

LITERACY AND NUMERACY STANDARDS: RECENT CONSTRUCTIONS WITHIN THE POLITICAL, BUSINESS AND MEDIA DISCOURSES IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

Concerns about a decline in literacy and numeracy standards in New Zealand are longstanding. Such concerns have again come to the fore with the introduction of the Education (National Standards) Amendment Act 2008. In this paper we track the debates leading up to the new legislation, focusing on the political struggles and the way in which games of truth, power and knowledge are played out in a bid to reconstruct thinking and action about literacy and numeracy. Such truth games have resonances within all educational enterprises, influencing the way we think about the key skills deemed appropriate for dealing with everyday civic life.

Literacy and numeracy currently capture widespread attention. Arguably, as a broad discourse “literacy and numeracy” has become a floating signifier, appropriated by various groups for different purposes. Drawing on Foucault’s understandings of the politics of knowledge construction, we explore the ways in which the discourse has recently been constructed. Our interest with recent curriculum history is to understand how the “current problems...become constituted as they are” (Popkewitz, 1997, p. 131). In tracking recent debates, we draw attention to the sense of national crisis within New Zealand that was created by politicians, the business sector and within the media. While we will acknowledge past understandings of “falling standards”, our intent is to impose an empirical discipline on the process of how recent understandings are currently formed, expressed, and how they gain ascendancy and how they culminated in the passing of the New Zealand Education (National Standards) Amendment Act 2008, which was subsequently introduced into schools at the beginning of 2010.

Our exploration entailed tracing patterns in recent critique, debate and response. In turn, these considerations required the collection of an extensive data set from a variety of primary and secondary sources. It also involved searching archival accessions, educational publications and policy documents at Archives New Zealand as well as in the Parliamentary Library and National Library in Wellington. Our material was complemented by contemporary professional and business and trade literature, and media reports.

The sources provided us with ample evidence of competing claims to truth. For instance, the archival material we gathered from official sources tended to reflect the view of the education bureaucracy. The professional literature we examined often encapsulated the views of those who advocated reform. Media and business sector sources had a tendency to both create and reflect a wider sense amongst the general public that education was in crisis. Drawing critically on these sources, and triangulating them where possible, enabled us to better detect movements and political identities behind the standards debates.

Our analysis, therefore, not only makes use of written and spoken texts, but also looks critically at how these texts operate with particular political interests in the construction of knowledge about literacy and numeracy. The approach thus makes explicit political and social orders that construct versions of literacy and numeracy as well as the standards of competence demanded of them. Specifically, we were interested in how the media, the business sector and politicians fashion that reality by embodying particular forms of difference. In exploring the relation between texts, the broader social and political structures, and knowledge construction, the approach enabled us to make some theoretical speculations about how texts position, locate, define, and regulate meanings of literacy and numeracy competence, based on their specific and conflictual emergence.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDING

Foucault (1984, 1988) provides a framework and a language for exploring the construction of curriculum knowledge. It is through the concept of discursivity (see Foucault, 1977) that he is able to offer a nuanced understanding of knowledge production. In his formulation, discursive spaces trace out what can be thought, said and done by providing people with a viewpoint of the social and natural worlds. For him, discourses imply forms of social organisation and social practices that, at different times, structure institutions and constitute individuals as thinking, feeling and acting subjects. Functioning like unwritten rules, discourses do not merely reflect or represent social entities and relations; they actively constitute

them. They shape our thinking, our viewpoints, our beliefs and our practices. They tell us what it means to be, for example, competent in literacy and numeracy at a particular time. They have the effect of producing truth and since they are the means by which reality can be read, they are extremely powerful (Walshaw, 2007).

For Foucault, power enters into any discussion of knowledge (see Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998; Walshaw, 2007). His argument (Foucault, 1977) is that power and knowledge directly imply, but are not coextensive with, one another—that there can be no power relation without the correlative constitution of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not simultaneously presuppose and constitute a power relation. Because power is constituted in discourses, the meanings we have of, for example, competence in literacy and numeracy, depend on the social, historical and political conditions under which these categories are formed. Meanings are, however, always notoriously slippery: the ways in which we understand the categories today might be quite different from an earlier or even later period. As Aldrich (2000) argues, we should not expect the “yardstick” to remain the same over time.

