

**Ko te tamaiti te pūtake o te kaupapa
The Child - the Heart of the Matter**

Ms. Karen Sewell
Chief Review Officer
The New Zealand Education Review Office

Introduction

Education is the foundation for the nation's future. Recognising this, New Zealand Governments allocate a significant part of their expenditure each year towards providing young people in New Zealand with access to a pre-tertiary education.

Schools and early childhood services currently account for about 10 per cent of the New Zealand Government's expenditure. This is mostly through funding of providers responsible for the actual delivery of education.

One of the paths to reducing inequalities and becoming a highly skilled nation is through high quality achievement and learning outcomes in pre-tertiary education.

The most direct involvement here is that of the students and the education providers. The Education Review Office (ERO) is not itself an education provider.

However, ERO reviews and reports on the performance of the providers - schools, e review role, ERO must make a positive contribution towards delivery of the highest quality pre-tertiary education to all young New Zealanders.

ERO influences and contributes to government outcomes in three broad directions:

Parents and communities

ERO reports regularly provide independent information on the quality of education being offered by schools and early childhood providers and inform the expectations that parents and others in the community have of education providers, enabling them to make informed choices. Well-informed parents and communities are able to endorse good practice as well as exerting pressure for improvement.

Ministry of Education and other government agencies

ERO review reports, both at the local and national level, provide information on how education policies are being implemented and the impact on the quality of education delivery.

In the course of its reviews ERO may also identify areas of risk or failure that require attention. Although the new ERO review processes enable a greater degree of provider input and are therefore of more assistance to individual providers, it still falls to other agencies such as the Ministry of Education to provide targeted interventions in response to serious risk or failure.

Education providers

Regular external review identifies strengths and areas for improvement. It gives schools and early childhood education providers the opportunity to confirm the direction in which they are moving as well as the incentive to demonstrate progress since the last review.

The new procedures that ERO has implemented involve the individual schools and early childhood education providers in the review process. ERO reports provide information about the quality of education being provided, the quality of governance and management and compliance with legal requirements. They also make recommendations for improvement.

The purpose of ERO

The purpose of the Education Review Office is to provide external evaluation that contributes to high quality education for young New Zealanders.

ERO does this through:

- reviewing the performance of schools and early childhood services to help bring about educational improvement; and
- providing review information to parents, communities and the Government to assist decision making.

ERO's national education evaluation reports and individual review reports on schools and early childhood services are used by education providers, by parents and communities, and by the Government and its education policy advisers.

ERO's national reports provide nation-wide information on the quality of education service delivery, issues in education service delivery, good practice, barriers to learning and the performance of target groups.

ERO's Operational Context

Expectations of the pre-tertiary sector

ERO carries out its evaluations in an environment in which there are changing expectations of the education sector. These include:

- increasing emphasis on the role of education in the development of a knowledge society;
- continued emphasis on the role of education in addressing social inequities;
- increasing emphasis on improving the performance of the education sector through building capacity in self review, management, human resources and curriculum development;
- growing demands for high quality teaching;
- an increasing demand for teachers to have high expectations of the achievement of all students;
- demand for clearer standards for the quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training;
- greater use of technology in teaching and learning programmes; and
- an increasing expectation from Iwi/Maori that they will be consulted and more involved in making decisions about the delivery and evaluation of education for Maori.

Expectations of the review process

ERO's evaluations are also influenced by expectations about its own role and functions:

- there are increasing community expectations in terms of the outcomes of the reviewing and reporting process;
- there are expectations for more frequent reviews and review reports;
- there are expectations that ERO will engage with Iwi/Maori stakeholders and develop and maintain positive and effective relationships with them; and
- there are increases in the accountability required of government departments; and
- there is emphasis on coordinating the activities of government agencies.

ERO as an Independent External Evaluator

One of the key features of ERO is its statutory independence. Its approach emphasises the importance of a transparent process, in which the credibility of evaluation findings is enhanced by having an independent, external evaluator.

Evaluation literature generally perceives two important advantages associated with external evaluation. These are the objectivity associated with externality and the ability to maintain a comparative perspective. In New Zealand Review Officers are not responsible for the development or delivery of the education programmes in schools and are therefore able to apply independent judgement in evaluating the quality of education that schools provide.

In addition, reviewers have observed a very wide range of practice and are well placed to recognise effective teaching and learning, across a range of educational settings. This also means that reviewers can have a valuable input into the development of recommendations for improvement.

On the other hand, external evaluators are less likely to be familiar with the circumstances of the institutions that they evaluate, and may lack particular subject or contextual knowledge relevant to the evaluation. For these reasons, dialogue with boards of trustees, school managers, teachers and the school community is important as a means of ensuring that review findings are accurate and verifiable, and that errors are not made.

ERO's approach to reviews is based on its understanding of evaluation theory.

