Chapter 10
The Spectre of Standards in Aotearoa
New Zealand Early Childhood Education and Care

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Keywords: New Zealand, Te Whāriki, Standards, Charter Schools, Neoliberalism.

10.1 Introduction

The announcement of an education policy of National Standards in literacy and numeracy (Tolley 2010) for primary level education in Aotearoa\(^1\) was met with an outpouring of resistance from educators, scholars, and parents alike. Newspaper headlines over many months aired perspectives and revealed the depth of ill-ease: “Parents braced for standards chaos” (Hartevelt 2009a, October 24), “School policy under attack” (Hartevelt 2009b, October 26), “Teachers want debate on standards” (Nelson 2009, December 11), “Tolley keeps fighting hard for achievement standards” (Hartevelt 2010, April 3), “Big leap backward halts progress made” (Fletcher 2010, July 5). Met with loud, public, and sustained disquiet from colleagues in the schools sector, the policy was considered by early childhood teachers as equally as risky to children and curriculum in early childhood education (hereafter ECE). Fears of a trickle down effect were raised, bringing with it concern about the narrowing of early childhood curriculum, parental anxiety about children’s future academic performance, and worry over the possible exertion of pressure by schools-sector colleagues towards teachers in ECE to prepare children adequately for the new rigours of national standards testing (Alcock and Haggerty

\(^1\)Out of respect to the dual language heritages of Aotearoa New Zealand, we use Te Reo Māori and English names interchangeably in this chapter.

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M. Li et al. (eds.), Contemporary Issues and Challenge in Early Childhood Education in the Asia-Pacific Region, New Frontiers of Educational Research, DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-2207-4_10
2013). Five years on from the introduction of the policy these fears remain, as the spectre of an imposition of standards for early learning in New Zealand persist. This chapter provides an opportunity to consider the issues and emergent realities of early learning standards in the context of New Zealand’s early years education (that is, early childhood and early schooling). In it we discuss how and why ECE in this country has remained largely resistant to the blanket imposition of early learning standards, and how Government remains significantly invested in the possibility of change.

10.2 New Zealand’s Education System and Its Neoliberal Orientation

In the late 1980s, the New Zealand education system was subject to a major reform and ideological shift that reoriented it towards neoliberal economic and political imperatives (Carpenter 2014). Neoliberalism holds free markets to be the most economically efficient means of producing most goods and services. Free markets are said to reward producer merit, given that individuals are considered self-interested, able to rationally weigh the costs and benefits of goods and services, and choose accordingly (Duncan 2007). Where free markets are not feasible to the delivery of services (as in New Zealand’s compulsory education sector, which, because of the compulsory requirement, involves government funding), neoliberally minded service providers seek to emulate market-like conditions. Gordon and Whitty (1997) argue that “the lack of a conventional cash nexus and the strength of government intervention distinguish quasi-markets from the idealised view of a free market” (p. 454). Key aspects of New Zealand’s quasi-market in education include attempts to increase school autonomy and parental choice, and new accountability measures to address a perceived lack of accountability for want of a free market (Gordon and Whitty 1997).

In 1988 a Government policy called Tomorrow’s Schools (Lange 1988) devolved management of schools to individual Boards of Trustees (BOT) who would be elected three-yearly by the parent community and staff of each school. Individual schools became responsible for identifying their own objectives within national guidelines and in collaboration with their community. These were set out in charters: formal contractual undertakings between a school, its community, and the government. A new organisation, the Education Review Office (ERO) became the body responsible for auditing an education service’s (school or early childhood) performance against charter obligations. Boards of Trustees were accountable to the school community and the government for meeting charter objectives. They were also the body who would appoint staff, supervise the delivery of curriculum within a national framework, and who would take overall responsibility for school administration and finance. In ECE the management and administration of services was left to individual settings or for groups of like settings, nationally
based organisations. The same kinds of charter obligations were introduced and services were also subject to audit by the ERO. The National government that came into office in 1990 continued with the neoliberal agenda. A new curriculum framework for schools was developed (Ministry of Education 1993a) and a direction for assessment, based largely on standards based (criterion referenced) school and classroom based formative assessment approaches was set (Ministry of Education 1998). It was in this broader context of education reform that a contract to develop a curriculum for early childhood curriculum was developed and let. Government wanted a policy that would parallel the new New Zealand Curriculum Framework (NZCF) of seven essential learning areas and eight skills (May 2002).