The idea that power is constituted in discourses makes it possible to consider the historically specific relationship between bodies of knowledge and forms of social control and agency. It opens up the possibility of exploring the rules that decide what is possible to know—those rules which constrain and enable, specifically, being, writing, speaking and thinking, within given historical limits. The media, politicians and the business community all participate in a social web of power that knits the social fabric together, systematically constituting versions of literacy and numeracy competence/deficiency for the nation. Power infuses our “reality” and it does this duplicitously.

Foucault (1977) talks of enforced obedience to rules that are presumed to be for the public good. He describes this process through “normalisation” and “surveillance”, notions that, for him, represent dual instruments of disciplinary power. These concepts suggest that practices of disciplining and regulation are, simultaneously, practices for the construction of knowledge. Systems of power both produce and sustain the meanings that people make of concepts such as literacy and numeracy standards. Both formal and informal practices exercise control over what it means to be, for example, a literate and numerate individual, by normalising and providing surveillance practices to keep such meanings in check.

THE DEBATE OVER STANDARDS 1998–2006

In May 1998, the “Government Consultation Green Paper” on “Assessment for Success in Primary Schools” proposed initiatives for “[b]ringing in external, nationwide maths and literacy tests, based on the curriculum, for students in Year 6 and Year 8” (Ministry of Education, 1998). The eventual shelving of proposals for some form of national testing, however, aroused concern amongst those who saw it as an unjustified retreat in the face of opposition from established interests within the state education sector. For instance in February 1998, the National Business Review published a feature article provocatively entitled “Let standards crusade begin” (Kerr, 1998). Its author was in full support of the education reforms to improve standards that had been announced within the United Kingdom (UK). These standards were claimed to include:

- devoting an hour each day to literacy and numeracy in every primary school;
- zero tolerance of under-performance;
- establishing study support centres;
- contracts between schools and parents;
- creating a national grid for learning on the Internet;
- setting national guidelines for homework;
- establishing school performance tables, showing the rate of progress and the absolute levels of student achievement;
- challenging targets set by schools; and
- closing failing schools.

The National Business Review claimed:

The UK is light years ahead of New Zealand on this How refreshing and how

sensible. What a contrast to New Zealand where education officials try to play down the importance of such performance data. Parents deserve such information so they can choose schools that are best for their children. Not only that. Knowing that their performance will be measured and published creates good incentives for schools. (Kerr, 1998, p. 24)

Such a view, publicly articulated and widely reported, was part of a wider regime of power whose central mission presupposed conforming and obedient individuals. In drawing demarcation lines between practices within the UK and within New Zealand, the writer lent support to Foucault’s (1984) notion that:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (p. 73)

Later that year in November, however, the Minister of Education, Wyatt Creech, firmly denied that the package included national testing. However, in the House he pointed out that he was “certainly not opposed—and we have measures that will attach—to measures such as moving up the pay scale, to assessments of performance, and to other measures that will enhance the performance of teachers within our school system” (NZPD, 1998, p. 13054). Individual teachers would become “successful”, in a Foucauldian (1988) analysis, when they had learned to perform and enact not only the genres that constitute literacy and numeracy but also the particular positionings and embodied practices that constructed Creech’s view of literacy and numeracy in schools.

The proposal was certain to raise alarm bells within the heavily unionised teaching profession. Indeed, in a feature article in the daily newspaper of a small community, the president of the New Zealand Educational Institute, the union representing the interests of primary/elementary teachers, noted that the tests used in Britain were “so unreliable that schools, parents and politicians [were] left in the dark about pupils’ progress” (Ward, 1999, p. 4). The author argued that Creech was decidedly ill-informed when he claimed that the introduction of national testing overseas had quickly improved educational outcomes.

Notwithstanding clear indications that

any move towards mandatory national standards would be heavily contested, the Government announced in September 1999 that national testing in reading, writing and mathematics for primary/elementary school students would soon be introduced. Announcing the new initiative for the new government, the Education Minister, Nick Smith, pointed out that the new policy would include diagnostic tools, exemplars of student work, and a pilot study of a national test in numeracy and literacy in Years 5 and 7. He noted:

Parents, teachers, schools and government all need better information on how well our children are learning so we can focus on achieving excellence for all pupils. Better assessment is essential if we are to reach our goal of having all nine-year-olds able to read, write and do maths. We do our children no favours by fudging. (NZPD, 1999, p. 16216)

When the preliminary results of the repeat Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS-R), announced in May 2000, revealed no significant improvement in performance levels from the 1994 results, the findings were to prove a major political embarrassment. However, the sitting government quickly threw back the blame on the former government for failing to develop systems that would ensure success for all. As Smith pointed out in the House

This Government is going to make a difference. We want high standards, not low standards. We want tests that occur week by week and are reported to parents regularly, rather than the 4-year approaches taken by the previous Government.

