

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Who will guard the guardians themselves? An institutional evaluation of the New Zealand State's educational 'watchdog' agency: the Education Review Office (ERO).

Abstract

ERO states it is an "... internationally recognised leader in education evaluation" (ERO, 1998a: 31). ERO is the State's agent of accountability or quality assurance in the education system. It evaluates the "performance of all providers in the pre-tertiary education sector in terms of their effectiveness in the education of young people and their accountability for resources" (ERO, 1998b: 2).

In 1997 the agency was the centre of unprecedented interest and critique when it was the subject of two external reviews (one a Ministerial and the other by secondary the other by the secondary teachers' industrial organisation). This year it will be subjected to another Ministerial Review by the new Labour-led Coalition Government.

The organisation has a stated policy of transparency and public accountability, for example "openness to public scrutiny is a stringent test for the Office" (ERO, 1998a: 31). This claim and other issues concerning the concepts of accountability, surveillance and self-review will be investigated within the context of educational evaluation. ERO has been an active supporter of neo-liberal policies such as increasing marketisation and managerialism in education and it will be evaluated as to its changing practices over the decade of its existence.

Introduction

Somewhat ambitiously (in hindsight), it was my intention in this paper to have had access to the latest ministerial review of the Education Review Office (Rodger, Holden, Meade, Miller & Smith, 2000/2001) to make some preliminary comments about what these authors had recommended to Government about the fate of ERO and how it might be transformed. Alas, whilst the commissioned report was due to ready for the Minister of Education (the purchaser/principal) by the end of the year, there have been no public pronouncements by either the chairperson of the review team (Stan Rodger), nor the Minister about the report's contents. Perhaps I should not have been surprised given that it has been reported that the Labour-Alliance Coalition Government have commissioned a "long list of reviews, inquiries, investigations and explorations promised or undertaken by the Government - a list which stands at more than 300. National believes it will cost more than \$33 million to complete them all" (*Evening Post*, 2000a: 16). Furthermore, I should not have been surprised that the review results had not been released given the often slow response of the education bureaucracies. For example in mid last year Cassie (1999: 2) reported that:

Midway through the year, education policy appears to be in limbo with significant failing to appear in parliament and no sign of the three promised white paper policy documents. ... The timeline to date is: ...

- October 1997: Teacher Education Green Paper.
- May 1998: Assessment Green Paper.

... Smith said in February that the teacher education white paper was due in March, but by late April had revised that to mid-May and this week his office reported the minister was still considering issues relating to the paper. Similarly there was no date for the assessment white paper which Smith said in February would be out in May (ibid.).

Therefore not forearmed, nor privy to any leaked or additional documentation from the panel or the educational bureaucrats, all I can supply in this paper is factual information on the background to the review, some musings and speculations on the outcome, and some strategies, I as an educational researcher and practitioner would like to see implemented to transform ERO into a more user-friendly agency for its stake-holders. Furthermore, in a year's time I would hope to be able to write that the review has made a tangible difference in transforming the ERO into a valuable real education evaluation agency with credibility with educators and that it is improving collegial relationships with schools and early childhood centres and actually achieving its mission statement and strategic intentions.

In recommending some strategies for improvement to the efficacy and direction in which I believe ERO should be heading, I have been drawn to the conclusions and informed by researchers in the United Kingdom reporting on policies they would like to see implemented to reign-in ERO's UK counterpart, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in England and Wales. I have used some of the recommendations from recent British text by Ferguson, Earley, Fidler & Ouston (2000) which make suggestions for changing the current system of inspection in UK under the OFSTED regime, and applied these to the Aotearoa/New Zealand context.

The paper is structured in six parts. The first provides an overview of ERO's changing position, and transition. The second aspect provides a background rationale for the review and outlines the terms of reference and appointment of the panel. What constitute the third section is a brief discussion of the symmetry between the ERO and OFSTED and their mutually-supportive strategies. The fourth and fifth sections are assessments of ERO's efficacy as an organisation and provide examples of the positive and alternatively negative ways in which ERO operates. The sixth and final section provides possible scenarios and strategies in which ERO might adapt and it provides a direction in which ERO might progress from here.

Whilst not wanting to diminish the importance of the early childhood sector in any way, I have chosen to focus this paper on the compulsory schooling sector which is my interest and essentially for manageability purposes.

Overview of ERO's Changing Position

This section contains a brief overview of ERO's history and transformations (more detailed analyses are provided in Smith, 1997). This is followed by a section highlighting a description of ERO in transition and one which outlines the language used by this organisation.

Brief history: formation and transformation

ERO was conceived as part of the *Tomorrow's Schools* (1988) reforms. It began with an operating budget of \$27.5 million and a personnel complement of 356 (Smith, 1994). The office was downsized after the Lough Report (1990). Currently the organisation has approximately 165 staff (approximately 100 of which are review officers, however, they have recently been on a national recruitment drive to employ more reviewers, see *New Zealand*

Education Review, 2000: 13). The latest operating budget for the 2000-2001 year will be \$20.4 million (ERO, 2000a: 5)

It has been my central contention that ERO was spawned by the neo-liberal and managerial revolution which has markedly changed the nature of New Zealand's public sector over the last 15 years (Smith, 1994, 1997). It was established essentially for accountability purposes, and represents a new form of state control in line with the devolutionary reforms occurring throughout other areas of the state, with the new public management techniques employed for supposedly greater efficiency (Boston, Martin, Pallot and Walsh, 1996; Kelsey 1997, cited in Thrupp and Smith, 1999). Furthermore, ERO's contested evolution as an agent of managerial accountability has been simultaneously one of the most admired and most hated aspects of the post-Picot reforms. In its own 'New Right' terms ERO has been an extremely successful government agency, emerging relatively unscathed out of major reviews of its activities (Thrupp & Smith, 1999: 186).