10.3 Curriculum Developments and the Future Proofing of ECE

The curriculum contract gave the early childhood sector an opportunity to determine its aspirations for children, families, and ECE, “the alternative, of not defining the early childhood curriculum, was a dangerous one: the national curriculum for schools might start a downward move” (May 2002, p. 31). To date the concern has been largely unrealised—if anything, the curriculum for ECE can be said to have influenced a later revision of curriculum for New Zealand schools (Carr 2006; Ministry of Education 2007). However, concerns over the schoolification of ECE (Alcock and Haggarty 2013), including the spectre of early learning standards or imposition of measures for particular outcomes of ECE persist. Later in the chapter we will discuss how. In the following section however we discuss the sufficiency of Te Whāriki to render questionable this threat. Our argument focuses on constructions of learners and learning within curriculum and fit-for-purpose assessment.

10.4 Te Whāriki’s Stances on Learning and Assessment

Rather than develop a prescriptive, individualistic, subject oriented, and measurement based curriculum for New Zealand children in ECE, Te Whāriki took an aspirational approach to curriculum design. It focused on the kinds of play-based learning environments and experiences that scholars, families, and educators in Aotearoa considered conducive to positive learning and human development. The position sat in contrast to one that sought the setting of standards for learning performance in specified domains of curriculum. The curriculum’s focus on aims for children was also different from the traditional developmental map that characterised many Western models (Fleer 1995). Te Whāriki was concerned with learning; it articulated an expectation that quality learning experiences would drive children’s development ahead. The curriculum was to become interpreted
as anti-racist (Ritchie 1997) and later as anti-biased (Gunn 2003). One of its strengths was seen in the way it provided for the diversity of languages, cultures, and perspectives existing in the New Zealand early childhood landscape. Reedy (1995, 2003/2013) described Te Whāriki as being about self-determination.

Despite these stances, at the time of its introduction, the Government was unable to resist an attempt at bringing the early childhood curriculum more into line with the prevailing neoliberal ideology and newly developed schools’ policy. Between its draft (which was subtitled a “guideline for developmentally appropriate practice”) and final versions (Ministry of Education 1993b, 1996), aims became goals and goals referred to learning outcomes; moves the curriculum development working groups and leadership team opposed (May 2002).

Additionally, the reference to developmentally appropriate practice in the title was dropped, the guidelines became curriculum, and an expanded set of links between the strands of Te Whāriki and the NZCF essential skills and each of the seven essential learning areas was articulated. At the policy level, the image of a continuous curriculum policy for early years education in Aotearoa was set. However, with no substantive change to either NZCF to connect it more broadly with Te Whāriki’s aspirational stance, and no real change to the foundational position and structures of Te Whāriki, these late changes left a significant gap between early childhood and school sectors’ approaches to curriculum, learning, and learners that in the current climate, replete with calls for standards and outcomes, has been an important factor in resisting the blanket imposition of these within ECE.

10.5 Assessing the New Curriculum: What Will Children Learn?

Integral to the assumptions and philosophical stances of Te Whāriki, the kind of assessment practices imagined and realised in New Zealand based ECE can be described as holistic, narrative, and credit-oriented. Assessment seeks to document what children can and are doing, rather than what they are not. The distinctive practices that have emerged since Te Whāriki was introduced are referred to variously as learning narratives (Carr 1998a), learning stories (Carr 1998b, 2001), or through the generic term of narrative assessments (Gunn and de Vocht van Alphen 2011). Assessment of children’s learning has come to involve teachers and others (parents, children, other involved adults) in the documentation of significant everyday events within environments designed for learning that highlight learning and learner identities in the contexts of dispositions for learning, working theories, and dimensions of mana.² Te Whāriki refrains from separating out the social, emo-

²For a comprehensive discussion of learning dispositions see Carr (1998a, b, 2001). Working theories are discussed by Hedges (2007, 2008) and by Peters and Davis (2011), whilst Reedy (2003/2013) gives an account of mana as it relates with the curriculum.
tional, cognitive, and the physical, so do the assessment practices desired of the
field (Ministry of Education 2004/2009, 2008a, b, c, 2009). Instead, the field seeks
to maintain and document a view of learning as complex and situated.

Carr (2004) argues that if what we set out to assess is overly simplistic, then it
does no justice to Te Whāriki, to children’s learning, and to the complexity of rela-
tionships that support learning in the early years. Simplistic, fixed, and standard-
ised measures cannot adequately account for the close connections between
children’s learning and the kinds of responsive and reciprocal relationships that
contribute to that learning. Nor do they recognise any uncertainty about what’s
being measured or the situated nature of what children can achieve, at a given
moment, alone or with others. Simplistic, fixed, and standardised measures also
fail to account for the fact that valued outcomes of early childhood curriculum in
Aotearoa include understanding how the learning-experiences children engage in
are contributing towards their identities as competent and confident learners.