As it transpired, the Government opted for a proposal that was based on a computer-based assessment system and that would provide parents and teachers information about primary school students' literacy progress. In 2001 the system was announced to take effect January 2002. According to a feature article in the national press, the new system "would assess literacy levels of children in years five, six and seven and a similar system looking at numeracy levels" (Kennedy, 1999, p. 2) was to be established by 2003. The Minister hoped that the new system "would give teachers the information to identify children who needed help and put them on the right track" ("Literacy system aims", 2001). The proposal that was promoted by the Minister as serving the interests of the nation state also functioned in Foucault's (1972) understanding as a regime of social selection and of symbolic domination, in that it provided a means of identifying those students who were deemed to require

socialisation into the dominant discourses of literacy and numeracy as defined by the state. As Foucault (1977) has argued, "[d]isciplinary power ... is exercised through its invisibility; at the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility" (p. 187).

In 2003, however, when the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study came to hand, the "three Rs" of education—reading, writing and arithmetic—became an issue upon which the sitting government was vulnerable. In September 2003 Smith argued that the introduction of national testing would "drive good teaching practice in the classroom, resourcing for recovery programmes and accountability for school management". An editorial in a regional newspaper claimed that this was

... a radical new track in dealing with the problem which is currently absent from the Government strategy. Among other initiatives, the National party is advocating a national testing system. Children will be examined in reading and maths skills at the ages of five, eight and 12. ("Kids' testing times", 2003,)

Without it, New Zealand would continue to 'slide down the international tables.' National testing, it was claimed, would make people accountable. It would improve standards by bringing teaching practices into 'sharp focus.' Arguably, it would, in Foucault's terms, also serve particular interests by providing a means of identifying, marginalising, and regulating teachers and pedagogical practices. "It is the fact of being constantly seen, of being always able to be seen, that maintains the disciplined individual in his subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p. 187). Whilst the editor of the newspaper clearly believed that "on face value, there is merit in measuring children's performance against a national yardstick," he conceded that what was proposed was:

... a simplistic view. The first difficulty is in setting adequate and consistent tests. How does one measure literacy in an otherwise well-performing immigrant child whose first language is not English? Exactly what level of mathematical ability is required from an eight-year-old? How do we account for the fact that all 12-year-olds are not created equal, and in fact cotton on to new concepts at different times? ("Kid' testing times", 2003,)

The editor warned that many teachers were opposed to national testing on the grounds that the proposal was based on an ineffective model operating in England. National testing in England, the editorial observed, had produced a number of negative outcomes, including teaching to the test, in which teachers focused more on performance than on developing understanding. He concluded that:

... measuring a problem does not necessarily help overcome it, and may not even increase understanding of what causes it... The real causes of poor literacy and numeracy remain complicated. National tests will not in themselves address the causes and may well detract attention from measures which do. (p. 9)

The intensified debate over standards

In April 2007, for instance, taking the lead from overseas initiatives, the Leader of the Opposition in New Zealand, John Key, announced that a National Government would seek to test all children at primary/elementary school in reading, writing and mathematics. This initiative, it was claimed, was not going to follow the allegedly overly prescriptive procedures adopted in the United States and the United Kingdom. Neither would the proposed New Zealand model simply assume that schools had uniform practices, policies, and student profiles.

These reassurances, however, once again were not to placate critics. Predictably, as was outlined in an editorial published in a weekly national newspaper, strong and vocal opposition was to come from schools and the Principals' Federation, who criticised the policy as a "vote grabbing exercise" and a "cynical attempt to place election votes ahead of student wellbeing and learning" (Stirling, 2007, p. 3). Equally predictably, others outside the education sector were to find much to admire in the proposed policy.

Foucault (1980) has argued that tensions and struggles only "become operative if one establishes concretely—in each particular case—who is engaged in struggle, what the struggle is about, and how, where, by what means and according to what rationality it evolves" (p. 164). When the findings were released in December 2008 from a further cycle of Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, the media became locked in a battle with the education system. The results revealed that although Year 5 students' achievements increased between 1994 and 2002,

achievement levels remained constant between that period and 2006. One day after the release of the findings in 2008, the national press featured, headline: "Primary kids get poor report for maths, science". This claimed that "New Zealand year 5 pupils are doing worse in maths and science than children in more than half the other 36 countries surveyed" (Nichols, 2008, p. A5). The same feature article alleged that Business New Zealand, the nation's business advocacy group, found the results "deeply concerning", in that New Zealand "risked losing its competitive edge and ability to innovate". The group was quoted as having observed that "stem skills" such as mathematics and science were critical to the workforce and development (Nichols, 2008, p. A5).