ERO has had a controversial and turbulent history since its inception in 1989 (see Codd, 1994; Smith, 1994, 1997, 1998; Gordon, 1995; McKenzie, 1995, Thrupp, 1997 and Thrupp & Smith, 1999). ERO has championed the exposure of failing schools in recent years as Thrupp (1997: 145) noted. It has been the recipient of two major governmental reviews, the first in 1990 (Lough, 1990) and the second more recently in late 1997 (Austin, Parata-Blane & Edwards, 1997). It has also been subject to two recent 'independent' reviews by major educational organisations, the New Zealand Principals' Federation (see Wylie/NZPF, 1997) and the Post Primary Teachers' Association (Robertson, et al., 1997).

There was an announcement pre-election 1999 that as part of the Labour party policy that ERO would again be reviewed if it became the government (Clark, 1999, McLoughlin, 1999). There was some election-year proposals to reign it in by merging it with the Ministry of Education (ibid.). The current Minister of Education (Trevor Mallard) did announce in December 1999 that the new government would be seeking to carry out a review of ERO covering its work practices, and whether it was the best approach to monitoring education quality (Mallard, 1999 cited in Cassie, 1999: 1).

It was noted in *The Evening Post* (2000a: 16) recently under the headline 'ERO to face its own review' that:

The Education Review Office's (ERO) stand-alone status might be under threat with the announcement of a \$400,000 review. Education Minister Trevor Mallard told Parliament's education and science select committee the review - an election promise - would look at ERO's place in the education sector.

It will be interesting to observe whether the outcomes from the proposed review will transform the organisation in quantifiable ways, as it has been my contention that the previous Ministerial review of ERO was merely a cosmetic 'legitimation' exercise (Smith, 1997).

ERO in transition?

The management of ERO are very media savvy and also reasonably clever about reading public and education sector reactions to the politicised context in which they operate. As a long-standing observer/researcher on ERO and its operations it is a difficult and on-going project to constantly chronicle the increasing number of changes to ERO operations. The terrain gets transformed very quickly within education, in some instances I and other

researchers have critiqued aspects of ERO's practices only to discover that the policy or operations have suddenly changed and the observations are no longer valid.

In relation to these points ERO documentation is illuminating, for example "[O]rganisations that are successful cannot be static. They must be open and responsive to the needs and challenges of the environment in which they operate" (ERO, 1997a: 41). This statement can be interpreted in a multitude of ways, firstly that change is important for dynamic organisations, and that they want to be seen to adapting to new contexts in education. An alternative interpretation is that ERO changes tact so rapidly in order to thwart criticism. In this regard I have previously noted (Smith, 1997) that they adapted some policies in order to pre-empt some of the issues that may have been raised in the Ministerial review (Austin et al., 1997) in order to highlight that certain concerns, or issues were already being addressed.

I would contend this is an example of ERO correctly reading the changing political terrain in Aotearoa/New Zealand. What might have been unpalatable to educators under the previous government with its deliberate policies aimed at increasing competition and marketisation of education supported and perhaps I might say even encouraged by a melding of philosophies between senior National Ministers and ERO executive managers - is now no longer the case.

ERO's uses managerialist-bureaucratic language to describe its purpose and essentially its philosophy. It is noted in ERO's documentation that the organisation's the primary purpose and core business are to:

... support and promote improvement in the quality of education by providing regular, independent, high quality evaluative reports on the pre-tertiary education sector for:

(ERO, 1999a: 1)

ERO's stated strategic intentions are "to add value to the quality of New Zealand education; to increase stakeholder satisfaction; [and] to maintain recognised professional autonomy" (ERO, 1998a: 3-4). Furthermore, it is noted in the latest *ERO Departmental Forecast Report 2000/2001* that "the services it provides are impartial, ethical, reliable and fair" (ERO, 2000a: 3).

None of these terms are neutral they display a certain set of cores values (for elaboration see Smith, 2000a). The organisation prides itself on its objectivity, transparency and accountability through the publication of all its reports. In the UK context Ferguson et al. (2000: 5) note of OFSTED:

Although school inspection is said to be 'independent', it is perhaps more appropriate, on occasions, to note its role as an arm of the state which has been created to ensure compliance.

The search for high standards through the market mechanism and competitive tendering is an important feature of the new inspection system and the publicity that attends a critical inspection report supposedly helps to empower the consumer as a force of change. So powerful are those forces for centrally induced changes that they cannot be ignored and the prospect of an impending inspection is sufficient to make teachers and heads feel apprehensive.

Similar claims have been levelled at ERO by (Thrupp, 1997; Robertson et al., 1997; Thrupp, 1998 and Smith, 1998). With this as a background this led Thrupp & Smith (1999: 186) to conclude that ERO is a successful agency in its own new right terms. However, we cautioned:

Irrespective of how successful ERO has been over the last decade in managerial terms, we have argued that its success in a more clearly educational sense is not as certain because it has to be seen against a background where potentially important problems have often been ignored. ... we think there is an urgent need for further external investigation of ERO's work and its impact, perhaps taking as a starting point the unaddressed concerns raised by the earlier reviews. What is required however is not just surveys of stakeholder or public opinion but careful, intensive studies carried out by suitably skilled and qualified researchers.