Some of the features of ERO's current reviews, such as the emphasis on the school's participation in determining the focus of reviews, are new developments. They reflect a shift in ERO's approach following the recommendations of the *Ministerial Review of the Roles and Responsibilities of the Education Review Office* in 2001. Other features, such as an emphasis on an evidence-based approach to evaluation, have been an integral part of ERO's approach since its inception in 1989. ERO has used evaluation theory to make informed decisions on where it should change its methodology as well as where it should keep things unchanged.

ERO's Dual Purposes: Accountability and Improvement

ERO is unique among New Zealand government departments in that its core role is evaluation. For ERO, evaluation involves reaching informed judgements about the quality of education received by students. ERO's methodology focuses on investigating student achievement and aspects of service delivery that are likely to impact on student achievement. ERO evaluation reports have two main purposes: to contribute to improvements in the quality of education and accountability.

The improvement focus involves assisting schools and early childhood services to improve their performance through feedback based on the findings of external evaluation. Evaluation for accountability purposes involves reviewing the responsibilities and obligations of the managers of early childhood services and school boards of trustees and reporting on whether these obligations have been met.

The *Ministerial Review* (2001) recommended that the focus of ERO reviews be on educational improvement, but that ERO also retain responsibility for reviewing compliance functions.

ERO aims to achieve this by implementing review processes that focus on improvement, while at the same time continuing to reach independent judgements about the quality of education provided to young New Zealanders.

However, there is an inherent tension between accountability and improvement functions, since both have different audiences and purposes.

What ERO Evaluates

What ERO evaluates reflects the:

- focus of ERO reviews on student achievement; and
- ERO's investigation of the way in which programmes and processes within schools and early childhood services contribute to student achievement.

Summative and formative evaluation

Evaluation theorists generally distinguish between a summative process of evaluation and a formative one. There are serious debates about the appropriateness of attempting to carry out both approaches at one time.

It is important for the tensions between these approaches to be recognised and addressed as effectively as possible. For example, in many cases it will be sensible to focus on the schools' processes for self management of compliance requirements (a formative approach) rather than identifying specific aspects of non-compliance.

Different types of evaluation can be categorised as:

- outcomes (evaluating results and impacts);
- programmes (evaluating processes and systems); and
- policy (evaluating policies that underpin programmes, processes and systems).

ERO is involved in all three types of evaluation.

Evaluation of outcomes

ERO's primary interest is in the outcomes, results and impact of schooling and participation in early childhood services. Its approach is reflected in its whakataukī: *Ko te tamaiti te pūtake o te kaupapa : The child – the heart of the matter* which emphasises the importance of the child as ERO's central focus.

ERO's approach to education reviews focuses on student achievement. Student achievement is used as an explicit reference point at different stages in the review process.

This approach has its theoretical basis in impact evaluation. Impact evaluation is undertaken to find out whether or not a programme

is working by determining its actual outcomes and comparing these with the intended outcomes. In education, the main intended outcome is improved student achievement. Thus an impact evaluation evaluates schools on the basis of the educational standards or progress achieved by its students. Most examples of impact evaluation are strongly summative in origin.

Evaluation of programmes

Because there is no general agreement on specific education outcomes in the pre-tertiary sector ERO uses programmes, processes and systems as the basis for its evaluations.

This approach has its basis in programme evaluation. The evaluation of curriculum delivery and its reporting in ERO reviews is essentially programme evaluation.

One issue here is that programme evaluation for summative purposes is dependent on a clear definition of the programme, including delivery standards. When the delivery standards are not prescribed within the programme description the evaluator has to establish standards against which the delivery will be evaluated. To ensure consistent judgements in matters of governance and management, curriculum and student support, it is necessary to establish clear criteria and standards.

Theory-driven evaluation is of interest to ERO because it may shed light on how to achieve a focus on student outcomes and issues of causation in the context of a particular institution. Potential strengths of this approach include the opportunity, through discussions with stakeholders, of better understanding the alignment between programme goals and consumer needs (student learning needs) and for considering causal relationships within the programmes. Such an approach should also assist in developing recommendations for improvement.

Evaluation of policies

Improving the quality of education is a driver and an objective in the development of much current educational policy. The evaluation of that policy and the education system itself is one of the key factors that contribute to improvement in education. Any measures taken to improve education have to be based on valid, reliable and balanced information

and evaluation is a powerful tool for both collecting and disseminating such information.

ERO contributes to the evaluation of policies both as they are developed and through providing information on how well policies are working in practice. The use of evaluation in policy advice is a relatively new field in New Zealand, in which ERO is well placed to make an active contribution.

How ERO Evaluates

How ERO evaluates includes:

- the basis on which ERO reviews are conducted - using a *Manual of Standard Procedures* and a *Code of Ethical Conduct for Review Officers*;
- an evidence based approach to evaluations;
- the use of evaluation criteria to inform judgements;
- a participatory approach to education reviews, in which ERO discusses the focus of reviews and develops recommendations with key stakeholders; and
- emphasis on developing links between external evaluation and self review.

Standards

Explicit standards of practice and behaviour are critical to successful evaluation.