Given the perspectives on learning taken up in Te Whāriki (predominantly emerg-
ing from bio-ecological and sociocultural theoretical lenses) that understand learn-
ing to be distributed, measures of that learning must be equally as distributed if
they are to be fit-for-purpose, credible, and trustworthy. It is difficult to imagine in
this context why or even how fixed and simplistic early learning standards might
be imposed or introduced. In spite of this however, questions about child learning
outcomes and the standards of such are regularly raised by Government officials,
some academics, and commentators (Blaiklock 2010; Early Childhood Education
Taskforce 2011; Woulfe 2014), and a new development, left-of-field has added to
the call. A form of charter or partnership model of schooling for New Zealand,¹ a
recent iteration of which included a call for proposals for a school incorporating
an early childhood setting (0-8yrs), raises the spectre of early learning standards
for New Zealand based ECE from quite a new direction, that of the partnership
kura.

10.6 NZ Partnership Kura

The establishment of partnership kura in 2012, created schools with the kinds of
flexibilities, in terms of management and strategic direction neoliberals aspire to.
By way of untagged funding these schools are given more control over finances.
They can set their own salary scales, employ unregistered teachers, set their
own curricula, hours, and holidays, and are exempted from provisions of the
State Sector Act (O’Meara and Parata 2014), the law that oversees state sector

¹Charter schools in New Zealand are referred to as “Partnership schools/kafa hourua” or, abbrevi-
ated, “Partnership kura” (Ministry of Education 2014e).
employer/employee relations. The so-called greater freedoms are designed to enable partnership kura to operate more efficiently and effectively than schools within the state system are said to be able to. They are also expected to help partnership kura meet the demands of their so-called consumers.

Partnership kura are targeted to students from Government identified and labelled “priority groups”: groups that have traditionally underachieved in state schools, that is Māori and Pacific students, students from low socioeconomic groups, and students with special needs (O’Meara and Parata 2014). From a neoliberal perspective, it is believed that these groups will gain most from a school that has the freedom to respond to their needs, especially when the school’s viability depends upon it meeting set achievement targets (Banks 2012).

Thus the increased freedoms of partnership kura travel hand in hand with increased accountabilities. The concept of provider capture was used in a Treasury Report to describe the condition of New Zealand education in the 1980s (NZ Treasury 1987). The concept embodies the belief that providers of education are more concerned with their own interests than those of consumers. To remedy this, providers must be made more directly accountable for the educational outcomes desired by consumers and the government (NZ Treasury 1987).

Whereas state schools have been made accountable to consumers via the BOT, and the government via ERO, partnership kura are governed by sponsors, who can include businesses, philanthropists, iwi, community organisations, faith-based groups, private schools, and culture-based educational organisations (Ministry of Education 2014c). They operate on fixed term contracts with the Minister of Education, and are required to meet specific targets in “four outcome areas: student achievement, student engagement, financial performance [and] enrolment of priority groups” (O’Meara and Parata 2014, p. 5). Achievement targets set for primary school students attending partnership kura in 2014 were related to the 2012 National Standards results of decile 3 state schools (O’Meara and Parata 2013). The contracts the MOE sign with partnership kura identify interventions that can be applied if kura fail to meet their targets, the ultimate being “cancellation of the contract” (O’Meara and Parata 2014, p. 5). Partnership kura are fully funded by the government at a rate comparable with decile 3 state schools, and they can be (but do not need to be) for-profit institutions (Ministry of Education 2014e). Five partnership kura opened for business in 2014.