There was certainly considerable dissatisfaction with ERO's performance prior to the previous Ministerial review of ERO. For example, as Wylie (1997: 132) observed public expression of disquiet lay behind the government review of ERO. A similar claim was made by Robertson, et al., 1997a: 17) who noted that "it was perceived by PPTA that negative public and professional reactions to the work of ERO had reached a level which could no longer be ignored".

There was considerable frustration in the education sector that only small changes to ERO occurred as a result of the \$300,000 Austin Review (Smith, 1997; 1998 and Thrupp & Smith, 1999). This tension was I believe, intensified by the perceived strong philosophical congruence between the National Government as principal and ERO as accountability agent. Whilst National was in power - ERO's position remained both stable and safe.

As the fortunes of the previous coalition-government waned so too did ERO's grip over the education sector. Whilst I am not suggesting that it was Thrupp & Smith's call to action that prompted a response from the then major opposition party (soon to become incoming government), the Labour party certainly had closer historical education and union sector links and powerful allies who were critical of ERO's stance. Furthermore, both the shadow Prime Minister and shadow Minister for Educational publicly expressed their disquiet with ERO and suggested it needed reviewing.

Whilst it might be viewed as cheap political point-scoring and an interesting strategy calling on parents (as consumers?) to try to influence government policy, the former Minister of Education Nick Smith recently noted:

This Government is setting a dangerous precedent in trying to silence the messenger. I urge parents to participate in the review and fight against the scrapping of ERO. ... Mr Mallard should get on with raising standards and ensuring excellence in our education system, not putting the ERO on the chopping block because his teacher union friends don't like what it sometimes says.

(National Party Press Release, 2000)

Whilst Labour had campaigned on reviewing ERO whilst in opposition, and discussed it again once it became part of a coalition government - it appeared to become less of a priority at least in its public pronouncements on education. It was not until late June 2000 that the review was given a higher profile outside of educational media (it was mentioned in December 1999 in the *NZER*). However, the announcement of the costing and priorities

were not published in the mainstream media until August when the *Evening Post* (2000a). Some nine months had passed in the meantime, with still no terms of reference or information on the composition of the panel.

Furthermore, there was nearly another month's delay (till the end of August) before this information was publicly available. The next section outlines the background, terms of reference and appointing of the panel.

New ERO review 2000: background

Some background and overview information has already been provided above, thus I will begin with the announcement of the appointing of the review team.

The review team

The review team was announced in a *Government Press Release* on the 30 August, 2000. It was reported that:

Education Minister Trevor Mallard today announced the membership of the Government's Ministerial Review of the Education Review Office. The Review will be chaired by former Minister ... Stan Rodger, who has extensive experience in state sector functions and structure, and will report back to the Government by the end of the year.

Other members will be Royal Foundation for the Blind CEO, Jane Holden, educational consultant and former director of the NZCER, Anne Meade, industrial and employment specialist Alan Miller, and Academic Dean and Director of the School of Maori Performing Arts, Barry Smith.

The review team will begin their investigation next week into the role, functions and placement of the Education Review Office. The purpose of the review is to:

Ensure there is an effective audit and support system for schools and early childhood centres;

Investigate best practice benchmarking systems for school and centre evaluation;

Investigate how best to ensure close liaison between ERO and the Ministry of Education so that appropriate follow up is provided to schools'

Investigate whether there would be efficiency or effectiveness gains in amalgamating ERO and the Ministry of Education.

The review team are experienced in both education and the public sector management, there is a reasonable gender and ethnic balance amongst the panellist. Having a number of educationists with international research experience and integrity will I believe, add to its credibility amongst academics and practitioners. However, it is difficult not to speculate and pre-empt their findings, nor to attribute too much power and influence to individuals, but the chairperson has a vested interest in that he was one of the principal architects of the state sector reforms, like Margaret Austin who was one of the third Labour Government front

bench when *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms were enacted. It would also with such a mixed panel be difficult to predict what the outcomes of the review might be.

In addition the terms of reference are far more flexible and open than the previous one's from the Austin Report. This panel was hampered by the two stringent provisions, firstly, that ERO remain in business as a separate crown entity, and secondly that fiscal neutrality be maintained.

The actual Terms of Reference for the current review were gazetted in October and these are outlined below:

Preamble:

Given the previous work on ERO, the focus of this review will be on external evaluation and follow-up actions, including structures and responsibilities.

Tasks:

- Evaluate the role and extent of external evaluation that would improve the effectiveness of school and early childhood services-based education, and recommend on external evaluation models suitable for Kaupapa Maori and mainstream settings.
- Advise on the relationships between external evaluations and self-reviews and other processes to enhance school and early childhood service performance.
 - (a) Advise on the link between external evaluation and follow-up actions that would enhance the effectiveness of school and early childhood service-based education.
 - (b) Advise on the effective linkages between those conducting external evaluations and those Government agencies with responsibilities for school and early childhood education.
 - (c) Advise on structure, roles and responsibilities of those involved in external evaluation and follow-up actions to support school and early childhood service improvement.