The *Manual of Standard Procedures for Accountability Reviews (Schools)* sets out ERO's evaluation methodology and provides a consistent framework to be followed in conducting reviews. The standard procedures allow for a flexible approach, reflecting the circumstances of individual schools, but also provide Review Officers with clear guidelines and resources so that schools undergo broadly compatible evaluation experiences.

The *Code of Ethical Conduct for Review Officers* identifies expectations and requirements that are specific to ERO. In particular, core ethical values as well as standards of competence, independence and process are defined in the code.

Because Review Officers are required to follow ERO's standard procedures and code of ethical conduct, schools experience evaluations based on a consistent and explicit methodology.

Evidence-based methodology

Review Officers are required to base their judgements and conclusions on substantive data that can be verified as being accurate and reliable. In addition, Review Officers have a responsibility to outline and explain the evidential basis for key review findings.

Evaluation criteria are used by ERO Review Officers during their investigations and in forming their judgements about the quality of education services provided by schools. Review Officers use these criteria to make informed evaluative judgements.

These facets of evaluation methodology – explicit, evidence-based methodology, the use of evaluation criteria and adherence to published ethical standards – are key features of evaluation described in the literature. Together they provide assurance about the integrity of the evaluation process, afford a measure of protection to the evaluator and enhance the credibility of evaluation findings.

Participation of stakeholders

ERO's education reviews involve an approach in which key stakeholders are involved at different stages in the review process.

- At the beginning of the review, ERO discusses with the board of trustees, staff and (if appropriate) members of the community school priorities identified during self review and how these will be reflected in the focus of the review.
- During the review, schools have the opportunity to nominate a *Friend of the School* to contribute to the review.
- Towards the end of the review, before the report is confirmed, ERO works with schools to identify recommendations for change arising from its findings.

At the national level, ERO has established a joint work programme with the Ministry of Education and is working to ensure that the Ministry and other policy agencies can be more actively involved in discussions

about the focus of national evaluations and in developing recommendations based on ERO findings.

Evaluation theory and stakeholders

In evaluation literature, *participatory* or *collaborative evaluation* is regarded as a means of establishing better engagement with stakeholders, accessing a wider range of reliable data and establishing a basis for recommendations for improvement. The evaluator retains the function of reaching independent judgements about the quality of the programme.

ERO has adopted an enhanced participatory approach because it considers that this will lead to its evaluations focusing more directly on student achievement and relevant causal issues. It should also help to ensure reports are used constructively to bring about improvements.

The use of ERO's evaluations

One of the reasons ERO has adopted a participatory approach to reviews is because it wants its evaluations to be better used to inform decision-making. This applies both to evaluations of individual institutions and to national evaluations intended to inform Government decision makers.

Utilisation-focused evaluation is based on the view that evaluations should be useful and should result in action aimed at improvement. According to Patton (1997):¹

The central challenge...remains doing evaluations that are useful and are actually used.

Utilisation-focused evaluation focuses on intended use by intended users. Evaluations are to be judged by their utility and actual use.

An utilisation-focused approach involves the evaluator accepting responsibility for establishing commitment by the intended users to both the evaluation process and the use of the results of the evaluation. This commitment is considered to be essential as research has shown that intended users of evaluative information are more likely to use the evaluation results if they are actively involved, if they understand the evaluative process and feel ownership of the findings.

¹ Patton: page xiv "Utilisation-Focused Evaluation" Sage 1997

Links between external review and self review

Evaluating schools and early childhood centres is an intervention that contributes to improving the quality of education. A key feature of ERO reviews is an integrated approach to external evaluation and self review, through helping to develop schools' capability in self review and incorporating self review information in its own reviews. So in evaluating the system as a whole how external evaluation and self-review complement each other and what role we expect the schools to play in this is very important. David Nevo considers that the dialogue between self-review and external evaluation is the most powerful tool for achieving educational improvement.

ERO's approach draws on the literature about the relationship between external and internal evaluations.

For example, Nevo (2000)² observes that *everybody seems to hate external evaluation while nobody trusts internal evaluation*. He argues that both types of evaluation are important and can benefit each other.

Conclusion

In the early 1990s ERO adopted a summative approach to evaluation well suited to evaluation for accountability purposes, but less focused on helping to bring about educational improvement.

The theory and practice of evaluation has developed considerably over the last 10 years. At the same time, accountability in educational institutions has improved enabling ERO to shift away from a focus on compliance towards a focus on performance.

The purpose of ERO reviews (contributing to student achievement) remains unchanged. ERO continues to reach independent, evidence-based judgements about the quality of education provided to young New Zealanders.

² Nevo: page 58 School Evaluation: Internal or External? In International Seminar on the Effect of School Evaluation: Searching for the Effect of School Evaluation on the Quality Improvement of Schooling 2000

However, there has been a shift in thinking about how ERO can best contribute to school improvement. ERO's new approach to reviews is informed by a variety of theoretical approaches that together have brought about significant changes in how it interacts with and gathers information from education policy makers, boards of trustees, school and centre staff, parents and students.