4A school’s decile indicates the extent to which the school draws its students from low socioeconomic communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10 percent of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, whereas decile 10 schools are the 10 percent of schools with the lowest proportion of these students” (Ministry of Education 2014a). In 2013, the average school per-pupil funding was about $6500 (Ministry of Education 2013). In 2014, a decile 3 school could receive around $320 more funding per pupil than a decide 10 school (Ministry of Education 2014b).
10.7 Partnership Kura for 0–8 Year Olds

A second call for proposals for partnership kura was released by the MOE in
December of 2013. This time, the Government announced that applications involv-
ing “innovative options for 0–8 year olds” (O’Meara and Parata 2014, p. 1) would
be given preference. Not all the same targets were to be set for the early childhood
component of any successful 0–8 partnership kura (the targets for student achieve-
ment and student engagement were excluded), however legislative modifications,
required for ECE to be included in a partnership contract, were signalled, and
concerns for ensuring continuity of early learning between ECE and school were
expressed (O’Meara and Parata 2014). As it has eventuated, no proposals for 0–8
partnership kura were judged successful in the second round of funding. This may
mean that none were regarded as appropriately innovative, none applied, or none
were able to conform to the requirements. However, the MOE suggests further
rounds of applications are likely to be forthcoming, ECE would be included, and
legislative change to simplify the process for ECE “may be desirable” (O’Meara
and Parata 2014, p. 6). Given their emphasis on accountability for educational
outcomes and the inclusion of an early childhood component to the partnership
kura policy, the risk of Government responding to public calls for some sorts of
early learning standards at school entry (see for example Barback 2014) remains
high. Such a development would be easily effected in the 0–8 Partnership Kura
arena and could later flow onto other ECE service types, thus opening the door to
standards more broadly. A Ministerial forum on raising student achievement (in
operation since 2012) has had a “continuity of early learning” work stream as one
of its projects (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Within this, the implementing of cur-
criculum and alignment of teaching practice across early childhood and school set-
tings (0–8 years) has been a focus. A recently convened (December 2014) early
learning advisory group (Parata 2014) has one of two main objectives as the provi-
sion of advice on “practical ways to align curriculum planning, implementation
and evaluation across early learning services and the early years of school and
kura” (Ministry of Education 2014f, p. 1). Much investment is being made by cur-
cent MOE officials to further align the practices and policy frameworks of early
schooling and ECE. As at the end of July 2015, the early learning advisory group
report was not released. A report on the continuity of learning between early child-
hood and school in New Zealand, however, revealed that the different approaches
to assessment between the early childhood and school sectors was consistent with
curriculum in each sector; policy expectations about measures of learning were
being heeded; different approaches to assessment were satisfactory in the view
of parents and teachers; and that the kinds of assessment information being
gathered and reported on as children transitioned to school was indeed useful
(Mitchell et al. 2015).
10.8 New Zealand’s National Standards

The partnership kura initiative came at the same time as the National Standards policy for primary education was bedding in, and, as noted, standards are employed in the initiative as an accountability tool, to measure student performance. This is a different purpose to the Government’s previously stated aim for National Standards—which is to improve student achievement (Ministry of Education 2014d). The tracking of student achievement via National Standards is said to occur through the provision, to parents and teachers, of accurate and transparent information about how students are achieving in literacy and numeracy at each curriculum level. Individual children’s achievement is examined and reported against a four-point scale. Children are deemed to be achieving: Above, At, Below, or, Well Below the National Standard. School wide data is aggregated and reported to the MOE (Thrupp and White 2013). This allows the Government to monitor school achievement rates. Publication of each school’s results occurs via a Ministry of Education website and report called Public Achievement Information (PAI, see http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/topics/national-education). From a neoliberal perspective, such public accountability encourages schools to be responsive to consumer demands by inciting comparison and competition.

In an effort to avoid any narrowing of the curriculum or introduction of further high stakes testing, which are problems commonly associated with National Standards (Hattie 2009), New Zealand standards are based upon existing curriculum achievement levels, which include numeracy stages and literacy progressions. They draw upon Overall Teacher Judgements (OTJ) gathered from a range of formal and informal assessment activities at each school. To ensure consistency, teachers and schools are expected to moderate their assessments internally or within local school clusters, and an online Progress and Consistency tool (PaCT), designed to assist teachers make consistent judgements, has recently been developed for schools that choose to use it (Thrupp and White 2013).

10.9 Partnership Kura, National Standards, and ECE: Conflating Neoliberal Agendas

As outlined earlier, to facilitate in education “the achievement of higher returns for each public dollar invested” (NZ Treasury 2013, p. 2), the government has attempted to replicate market-like conditions in a state funded education system, which manifests in schools via competition between publically funded institutions. Similar thinking has contributed to the development of New Zealand’s ECE, whereby private for-profit and public not-for-profit early childhood services are funded to the same level, operate under the same regulatory framework, and implement the same curriculum. The consequence of the neoliberal and market oriented policies for ECE has been a marked shift from public to private provision.
(Mitchell 2012), persistent questions over variability in the quality of education and care (ECE Taskforce 2011; Mitchell et al. 2011; Smith 1996), including worries over increasing numbers of unqualified educators working in ECE, and a lack of consumer choice. As private provision has come to dominate, services have shifted into higher income communities (Mitchell and Brooking 2007), and concerns over access to services by diverse populations have been raised. The Government response has been to target provision towards so-called priority groups and to leave the rest of the market to its own devices (New Zealand Educational Institute 2014).