(Ministerial Review of ERO, 2000, *Education Gazette*, p. 19)

As can be seen in the terms of reference in line with the Government's 'Closing the Gaps' policies and strategies where Maori education is a priority. Moreover the issue of follow-up actions is noted on several occasions signaling this as significant issue. This may be because of the fact that there are annually increasing numbers of schools and centres getting Discretionary Accountability Review reports, or alternatively, finding new ways in which to usefully support schools and centres which get a 'poor/bad' report and require assistance.

Furthermore, there are explicit links between self-review and external review and ways in which there can be closer liaison between the Ministry of Education and ERO. Some potential strategies will be outlined in later sections.

The next section outlines the growing international linkages of external evaluation/inspections agencies, with a particular focus on ERO and OFSTED whose practices have been mutually informing.

Inspection internationalisation: the mutual influence of OFSTED and ERO

OFSTED/ERO Connections

This section contains more of a sketch-plan than a fully-fledged overview and analyses. It is still under-developed and requires considerable work, data and conceptualising some of the material is covered in more detail in Smith (2000a). Both Thrupp (1998) ERO in their own documentation, and Offices of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools in England and Wales (1995) have highlighted the close-links between these organisations.

In mourning the demise of the former HMI (inspectorate) and contrasting it with the replacement agency in the UK, MacDonald (2000: 21) noted:

The highly respected, professional and independent schools inspectorate was decimated, its function of monitoring schools largely taken over by a new, ad hoc inspectorate chosen from a centrally approved list and paid daily rates to carry out periodic evaluations of individual school compliance and performance. Thus failing schools would be identified, publicly shamed and threatened with closure, much like a bankrupt business.

Whilst not a direct replication, a similar situation occurred in NZ with *Tomorrow's Schools*, the Education Act of 1989 and its countless amendments and the increasing power and influence of ERO. In relation to the replacement of the Inspectorate by ERO many educationists have lamented upon the differences in approach to inspection and advice between these two quantitatively different organisations (see Milddleton & May; Smith, 1998).

OFSTED, like ERO, is also a separate non Ministerial government department which was designed to ensure the independence and objectivity of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector's (HMCI) advice to the Secretary of State (OFSTED web-site: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk>).

It is clear even from this brief piece of information the similarities between ERO and OFSTED. The language they use is almost synonymous and its functions are separate to other central education departments. ERO and OFSTED have developed some loose form of reciprocal training arrangements and have annual visits. Both organisations have high profile CEO's and the British equivalent is the highly controversial Chief Inspector Chris Woodhead. Both he and Judith Aitken are outspoken critics of teachers and their trainers and both have received philosophical support from Tory-style governments on their 'shame and blame' tactics for 'failing institutions' (Thrupp, 1998).

Furthermore, Thrupp (1998) critically evaluates the role of ERO and OFSTED and has noted that they bear close resemblance, and that their policies and practices have clearly informed one another. A key point of congruence is their emphasis on 'external' inspection. Moreover, he observes:

... both share overwhelmingly technicist approaches to assessing schools. While there are some differences in their methods, these are more matters of detail than substance, and are in any case gradually disappearing. As well, helped by the independence of these agencies, OFSTED's Chief Inspector and ERO's Chief Review Officer (Chris Woodhead and Judith Aitken

respectively) have both publicly identified with the neo-liberal critics of education. Most significantly in terms of their ideological role of 'turning up the heat' of neo-liberal school reform, ERO and OFSTED have chimed in with populist 'tough on schools' discourses of recent governments in both countries, pursuing 'failing' schools and 'incompetent' teachers with uncommon vigour.

(Thrupp, 1998: 195-196)

A point of difference between the two agencies is that OFSTED inspection teams include lay members (this also occurs in the New South Wales' Quality Assurance Directorate based in Sydney). Having the addition of lay inspectors was advanced by Picot et al., 1988) in the original conception of the forerunner agency the Review and Audit Agency which quickly became renamed as ERO (see Smith, 1994) .

Like ERO, OFSTED has a large number of organisations which overtly criticise it, the HMCI (CEO) and its methodology. One large organisation is a group of UK high profile academics and educationalists called OFSTIN (the Office for Standards in Inspection). The following is described in the conference publication (OFSTIN, 1996):

The time was right to offer a focus for discussion of a system which inspects others but is not itself subject to scrutiny.

The four key questions driving the conference were:

- How sound are OFSTED's methods?
- How helpful is OFSTED's impact?
- Is OFSTED value for money?
- How should inspection develop?

All of these points will sound remarkably familiar in the New Zealand situation for anyone who is up to date with the critical literature on ERO. The following are some of the criticisms of OFSTED (interestingly they could have been directly taken from the reviews of ERO by Wylie/NZPF (1997); Robertson et al. (1997) or some of the more critical elements from the Austin Report (1997).

Some Key Issues/Criticisms of OFSTED:

- Inflexibility of approach;
- weakness of method
- unreliable data: small sample sizes; random variations in amount of observation; unreliability of inspectors' judgements;
- unproductive impact;
- weaknesses in quality control: lack of professionalism; inconsistencies of judgements within and between inspection teams; judgements influenced by inspectors own orthodoxies; ineffective complaints procedures;

- high financial cost;
- the cost of stress; demoralisation; loss of control over professional activity;

(OFSTIN, 1996: 5-12)

The recommendations resulting from the conference included the following: an independent review; clarifying OFSTED's purpose; requiring flexibility of approach; linking inspection to continuous school review; improving inspection methodology; and improving the inspection process (ibid: 13-17). The independent review did occur and in 1997 the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust gave OFSTIN a grant of £68,000 sterling with which OFSTIN commissioned an independent review of OFSTED (Westgate, [OFSTIN Secretary], 1999). In addition to this there was also a critical Select Committee Report on OFSTED in 1998. ERO had experienced a similar critical report from the Education and Science Select Committee in 1997.

