

# INTERROGATING HISTORICAL DEBATES OVER STANDARDS IN PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to make a contribution to a topic in the history of mathematics education, namely standards in pedagogical practice in schools. National standards in pedagogical practice have featured prominently in the news in many countries over a long period of time. Traditionally, they have been key rallying points not only for politicians, but also for administrators, parents, and educational researchers.

In this paper I provide an account of the powerful force of crisis voiced in relation to pedagogical standards. Utilising the historical period from post -Second World War to present time, in the context of the New Zealand public education system, the paper examines how debates are characterized by sharp divisions between professional and public opinion. It explores the competing conceptions of mathematics teaching and learning underpinning these divisions, illustrating the ways in which these conceptions combine to create a conviction that public education is in crisis, thus necessitating a decisive response from officialdom. The paper also examines the ways in which the debate obscures the fact that underpinning rival claims are radically different, possibly irresolvable conceptions of the purpose of education.

The historical data are drawn from a range of sources that informed a larger study within which this project is nested (see Openshaw & Walshaw, 2010). The dataset included archival accessions, publications and policy documents and was complemented by material from contemporary professional literature, and media sources. When this dataset was critically interrogated and triangulated, what was revealed were the ways in which notions of good mathematics pedagogy and sound mathematical benchmarks are historically constructed, and why they are so vigorously contested.

The paper contributes to informed historical debate over standards in mathematics pedagogy in two distinct ways. First, it highlights the reality of competing truths. Foucault (1980) has long argued for the social construction of knowledge, where truth itself is an historical production. Second, the paper aims to highlight the ways in which various interest groups utilize particular versions of “the truth” to shape the debate and to shift the parameters around wider processes relating to mathematics education. Thus, an important contention put forward is that mathematics curriculum, teaching and student achievement all need to be viewed within the context of alliances between key groupings of people.

## REFERENCES

- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. (Trans: Gordon, C. *et al.*). New York: Pantheon.
- Openshaw, R., & Walshaw, M. (2010). *Are our standards slipping? Debates over literacy and numeracy standards in New Zealand since 1945*. Wellington: NZCER.