10.10 Returning to the Question of Standards and ECE

The Government recognises that the highest return for the education dollar comes from investment in high quality ECE, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (NZ Treasury 2013). Additionally, smooth transitions between ECE and school are argued to increase the effectiveness of the education dollar by benefiting children’s educational outcomes (O’Meara and Parata 2014). It is not surprising therefore, that having initiated National Standards and having introduced partnership kura and set the scene for ECE to be included, the government’s questions about measuring outcomes of Te Whāriki remain (Education Review Office 2013b; Ministry of Education 2014). In pursuing the neoliberal object of the highest possible return for each dollar invested in education, the government has become obsessed with measurement and accountability; this interest in the current climate supports a continued and troubling interest in the spectre of standards for ECE.

10.11 NZ Evidence on National Standards: Why Should ECE Remain Vigilant?

A comprehensive three-year study Research, Analysis and Insight into National Standards (RAINS) Project into the ways National Standards were experienced by staff, children, and parents in six diverse schools was completed in 2013 (Thrupp and White 2013). The results confirmed the kinds of fears raised by educators and parents noted at the beginning of this chapter. Standards had not provided the accurate and transparent information on student achievement that the government intended. This was partly because the OTJs were inconsistent: “On the one hand there is a mandated but crude four-point scale, while on the other hand the process behind this scale allows for huge variation in assessment approaches between schools” (Thrupp 2013, p. 13). Furthermore, while the introduction of Standards did impact favourably on teachers’ understanding of the curriculum levels, on the
motivation of some teachers and children, and on targeting interventions, “the gains are overshadowed” by the harms (Thrupp and White 2013, p. 1). We discuss those particularly relevant to ECE below.

New Zealand’s stance of using OTJ rather than a single high stakes test led some schoolteachers to see National Standards non-problematically as an extension of something they had already been doing: classroom-based formative assessment. This made it easier for them to accept National Standards when they were introduced (Thrupp and White 2013). In the context of an increasingly under-educated workforce (Mitchell et al. 2011), fierce competition for market share, and persistent calls for transparent measures of some sorts of fixed learning outcomes of ECE (Barback 2014; Blacklock 2010; Education Review Office 2013a; Woulfe 2014), it is our concern that standards may become similarly viewed over time by some educators in ECE. This may ease the way for standards to be introduced more fully to ECE, and in doing so, disrupt efforts towards attaining a fuller and more robust national implementation of Te Whāriki. If the gaze on children’s learning narrows from a dispositional, working theory and mana-strengthening basis, towards one of pre-school preparation and knowledge in some curriculum domains (principally literacy and numeracy), the promise of Te Whāriki is lost. However, as the Mitchell et al. (2015) research indicates, emergent practices between teachers in early childhood and schools are beginning to open up understandings about learning and achievement of children as they transition from early childhood to school. These developments represent a strengthening of curriculum implementation and teacher practice within the existing policy frameworks.

Additionally, when Standards were introduced to schools, some school leaders saw Standards and their school’s progress towards them as a means of demonstrating their own high expectations of students and their school’s improvement, and as a way of showcasing their school. This ignored how some schools are better placed than others for the majority of their students to achieve the Standards, and it led to dissonance: Some school personnel began to see the standards as a means of positively showcasing a school’s quality, for others they remain troublesome measures, stigmatising children and driving the curriculum towards more narrow ends (Thrupp and White 2013). These findings hold warnings for ECE. We argue that if government pressure is placed on ECE to adopt more fixed and simplistic measures of some sorts of learning, then some ECE leaders, too, may see it as an opportunity to showcase their staff expertise, to capitalise on government incentives, and to increase market share. The purposes of ECE could become oriented towards preparedness for school, the National Standards testing environment, and assessment of particular skills and abilities at school entry. Te Whāriki’s focus on learner identity, mana, and dispositions for learning would consequently diminish; the promise of ECE to create learning environments that foster learning dispositions, would be challenged. Furthermore, the risk of a fracturing of ECE along the lines of age and pre-school preparation could emerge, which in itself could lead to a re-emergence of the care and education divide that characterised New Zealand based ECE in decades past and many other countries approaches to ECE (Bennet 2003).
10.12 Standards: Lessons from the Schools-Sector for ECE