The cross-fertilisation of ideas from the UK and New Zealand has been evident recently in other areas too such as the ERO/Government push for assessment (particularly in primary schools) and also in the increasing drive to improve literacy and numeracy (even at the pre-school level) in both countries. It would seem that both ERO and OFSTED are the 'drivers' of these current moves. The interactions between ERO and OFSTED and their influences upon each other have been noted by Thrupp (1998 & 1999).

Ferguson et al. (2000: 146) summarise the purpose of OFSTED in the following way, yet the same claim could be made of ERO:

The inescapable and in some ways rather obvious conclusion is that the prime purpose of OfSTED inspection is to make schools accountable to the government and, by proxy, to the taxpayer and the nation at large. In this view it is important not only to be assured that most schools are meeting national expectations and represent 'value for money' but also to create a mechanism for exposing those that are judged to be unsatisfactory.

Furthermore, these authors' contend that:

OfSTED has had such a potent influence in schools in England and Wales that some commentators have become concerned about its power to dominate teachers' thinking and take charge of the education agenda. Cullingford (1999, p. 59), for example, notes the emphasis that government places on the control of schools and suggests that 'the most significant demonstration of the belief in measures of external control is the power invested in OfSTED'. However, it is not simply the mechanisms of inspection that cause concern but the fact that the discussion of education that takes place in schools and elsewhere increasingly employs a vocabulary and transmits values that are dominated by the 'OFSTED discourse'. There is a new set of assumptions and a vocabulary to go with them. ... It is too easy to overlook the fact that the judgements made in inspection reports are judgements and that inferences made on the basis of classroom observations, the scrutiny of documents and pupils' work, and discussions with school staff and governors are capable of a variety of interpretations that depend on the frame of reference and previous experience of the individual inspector.

For a discussion of similar themes in the New Zealand context (see Smith, 2000a). Whilst both ERO and OFSTED have in the past publicly prided themselves on their independence, objectivity and impartiality recent reports from both organisations show a softening or change in this positioning. For example it was recently stated in an ERO document that "It is crucial that these judgements and comments are soundly based. ... [and that they are] fair with an appropriate balance between findings and opinion" (ERO, 2000b: 39). The use of the term 'opinion' is questionable, contestable and also speculative and less than 'objective'. In this context Ferguson et al. (2000: 144) recently noted that:

As the chief inspector himself has recognised, 'inspection is not and cannot be objective in a scientific way. It is, as I have said ... best described as and act of disciplined subjectivity' (Guardian, 5 October, 1999).

In addressing the profound influence OFSTED have over the education system in the UK Ferguson et al maintain that:

Teachers' thinking is said to have been 'colonised' (Jeffrey and Woods, 1998; Lowe, 1998) by the OfSTED discourse and the way that teachers think about their work and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses is likely to have been influenced to a considerable extent by the Inspection Framework. The creation of an orthodoxy, and its power to influence the ways that school judge themselves in the period in between inspections, explains the sense in which all schools, or nearly all schools, might be said to be 'self-inspecting'.

Using a Foucaudian analysis of power and surveillance, I have in the past advanced similar claims about ERO's influence on the New Zealand educational landscape (Smith, 1998).

ERO has strongly resisted the call from educationalists to provide an advice role. Perhaps one of the longest-standing and most loudly vocalised criticisms about the ERO is that it provides no on-going assistance to institutions or an advice role of where to get assistance after a poor review. This was in stark contrast to the roles that the former Inspectorate played (see Smith, 1994 & 1998). As I have noted in these earlier papers the new role to be assumed by the new education audit agency post-Picot and *Tomorrow's Schools* was to have a single focus upon auditing and no advisory capacity. It was based upon the separation model being applied elsewhere in the public sector using new public management strategies (Smith, 1994).

Post-1992 ERO has always clearly not been involved in an advisory capacity and has adopted I believe a safe yet somewhat defensive strategy to protect their position as is evidenced in the following statements (which are from the CRO's Strategic Overview and quoted at length):

Over the past year there have been repeated demands for the Office to provide more advice to schools and early childhood centres. ... Reference is often made to the inspectorate of the previous Department of Education which is perceived retrospectively as having had a major advisory function. ... In its role as independent external evaluator, the Office provides evaluative comment and recommendations for improvements in the performance of the managers of individual schools and early childhood centres and on aspects of the education system as a whole. ...

Although it may not be in the form familiar to principals appointed before 1989, the Education Review Office and several other State-supported agencies do provide advice. ... As well as providing advice to individual

schools and early childhood centres through each institutional report, the Office also provides advice to schools and centres in general through its national education evaluation reports. Drawing on the extensive data provided by individual reports the Office aggregates information about the system as a whole and highlights good practice and avoidable causes of inefficiency in schools and centres across the country.

(ERO, 1994: 13)

Whilst Austin et al. (1997) had outrightly rejected ERO had a role to play in advising schools, they had recommended that ERO include a section in the report which outlined the sources of advice and guidance available in a district for institutions to access for assistance (Rec. 27, p. 9). Furthermore, the panel recommended ERO act as 'broker' to assist institutions in finding useful sources of guidance and advice (Austin, et al., 1997: 35).