Similar sentiments in relation to the findings were expressed in the Independent.

The TIMMS results are a clear reminder we still have a lot to do to raise the achievement of our children in mathematics and science to high above the average. Setting clear standards will be crucial for achieving this. But they will be valuable for other reasons too; helping children to learn basic skills for life; helping make New Zealand become a more productive nation; and fostering a love for subjects which challenge the mind and stretch the boundaries of discovery. (Thomas, 2009, p. 22)

The business and commercial networks were thus clearly pushing for measurable and assessable standards to enhance student outcomes. Whilst the gaze of the business and commercial sector was often dismissed as narrow from within the educational sector, its networks had the capacity to determine the very status of literacy and numeracy. Along with writers in the popular press, the business and commercial sector constructed a public perception of the demise of standards, using headlines such as "Lagging in the reading stakes" (Nicholson, 2008), "Maths stumps kiwis" (Williamson, 2008) "Is education making the grade?" (McManus, 2008), and "School standards must be raised" (The Dominion Post, 2009). The media's coverage of the debate conveyed the impression that it was teachers, schools and the education system, in general, who were to blame for poor literacy and numeracy skills. In this way, the media figured significantly in provoking a sense of national crisis. The fears associated with that crisis played a central role in creating a climate within which government intervention was deemed as both obvious and necessary.

The debate over national standards was further sharpened by the onset of the global recession, accompanied by rising prices and increasing unemployment. In March 2008, economists warned that the housing slump and the global credit crunch were ominous indications that New Zealand was headed towards recession. During the same month, a national press front-page article warned householders to prepare for prolonged pain with rising power and petrol prices and high mortgage rates (Watkins, 2008, p. A1). Depicting economic circumstances in this way had the effect of enticing the population into a way of thinking that change was imminent and necessary. In forecasting losses and limitations, they fostered the development and control of what was to count as productive citizenship.

Shortly before the national elections of 2008, the long-promised "crusade" to raise students' literacy and numeracy skills was launched. The strategy, it was announced, would require regular assessment of every primary/elementary student. The assessment would be measured against national standards in literacy and numeracy and would also require reporting of the results to parents. Other discourses vied for the population's attention, offering competing ways of organising and giving meaning to literacy and numeracy. Some of these discourses validated the status quo; others contested the ideas that were presented by the Government as well as the particular interests those ideas represented. These competing discourses operated simultaneously within the nation. In particular, the continuing lack of detail regarding the nature of the standards, the resourcing provided, and the implementation process itself, prompted much angst amongst the teaching profession. The media published teachers' concerns in a news item entitled "Show us details of literacy 'crusade' say teachers" (McKenzie-Minifie, 2008). In the same article, the National Party's education spokeswoman assured readers that the specifics would be finalised after the election, if and when the National Party came to power.

As election fever mounted, many were keen to express an opinion one way or another on the issue of national testing. In The Independent, a full gambit of controversial issues was canvassed, including "bulk funding"; "the 'phonics' versus whole language approach to the teaching of reading"; "zoning"; "pitiful

teachers' pay scales"; "performance-based assessment and pay"; "dumbing down of the curriculum"; "fixation with ethnic and gender balance"; "white flight from less desirable schools"; and the "whole-child centred approach to teaching" (McManus, 2008). In the view of the author:

During the last 30 years education has become a battleground between the so-called reformers (generally the ideologically-driven teacher unions and educational theorists) and market-driven activists who advocate a back-to-basics approach (generally parents and employers). (McManus, 2008, p. 8)

It is important to emphasise that practices of surveillance are critically important for consistency and continuity within any sector. They were important to the business and commercial sector, given its focus on productivity and given its long-standing support of national testing. It was no surprise that the author urged readers to "[a]dopt National's emphasis on numeracy, literacy and reading, along with nationwide assessment of primary school children to ensure they are reaching pre-determined standards" ((McManus, 2008, p. 8).

