



Newsletter

A return to teacher bashing

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Kia ora tatou, talofa lava, malo e lelei, greetings.

The Education Review Office national report on reading and writing released yesterday (16th Dec) sees a return of 'teacher bashing' to the agenda. Despite the fact that ERO has taken up a far more positive role in recent years, this national report has a sting in the tail for schools, teachers, leaders and Boards.

Those who have been involved in ERO reviews will know that school reviews are not an exact science. Besides the compulsory review of 'areas of national interest', there is currently significant latitude given by ERO to schools in framing both the review focus and some of the recommendations.

ERO review methodology is essentially one of triangulation - "don't tell us, show us!" Of course, you tell, you show, and they watch and listen. This is why the Friend of The School has become such a critical role, because this is the person with 'ERO' eyes and ears, but who is on the school team. This is a person who can correct misinterpretations and fill the gaps that ERO sometimes finds.

That nearly one third of teachers, school leaders and/or Boards have been found

wanting demonstrates that ERO teams across the country did not hear, read or see what they were looking for in all of the 212 schools reviewed. It is however not logically necessary that 1/3rd of schools, teachers or Boards in New Zealand are failing. Whilst there must be instances of genuinely poor or sub-standard practice, some of the ERO conclusions will be based on the quality of data or substance of comments made to their teams. The ERO conclusion that teachers are intentionally setting low standards or that school leaders are hiding results from their Boards sounds like teacher bashing however.

It is interesting to note a pattern of language usage in this national report - in this case, the ERO use of 'confidence', which appears 15 times in the report. This usage is applied mostly to teachers, who are said to 'lack confidence' in areas ERO has misgivings. However, if teachers 'lack confidence', there must be reasons, and those I would like to suggest are a lack of experience, knowledge or guidance, or a combination of these.

ERO found several instances of Beginning Teachers (BTs) working at the Year 1 and 2 levels, which it clearly disapproves of. No doubt, that will have some Principals scratching their heads - if a BT is a junior school teacher, where else will this person be placed? ERO considers Year 1 and 2 to be critical - too critical indeed to justify placing a BT in front of. So are the other years not critical too?

In particular, Principals and Boards of low decile schools which often struggle to attract teachers will acknowledge that they may have no option but to place inexperienced teachers (either BT or immigrant) into junior classes. However, this comment ignores the fact that there are many highly effective BTs and immigrant teachers who work at that level with competence and skill.

It seems ERO fails to understand that successive New Zealand governments have, over the last decade or so, watered-down teacher preparation programmes. In particular, the shift away from practical diploma programmes to more theoretical degree programmes has provided enhanced qualifications at the expense of the skills and knowledge of expert teaching.

Government marketisation of teacher education has also allowed too many tertiary providers to offer teacher education programmes, some of dubious quality. Government policy has effectively made the schools responsible for the completion of teacher education with the 2 year BT internship programme. Not all schools are equally able to support BTs and immigrant teachers. Is it any wonder then that some teachers may 'lack confidence'? This situation is only likely to be exacerbated next year with the introduction of national standards and the paring back of school support services.

It is for school leaders to provide their teachers with guidance. The adequate

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and effective analysis of assessment data and action going forward is generally a leadership function rather than being the responsibility of teachers. However, it must be noted that school leaders are flooded with paper-work and compliance, much of which is focused on meeting ERO and Ministry of Education expectations.

The ERO claims that two thirds of schools have 'little evidence of systematic monitoring in Years 1 and 2' requires some contextualisation.

Most examples used by ERO of ineffective practice occurred in small schools, which could be small sole teacher schools. These isolated schools face incredible challenges, but do not represent the full range of New Zealand schools.

Several ERO examples of 'ineffective practice' were quoted as occurring in low decile schools. Experience suggests that these are the schools that face enormous challenges, probably more so than mid and high decile schools face. Typically, leaders in these schools are stretched almost to breaking-point, and for them very little comes easy.

In an ideal world, an absence of analysed data, thorough assessment programmes or robust reporting to the Board should be inexcusable. However, for many small and low decile schools in New Zealand, their world is far from ideal. That there are nevertheless very many examples of highly effective low decile and small schools with inspiring leaders and teachers and delightful students who are achieving well, is a testament to the efforts of those working in these schools.

It seems this latest national ERO report overlooks that point.

Business Activity in 2009

Jan - Dec 09

Business Activity

- O n - g o i n g N Z C implementation work (whole staff TOD; workshops & committee work)
- Strategic Planning (Principal & Board of Trustees level)
- Principal appraisal
- Friend of the School (ERO Review)
- Board of Trustees training & development
- New Principal search & select (working with Board of Trustees)
- B e g i n n i n g T e a c h e r workshops

Jan - Dec 09

Client Schools

Kaikohe Christian School
Kaikohe West School
Whau Valley School
Whangarei Intermediate
Wesley College
Park Estate School
Elim Christian College
St Pius X School, Glen Innes
St Mary's School, Avondale
St Ignatius School, St Heliers
St Dominic's College, Henderson
James Cook High School
Holy Family School

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- Middle Managers need support and guidance
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