It had also been recommended in the Austin Report that ERO act as a 'critical friend' (ibid: 19) to institutions. However, as Thrupp & Smith (1999) reported this recommendation was immediately rejected as a concept by ERO with Dr Aitken being reported as saying this:

... presented a paradox and dilemma to ERO. ... ERO approached schools as a critical and independent evaluator and the critical friend approach could reduce the learning experience of the organisations under review. [Furthermore she noted] ... internationally external evaluators that acted as critical friends generally had a wing that could provide on-going advice and support, but ERO did not.

(Aitken, 1997 cited in Gerritsen 1997)

In a similar vein, whilst OFSTED does offer an advisory division Ferguson, et al, (2000: 94) noted that the Select Committee evaluating the work of OFSTED concluded:

We do not think that OfSTED inspection team should become involved in the provision of formal advice or school development. It is not the role of the inspector to come into the school and tell the headteacher how to run it. It is up to the school itself to build on the outcomes of inspection, rather than depending on the inspectors for guidance (House of Commons, 1999a, paragraph 99).

The examples outlined above show the congruence between the two organisations and that they both wield significant power over their respective education sectors.

The next section provides an assessment of ERO as it is currently by highlighting some of the positive components of its work.

The positive contribution by ERO to New Zealand's education system

Under-funded and resourced - completing an impossible task

ERO have an impossible task to perform reviewing all schools and early childhood centres on a three-four year cycle with their limited funding and personnel. It is a credit to the professionalism and genuine commitment of the management and personnel of ERO that it is able to operate with reasonable success under such stressful and constraining conditions.

This said they could be performing their role differently and this will be explored in a later section.

Increase in funding will provide a positive direction

It was reported in the *Evening Post* (2000b: 12) under the headline 'Schools watchdog to hire more staff' that "ERO chief executive Judith Aitken said she was delighted with the extra funding, \$866,000 next year, which meant the office could increase its review staff by 38 percent".

This increase in personnel is quite significant given the reductions in staffing over time which had previously occurred (Smith, 1997). Furthermore, it should aid in ERO being able to meet some of the timeliness criteria for their core reviewing activities.

Denial of SES but slowly changing stance - acknowledging SES

In the past ERO personnel have vigorously denied the influence of SES on performance. However, in the intervening nearly three years since the Austin review occurred ERO have made some changes in this area. Last year Martin Thrupp and I observed that one recommendation from the Ministerial review was that ERO's reports on schools include a narrative description provided by the school or centre on the context in which it operates (Thrupp & Smith, 1999: 196). ERO has 'partially' followed up this recommendation and it may be regarded as a step in the right direction however there is no indication of any more systematic attempt to take context into account.

Since we wrote this there has been another change in that SES decile ratings are now included directly on the report. When asked about the timing and motivation for this procedural change an ERO senior manager recently stated:

Decile ratings have been included in school accountability reports since August 1999. This was a procedural change, very largely presentational, responding to external representations and observations that the ERO did not appear to reflect the socio-economic environment of the school in its accountability review reporting.

In fact this was the case, but as the perception was otherwise, a specific reference to the decile rating in the front of the written report was seen as an obvious way for the Office to acknowledge its awareness of the context within which the school operated.

(Canning, 1999a)

While not directly disputing the accuracy of when this change actually occurred I have only observed the placing of decile ratings on ERO reports from around November/December 1999 and only by chance when perusing ERO school reports on ERO's web-site earlier in 2000.

Thus there has been some policy changes with regard to SES decile from ERO, however, three uneasy questions arise as a result. Firstly is this a genuine or cosmetic change? and to what extent are ERO taking this context into account when reviewing schools? and how could this be measured and assessed?

Changes in methodology to reflect contextualisation

There have been some changes to the ERO methodology and French (2000: 46-47) states that:

Aitken notes that the Office has recently made substantial changes to its own core methodology for Accountability Reviews. 'We have identified clearly where we do need to have prescriptive evaluative criteria - classroom observations, the assessment systems being used by teachers, and comparative performance over time, and at the time of writing was introducing a new system for reporting on the comparative performance of like schools - that is, schools that are broadly similar in type, size, and location. From the beginning of the 2000/01 financial year Review Officers will have a typology enabling them to compare and report on the performance of schools in like situations - schools type, size, socio-economic context, reporting history. Reports will be also raise public policy issues, such as the quality of the national curriculum.

These points are also reiterated in ERO (2000a: 18 & ERO, 2000b: 14) and they represent a changing position from ERO, and the inclusion of more data from educators. Whilst in one sense this is a breakthrough and acknowledgement of the work of teachers as professionals it could also be interpreted as a further intensification over teachers' workload preparing all this data for an ERO inspection.

Follow-up reviews and assistance to schools

As a long-term researcher of ERO I have been critical in the past of the 'hit and run' mentality of the ERO. Their brief was to report on schools but not offer follow-up assistance and advice. Whilst I am still concerned that each year there has been an increase in the numbers of schools gaining 'poor/bad' reports, which ERO maintain warrant follow-up reviews. I acknowledge that ERO has recently somewhat softened in its approach to provide post-review assistance to schools in need. For example it was recently noted:

Follow-up reviews

... ERO's experience suggests that, in the school sector, one way to break this cycle of chronic failure is to offer an immediate follow-up workshop to help the school to understand and respond to ERO's findings, and to plan and implement appropriate action to address the problems identified.

