseas researcher. But this would have brought its own problems around understanding the context within which the research needed to be carried out.[8]

Summing up, criticisms of 'independence' are predictable when researching in areas that are politically contested but they are often easy criticisms that misrepresent complex issues.

Researchers might choose to ignore such arguments, but unpacking the ways in which they are counterproductive, unrealistic or hypocritical will often be the most constructive and educative way forward.

Criticisms of Related University Teaching

The *Waikato Times* editorial followed an article in the same paper in which I was criticised by then Minister of Education Anne Tolley (*Waikato Times*, 2011b). The article mentioned my involvement in the RAINS project and criticised me for 'biased' teaching about National Standards in one of my university classes, claiming it had led to students being 'let down', 'clearly distressed' and 'deserv(ing) to be treated with respect'. I had scant warning that the article was coming out. One morning I was taking the lift at work and was astonished to be pulled aside by the chairperson of my department and told that some students had complained to the minister about my 'biased' teaching.[9] There had apparently then been a complaint from the minister's office to the Dean. By the afternoon there was a message on my office phone to call a journalist but the deadline for responding to his query had already passed. Next day the 'biased course' article was in the paper, followed the next day by the editorial about the 'hired gun' mentioned in the section above.

There can be little doubt the comments in the article set a dangerous precedent as they involved a cabinet minister publicly smearing an academic's work on the basis of scant evidence. There were 86 students in the class and Tolley was criticising the teaching on the basis of hearsay evidence from four students. Of course students can be dissatisfied with a paper for all sorts of reasons, which may include the calibre of their course but may also include challenges to their politics or beliefs. There are well-publicised channels for student complaints in my university, as in other tertiary institutions, so the fact that students had gone direct to the minister was suspicious. I also thought it significant that the minister's office never bothered to request the course outline, although had they done so they would have found ample evidence of a more generous approach to the debate over National Standards than the public were led to believe.[10] Other senior academics scrambled to my defence with supportive public comments but in general it was deemed pointless to respond through the media. One action I did quickly take was to have an additional class evaluation done using items that would test the sorts of student views Tolley was claiming. The results indicated little cause for concern.[11]

Undertaking the Fieldwork in the RAINS Schools

Perhaps surprisingly, none of the media coverage mentioned above caused any problems for carrying out the research in the schools. No one raised any concerns or withdrew from the study on account of the coverage, and where the media coverage was mentioned, it was dismissed as 'political mischief' rather than something that needed to be taken seriously. The role of practitioners involved in the research – in this case, the RAINS 'lead teachers' – as advocates and allies when a researcher comes under political attack is not often considered but worth noting here. There is usually a trusted perspective from within the organisation; having this support can really make a difference when a researcher is 'in the field' in times of adversity.

Giving draft case studies back to the schools for comment and revision was another point at which the politics of the National Standards was felt. It was recognised by senior leadership team members that the National Standards was a contentious issue amongst primary schools and teachers and they were often keen to revise comments made in interviews that on paper seemed to be too judgemental about the stances of other schools or organisations and which might damage external relations. They were notably less concerned about being seen as 'on message' with government policy, perhaps because they had complied with the Ministry's formal requirements or, in the case of one of the schools, had been openly opposed to the National Standards policy in any case.

Reporting the RAINS Research

The political context of the research also had implications for writing it up. The first report needed to be armoured both against the criticism of a foregone conclusion that had been levelled against the project and against potential misuse of the findings. One kind of response to these concerns was to provide plenty of background about the National Standards and the nature of the research. Hence the first report (Thrupp & Easter, 2012) provides much more context than most do, including being explicit about the politics of the research (making many of the same points that are made in this article). Another response was to say much more about the authors than most reports do: more like a disclosure statement than any typical 'About the authors'. In terms of the substantive content of the report, as noted above, the case studies were checked and confirmed by the schools before being included and the findings were presented in an assertive way but one that was also open to further findings and other possibilities. While these could be seen as features of any good research report, there is little doubt that the political context of the research heightened concern with clarity, transparency and rigour. As strategies for reporting a controversial research project, they were highly successful. The first RAINS report was welcomed or ignored but not criticised. It is as if those who levelled criticisms at the mere idea of the project have been unable or unwilling to get purchase on the detail of it. The research programme continues and is offering increasing insights into the National Standards as a mandated but ambiguous policy.

Issues around Further Activism

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

There is also a multitude of specific decisions involved. For instance, in 2011 I turned down speaking engagements in areas where the RAINS research was being undertaken. There was no specific requirement to do so, but it seemed sensible from a research perspective to avoid my views dominating the discussion space in the RAINS schools. In 2012 there were new announcements around the public release of the National Standards data that I considered needed my urgent response as an academic and also because this was something that would be taking effect long after the RAINS research was due to finish in 2013. For the two months leading up to the release of the data I was frequently in the media, jointly spearheading a large group of academics who publicly opposed the release of the data (Thrupp et al, 2012), was again writing 'popular' articles (Thrupp, 2012a,b) and again supporting the NZEI as a speaker at public meetings. Yet it did not seem prudent or appropriate to pull out lots of in-progress findings from RAINS during this campaign. It was for this reason that I tended to avoid talking much about RAINS, or kept my comments about it to passing references.