According to Thrupp and White (2013), National Standards brought with them increased workload related to accountability, and pressure to justify and modify OTJs. Interestingly, teachers did not experience pressure in the making of OTJs. They did this effectively and competently. However increased pressure and workload led some schools to focus the curriculum on perceived needs relative to standards for reading, writing, and mathematics. This has left less time for teachers to address concepts, key competencies, or to carry out topic work. There is evidence of a “two-tier curriculum being reinforced by the National Standards policy ...” (Thrupp and White 2013, p. 19), one founded on a broad-based NZ curriculum, and the other based on National Standards. Teaching is becoming more technical, as teachers feel pressure to ensure students can demonstrate the mastery needed for National Standards (Thrupp and White 2013). The narrowing of the teaching and assessment focus towards so-called STEM subjects (sciences, technology, English and maths) is of growing concern to us.

In New Zealand, well qualified and experienced ECE teachers are becoming increasingly able to think broadly about children’s engagement in play-based curriculum, and how, in this, children are becoming stronger in themselves, and disposed towards learning (Mitchell et al. 2015). If, as *Te Whāriki* holds, participation in quality ECE supports children to meet the world with interest, become involved, persist with challenges, communicate about their endeavours, and take responsibility for themselves and others, then this is the measure of learning and the learner we must remain invested in within New Zealand based ECE. Calls for fixed and simplistic measures of learning in narrow domains of curriculum (such as those seen in Barback 2014; Blacklock 2010; Woulfe 2014) make no sense in this curriculum context. Such measures, even those that employ OTJs, that speak to decontextualised skills and externally composed standards, have no place in a rich and play-based learning environment that is premised on situated and complex learning.

Finally, once National Standards were introduced in New Zealand and schools felt pressure to conform, there was a general concern that non-complying schools would face sanctions, leading the authors of RAINS to suggest that “a new normativity” is creeping into schools as National Standards become integral to educational discourse (Thrupp and White 2013, p. 18). As National Standards become more entrenched in schools and in society, and unless educators in the ECE sector can articulate why ECE should continue in its stance against them, may trickle down into ECE with less controversy, especially through right-of-field-developments such as 0-8 Partnership Kura. This would be a travesty in New Zealand. Early childhood education has a broad and inclusive curriculum that encourages diversity, expects teachers to follow, respond to and expand the interests of children, and aspires for children’s contributions to their worlds to be recognised and valued (Ministry of Education 1996). Evidence from New Zealand schools suggests this could be compromised if a framework of standards was imposed on children in their early years.
10.13 Conclusion

The intent of partnership kura and National Standards seems admirable: to improve the educational achievement of priority students by introducing an alternative model of state funded education, to provide the new model with the flexibility it needs to respond efficiently and effectively to consumer demands, to monitor the achievement of students, provide transparent and publicly available information, and enable families and teachers to support children’s learning. Evidence is inconclusive about whether charter schools (Lubienski 2003) or National Standards (Thrupp 2013) will improve student achievement. Evidence does however suggest that National Standards will result in a narrowing of the curriculum, a more technical approach to teaching, and a ‘sameness’ as teachers work to instil in children the knowledge and skills they need to meet the National Standards, and as schools focus on ensuring they comply with targets (Thrupp and White 2013).

We have argued that an imposition of early learning standards via a downward thrust of summative forms of assessment or standards into early childhood education in Aotearoa is untenable. It would be inconsistent with curriculum policy and with long established principles for young children’s learning taken up in this country. It behoves teachers in early childhood education to clarify and strengthen how they articulate information about children’s learning, and to help their colleagues, in the schools children transition to, to understand the valued learning strengths and dispositions that children and their families bring with them from ECE into school.

That the spectre of early learning standards in NZ exists. Even if it does sit within the Partnership Kura initiatives, this does not automatically mean that standards in early childhood education should or need to become reified. As recent work has shown (Mitchell et al. 2015), parents, children, and teachers can usefully expand practices, clarify expectations, and build understandings about children’s learning in ways that allow school teachers to welcome children and families to school with sound knowledge of learning strengths and interests. From there, school based teachers can capitalise on this knowledge and use it to support the transition of children from early childhood education into school. Our argument has been that the curriculum policy for this already exists; teachers’ practices are now catching up. In our view, no need for additional measures of learning on children in their early childhood years presently exists.

References

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