During 2000/01 ERO will pilot follow-up assistance to schools where an accountability review signals the need for a discretionary review. This assistance will be provided by one or two members of a small, specially-trained team of experienced reviewers who will go to the school immediately after the accountability review report has been confirmed and offer a one to two day workshop.

The purpose of the workshop would be to take the board, principal and staff through ERO's findings and help the school develop its own recovery plan.

(ERO, 2000a: 12)

ERO has budgeted to go to 55-65 schools in 2000/2001 to do post review assistance at an estimated cost of approximately \$226,000 (ibid: 38 - 39). While this may be the beginning of a very positive initiative is both long over-due and merely a start given that during 1999 221 (26 per cent) schools had an 'poor' accountability review leading to a discretionary review

according to recent ERO figures (ERO, 2000b: 17). Assuming a similar number of schools will receive discretionary accountability reviews in 2000-2001 period as the 1999-2000 year that means more than 70 per cent of the schools requiring post-review follow-up assistance will not get any help from ERO.

This rather damning point aside, it is a starting point and ERO are to be commended for adopting a new position on this somewhat vexing issue. However, I would question both the ethics of commenting upon your own review and advising what needs to be done in regard to make changes - there seem to be blurred accountability lines. These same claims were always leveled at the Inspectorate in lacking accountability and having dual functions which were in conflict with one another (see Smith, 1998). In addition there could be some serious questioning of whether ERO has the mandate, legislative authority or necessary expertise to provide/conduct these follow-up assistances to schools.

In commenting on this new development Dr Aitken was quoted as saying:

... one of the biggest concerns schools had was the gap between a report highlighting concerns and any follow-up intervention and help. The follow-up workshops would involve **ERO** revisiting the school within a couple of days and telling the staff, board and community the reasons behind the report and how they could take steps to fix problems.

(*Evening Post*, 2000b: 12)

Change in methodology exempting good schools

It was announced in *The Evening Post* (2000c, 12) that a new initiative undertaken by ERO was under consideration. This involved exempting 'good' schools from ERO reviews as the following reveals:

Schools with straight-A report cards have earned a reprieve from Education Review Office audits, chief executive Judith Aitken says. Twenty high-performing secondary schools will be exempt from the standard three-yearly external review under a pilot scheme. Dr Aitken has met principals from various schools to discuss trialling review exemptions. "We're pretty confident about those schools that have sustained high-quality performance," she said. "We looked at whether there were any issues for exemption from external reviews, and saw none." The review office would continue to monitor performance in areas of concern to the Government, such as literacy, maths, and science, but would vary its audit approach. "What we're talking about is a continuing conversation with these schools, perhaps establishing a forum for discussion rather than reviewing," Dr Aitken said. The review office would develop procedures, dependent on each school's strengths, over the next few months. Common to all the high-performing schools in the trial will be the requirement that they share their skills and knowledge with other schools. Schools invited to take part in the trial have been identified as sustained performers over time, and their know-how would benefit others. Dr Aitken said it was an experiment, but the review office was confident it had "pretty solid international grounding" behind it. She planned to release more details about the trial in August.

There has been no further explanation/justification in any published ERO report or on its web-site <http://www.ero.govt.nz> mentioning this initiative since, however, there was some material about it in French (2000: 47) who observed:

Finally, ERO intends to institute a project to identify schools that have sustained a good level of performance over time to serve as models of good practice for other schools. Aitken envisages that the Office and the Taumata Rau Project schools would agree on outcomes to be achieved over several years,¹⁷⁶ and could develop a customised evaluation programme for each school. The school's compliance costs would reduce, and in return they would take on a model school role within the sector.

176 The proposed name, taumata rau, means 'pinnacle'. The concept is similar to the 'lighthouse schools' or 'charter schools' in the US.

In order to obtain additional information on the trial and ascertain what had developed since August I contact ERO Corporate Office personnel, and received the following reply:

After the Ministerial Review was established ERO discussed with the review committee a range of approaches that ERO could take to reviewing schools including high performing schools.

ERO then informed the members of the focus group that changes to ERO's review procedures would not be considered for implementation until after the Review Committee had reported to the Minister and undertook to contact them early next year to continue the discussions.

(Salt, 2000)

Given that there is no additional information, this initiative may eventuate as a recommendation in the Ministerial Review Report, (Rodger, et al., 2000/2001) or depending on what the panel considers is appropriate, it may languish. There are several issues I want to raise in relation to the Taumata Rau proposal, the first is that it is yet another example of ERO's entrepreneurialism and initiative, it is also a cost efficiency in line with its own internal policies. Secondly the proposal makes sound and prudent financial sense. It is on one level a sensible use of scarce education evaluation resources. Given that the average cost of an Accountability Report for a secondary school is between \$15,000-\$45,000 (Canning, 1999b) and that there are supposedly 20 schools in the trial this represents a saving of a least \$300,000 to ERO's budget which could be reinvested areas which require more attention such as schools requiring assistance after follow-ups.

There is however, an alternative interpretation and that is that not all schools are being treated the same by ERO, leading to a form of differentiation in inspection and evaluation. This represents a move away from their previous position on this issue and one which is at odds with their previous philosophy of treating all schools the same (see Smith, 1998; Thrupp and Smith, 1999). Furthermore, this departure from standard practice brings with it an element of coercion for the exempted schools in that in order to gain the exemption they must act as role models for other institutions. This provision brings with it both negative and positive connotations. At one level it provides a further example of polarisation of New Zealand schools between those doing well in the system, typically Pakeha middle class institution in high SES localities as opposed to those schools which are not doing as well and these are more often schools in rural locations, or alternatively multi-cultural schools in lower SES decile neighbourhoods. Moreover, it highlights the existing inequalities of schooling in New Zealand and elevates and glorifies certain types of schools over others.