The surveillance practices of the business and commercial sector added strength to the National government's decision, on return to power, to implement a strategy of literacy and numeracy standards-based accountability. The strategy serviced a specific discourse that explicitly linked political and economic structures together. It was presented through the national press in December 2009 as follows:

Schools will have to reveal pupils' annual test scores under Government plans to raise literacy and numeracy standards... Under the law change, schools will have to provide parents with all assessment information collected about their child and must also pass on the aggregate data, which will be used to compare the quality of teaching across similar schools. That will allow the Ministry of Education to compare schools of similar decile rankings for the first time and could mean the Government targets and sanctions poorly performing schools. (Espiner, 2008, p. A1)

The report outlined to its readers the changes afoot, highlighting, in broad terms, differences and deviations from the everyday discourse of literacy and numeracy. Shortly before the Christmas break Parliament debated the Education (National Standards) Amendment Bill, in which the overarching aim was to raise standards of achievement in the compulsory sector. However, discourses within the wider community ran in

"different and even contradictory" ways (Foucault, 1984, p. 101). Responding to fears over the possibility of league tables, National's Minister of Education, Anne Tolley, pointed out that while schools would be required to report to parents, only the Government would have access to the full data set. Meanwhile, the debate continued to escalate in school staffrooms, in everyday conversation, and in the media, with little sign of common ground. A correspondent to the national press on New Years Day 2009 warned that:

Tests reveal only the knowledge that young people can display on the day, after plenty of revision on the narrow slice of the curriculum that a standardised test can include. Britain has long had a heavy regime of national standards and is now retreating from it... [E]njoyment of reading is a key indicator of success. Evidence of this can be found in many studies. (The Dominion Post, p. B4)

Nevertheless, shortly after the Act was passed, work commenced on fleshing out national standards in mathematics, reading and in writing. In their move into the highly visible public arena, the New Zealand draft standards went through several iterations and a brief consultation period prior to the anticipated distribution to schools in 2010. Faced with the reality of a set of opposing viewpoints and agendas, and working from an interest in avoiding alienation of some sectors of the electorate, the New Zealand Ministry of Education assumed the role of final arbiter in the bid to fix what would count as necessary knowledge at a specific trajectory of time. As a "new initiative", the standards sent a clear message about what was valued within the New Zealand school curriculum. Although literacy and numeracy had both previously been categorised among the list of essential learning areas within the curriculum, the rules of exchange and value had now changed. Within the new social and economic field, literacy and numeracy became the central planks of education. But more than that: as the centrepieces of citizenship, numeracy and literacy have become the cornerstones of social progress and self-fulfilment.

This process has not occurred without challenge. Predictably, the policy invited a challenge to schools in their task of delivering a "broad and balanced curriculum...without subverting the programme and heading down the path of overseas countries and moving away from where the test becomes the end in itself" (Buutveld, 2009, p. 3). There was also some disquiet expressed in the media. A feature article entitled "Standards law won't help pupils" (Rush, 2008) argued that the law changes presupposed that by making poor

performance visible by national testing, schools would be forced to become more accountable. The article went on to state:

National's Education (National Standards) Amendment Act represents smart political management but poor educational leadership. The introduction of national standards may well have dire consequences for children's learning. (p. B5)

All this illustrates Lo Bianco's (2001) contention that there is never a straightforward acceptance of any official curriculum policy. In New Zealand teachers have negotiated and contested the cultural logic of National's Education (National Standards) Amendment Act. Voicing their concerns at an annual two-day regional meeting, delegates complained: "We don't know how the national standards are going to fit in with the new curriculum." Drawing attention to contradictory realities and competing perspectives, one teacher was reported to have said: "The real scary thing for schools at the moment, is what the ministry is going to do with these results" (Morgan, 2010). Working to equalise behaviour, actions, and even thinking, in relation to the new standards, other groups, for example, the School Trustees Association, advocated for the introduction of standards, hitting out at organisations for trying to influence boards of trustees. The outcome was a war of words, with union opposition branded as "ill-informed scaremongering" (Morgan, 2010). During the discussion there was an attempt to shift the discourse from standards per se, to the way student progress was reported to parents. This came in October 2009 when Tolley was reported as saying that

at the moment I have parents coming into my electoral office showing me their reports and they don't know what they mean. What we want are reports that clearly tell parents where their child's strengths are, their weakness, and what the school is doing about it. (Beaumont, 2009, p. A2)

Notwithstanding the attempt to shift the focus of debate from national standards as such, by early 2010 the propaganda war was in full swing. In January, a lead article in the media reported that the Minister would concentrate on winning over parents, teachers and schools with a 26 million dollar "charm offensive" in response to suggestions from teachers that league tables that rated schools' performances would follow inevitably from the introduction of National Standards ("Table sure as gravity", 2010, p. 4). The Minister was quoted as saying that school boards that refused to cooperate on the policy could be sacked. This policy has the effect of regulating school boards, principals and teachers, while simultaneously constituting them. In New Zealand, the policy, in its capacity as standard-setter and, in keeping with the trappings of the Ministry as an influential governing body, is a primary instrument of disciplinary power. There are penalties for failing to keep oneself in check.