During this time it also became clear that my involvement in the RAINS research might be used as an excuse to try to undermine my contributions to the wider debate. An article in the *New Zealand Herald* about league tables that quoted me as an 'expert' (Tapaleao, 2012) was criticised by an influential blogger for not reporting that I was 'funded by NZEI and a prominent campaigner against the Government on education policy' (Farrar, 2012). This was accompanied by what New Zealand's Tertiary Education Union described as a 'torrent of ill-informed blog abuse' (TEU, 2012). However, the argument that a 'health warning' should accompany my public comments seemed to have little effect on the media as the *Herald* and other outlets continued to publish my comments. Meanwhile I was confident I would be making the same research-informed points regardless of who was funding my research, or which political party was in power for that matter.

What became more of a problem over this time was being quoted in a way that reflected how I saw the issues rather than how the media wanted to portray them. There was a particular problem with the National Standards in that the print media, in particular, stands to gain from the publication of league tables and so has seemed to prefer to engage in relatively general and abstract arguments about whether or not parents have the right to the information rather than focus on the important issue of harm, of why releasing the data is likely to be destructive. An example was a *Herald* editorial (*New Zealand Herald*, 2012) that started off by pointing out that I had argued that 'schools will use tricks to portray themselves in the best possible light in National Standards results that will be published next month'. By leaving out the details of what had been reported previously, this carried the implication that I could be criticising those in schools, which I certainly wasn't. (What I was consistently saying was that if the aim was for schools to be honest and authentic then we shouldn't incentivise them to be otherwise by making the data public.) To counter this problem I began to prepare written scripts to speak from and then quickly released them as opinion pieces on Scoop, an independent news website (Thrupp, 2012 a,b). The main advantage of doing this was to make it harder to be misquoted as the public could quickly read the whole argument online.

The Value of Supportive Networks

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

Conclusion

The RAINS research provides a case study of a project that was always likely to be political in some obvious sense because of the context in which it was situated. It illustrates how challenges to the legitimacy of research and academic involvement in public debate may need to be expected and addressed by researchers. While not all political challenges to research can be anticipated at the outset, it is clear that some approaches and stances leave academics less vulnerable than others. Perhaps consideration of these should become part of the preparation of researchers alongside other aspects of research methodology.

Notes

- [1] Further details about how the National 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>
- [2] See Thrupp and Easter, 2012, p. 10.
- [3] Other concerns were that the National Standards 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 a universal system and the government's claim that such a system was 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 that the government was operating with simplistic notions of poorly performing teachers needing to be made more accountable; concerns about advisory services for

teaching the arts, science and physical education being withdrawn at the same time that the National Standards were being introduced; concerns about numerous 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.

- [4] See Thrupp and Easter, 2012, pp. 21-26.
- [5] There is the Royal Society's Marsden Fund, but this is a general fund and only a very small proportion goes to education. For instance, in 2012, 86 projects were funded, of which 13 were social science projects, but only one was clearly in the area of education.
- [6] Two other issues of note relevant to the contract were that the NZEI had to pay the full cost of the research and that the NZEI wanted to have a joint conference with the university at the end of the contract, but in the event had to go it alone. It is difficult to know how much these were financial decisions or political ones, or both.
- [7] The NZEI's main requirements were that the research be longitudinal, rather than a snapshot, that it should offer a rich qualitative picture, that it should be well informed by existing research and scholarship, and that the research would allow for the close involvement of teachers.
- [8] Another angle is the independence of the bloggers. Drinnan (2012) notes: 'Insiders say in the past the Government has fed negative stories to Whale Oil [i.e. Slater] to put them into the public domain.'
- [9] Some students in the class later told me that there had been an email response from the Minister's office within minutes!
- [10] Assignments allowed for multiple perspectives and the students were advised to look for 'Discussion of national standards on following websites – Ministry of Education, National Party, New Zealand Principals Federation, NZEI, PPTA, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Stuff, Herald, Listener, Red Alert (Labour Party) etc.' (Course outline, University of Waikato paper, TEPC220 11A Social Issues in Aotearoa New Zealand Education).
- [11] A course evaluation done by the University's Teaching Development Unit on 15 April 2011 asked students in this class to rank statements on a scale of 1-5 (1 being best, 5 being worse, response rate of 69%). In this survey the statements 'This teacher made me feel safe to express my views', 'This teacher listened to my views', 'This teacher was responsive to student concerns' and 'Overall, this teacher was respectful of me as a learner' all received means of between 1.5 and 1.8.

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