The Education (National Standards) Amendment Act can thus be thought of, in Foucauldian terms, as a major apparatus of social regulation in New Zealand. It performs both surveillance and normalising functions by disciplining intellect through testing and examinations. It is not simply intellect that is the focus of attention. The actions and interactions of school boards, principals, and teachers, in relation to numeracy and literacy, are aspects that come under the constant gaze of the Ministry. The gaze differentiates and compares. The smallest deviation from normal practice is noticed. Gaps, omissions, and extremes—all these are held up for inspection. Inevitably, perhaps, at the end of National Standards' first year of introduction into schools, the stage was set for further conflict with no resolution in sight.

CONCLUSION

Over the last two decades the spectre of underachievement in the core learning areas of literacy and numeracy has loomed larger than ever in educational discourses. Arguably, New Zealand is not alone in demonstrating how entrenched positions on the issue of nation standards in literacy and numeracy are often backed by ambitious propaganda campaigns designed to influence public opinion one way or another. Hence they shape the construction of knowledge.

In a very real sense, then, this study has revealed particular kinds of political struggles—a field mapping certain kinds of meanings of literacy and numeracy, produced for particular purposes within the very specific social and political conditions at the turn of and during the first decade of the new century. It is only through an examination of spoken and written texts of the media, of the business and commercial sector, and of politicians, viewed in relation to one another, that

we begin to see the political and strategic nature of knowledges that are still all too often considered to be either relatively independent of power. A new picture, therefore, emerges of literacy and numeracy as servicing the political economy of the state, set within the context of mobilisations of groups through which complex and ongoing social issues were invested and filtered. In short, what was revealed was the “simultaneous articulations of a dispersed and localized shifting nexus of social power” (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 1997, p. 268), surrounding the world of literacy and numeracy standards.

What is important to emphasise here is that literacy and numeracy are political objects of social administration (see Ozga, Seddon, & Popkewitz, 2006). They can be interpreted as “a problem of power produced through the production of rules and standards of truth” (Popkewitz, 1997, pp. 154–5). Thus, knowledge production is a strategic and interested activity. Since it always works through vested interests, it functions as a disciplining technology and, in that sense, is profoundly normalising. In the process, politicians, the business sector and the media, among others, inscribe the coordinates for the literate and numerate individual—changing and regulating “systems of ideas...through the organization of school knowledge” (p. 145).

The so-called shortfalls, denials and solutions were, are, and will probably long remain an ideological scapegoat for all that is perceived to be wrong with society. As Nozaki, Openshaw, and Luke (2005) have argued, most education systems worldwide have responded with a back to basics appeal, symptomatic of a renewed educational fundamentalism. Increased surveillance, set within a new audit culture, is the order of the day. Demands for increased testing and attempts to script literacy and numeracy pedagogical interactions operate through normative discourses that privilege certain fundamentalist interests, values and practices (see Walshaw, 2010).

It could be claimed that as an object of attention on many a public platform across the world, the standards debate has helped to launch a number of political and educational careers. And as Aldrich (2000) has observed, it is the “polemical style of many journalists...[that] sells more copies of newspapers” (p. 43). Certainly, in New Zealand, the debate’s increasing importance as a vote-winner that no prospective government could afford to ignore is clearly illustrated by the sharply increased government intervention noted in the period between the late 1990s and the introduction into schools of the Education (National Standards) Amendment Act in 2010. Legislating over the meaning of literacy and numeracy, the new authoritative discourse “conceal[s] [its] own invention” (Foucault, 1981, p. 49).

Finally, the problem is, as Heller (2008) argues, whether to accept the rules of the game as they are set, or to contest them. For Foucault, if there is a freedom of choice it is a freedom constrained by “a lineage of loose alliances, relations of resistance and mastery, and configurations of fluid interests...[that are] not outside the games of truth” (Blake, Smeyers, Smith, & Standish, 1998, p. 62). Whatever approach, the point is to move beyond a declinist myth that tends to celebrate and nostalgically re-imagine a history that never was.

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