An alternative more positive interpretation is also possible, in that these exemplar schools will potentially provide useful assistance to schools which will help them to potentially improve. This working alongside schools will have benefits in terms of breaking down

competition between schools and will also provide opportunities for greater collegiality between institutions.

These positive aspects aside, there remains some uneasy questions/issues which require some consideration:

- This appears to be a shifting of responsibility away from the agency charged with evaluating schools to potential institutions with little experience in this technical area. What training and assistance will there be from ERO?
- What is the efficacy and research evidence that similar overseas schemes have worked? Can they be imported or translated in the Aotearoa/New Zealand setting?
- On what basis were the schools chosen?
- What is the evidence that these 'pinnacle' institutions will be able to make the desired changes in the other schools? Will these other schools be required to emulate the model school?
- Do they represent a cross section of schools in different SES deciles, geographical locations and types of schools e.g. single sex and co-educational?

If they are located in high SES neighbourhoods what is their experience of schools in different locations e.g. lower SES schools - could their skills and abilities be transported across localities?

- Are they paired with comparable institutions?
- How long do they remain exempted?
- How is the trial being assessed/evaluated?

In addition in the UK OFSTED have also began to move into a similar direction with 'light touch' or differentiated audits (Ferguson et al., 2000). In which certain 'good' schools with effective self-review processes are provided with shorter, less detailed inspection. This is a process New Zealand inspection agencies should be considering as a potential model for emulation.

ERO should disseminate more information about good practice.

Whilst ERO has moved significantly in the area of information provision, there is still a general perception that the organisation focuses on some of the more negative aspects of information about schools and centres' practices. ERO have become more of a conduit for providing positive information about good practice and this is an area in which they should focus more attention. This practice would serve a dual purpose improving its public relations with schools and also to increasing awareness amongst practitioners of good and exemplary practices occurring at other sites.

These are some of the more positive aspects of ERO's practices, yet the next section contrasts these by providing some of the more negative aspects of their roles and functions.

The negativity permeating the work of the Office

There are several aspects of ERO's efficacy or practices that require some immediate attention, reconsideration if this organisation is to develop into a more more-friendly agency for practitioners as these points are outlined below.

Linked to NR agenda - pushing agendas and linked with National agenda on marketisation

Several authors have contended that ERO philosophy and mode of operation have been clearly linked with the new right and managerialist agenda (Smith, 1994; Thrupp, 1998; 1999; and Thrupp & Smith, 1999). In this context Thrupp (1999: 146) observes:

Consistent with the managerialist doctrine of external accountability to prevent 'provider capture' and improve effectiveness, ERO's emphasis is on 'external' rather than 'friendly' inspection. Its Chief Review Officer, Judith Aitken, has publicly identified with the neo-liberal critics of education and had talked frankly of the place of ERO within the neo-liberal economy (Aitken 1994). Most significantly in terms of its ideological role of 'turning up the heat' of market reform, ERO has vigorously pursued 'failing' schools and 'incompetent' teachers. There has been a degree of support for this approach from some teachers and school leaders but there have also been numerous complaints that ERO is misguided and unfair in its school evaluations. Teacher unions have threatened to boycott review (inspections) altogether.

Within the next point the negative aspect mentioned is inextricably linked to the previous theme. ERO do still, I believe, have a public relations problem in how they are perceived. Whilst it is a tautology that given the nature of their work they are unlikely to be popular, yet I would still contend that despite the respect and praise they have received from some quarters, educationalists still view them with suspicion and in some cases fear.

Perception of stakeholders not positive/mixed

There is still general feeling that ERO whilst they are a 'necessary evil', they are still viewed in an overwhelming negative way in some circles (for an overview see Smith, 1997). However, there is in some areas a mixed feeling engendered about ERO as has been noted in recent reports from the Waikato (Thrupp & Smith, 1999; Harold, Hawksworth, Mansell & Thrupp, 1999).

One of my most vociferous and enduring criticisms of ERO has been their encroachment into areas for which they have no expertise and experience and some inability to complete even their core activities within set time-frames. The next section addresses this issue.

Behind in core work and encroachment into new domains

I have noted previously (Smith, 2000a; Smith, 2000b) that ERO are beginning to taken on responsibilities for activities that lay outside their brief. I believe, and I know I am not alone in this perspective amongst educationists, that ERO are on shaky ground and getting into some activities for which they have no experience, expertise, knowledge or legal mandate to be involved in. In this regard Meyer (2000: 4) recently observed the following:

Well perhaps ERO is in the midst of an identity crisis, I believe ERO is shifting ground dangerously and trading into areas for which they may not be as well qualified ... areas for which they probably lack preparation and in areas in which I doubt they have the statutory responsibility.

Meyers' point was in relation to ERO completing the review of re-service teacher education (which they call training!). For an assessment of ERO's performance in evaluating this area (see Smith, 2000b). In response to ERO there was long list of criticisms outlined by the tertiary teacher education providers inappropriate compulsory education sector organisation to get involved in this type of evaluation. ERO did not possess tertiary sector knowledge, experience or expertise. They are not researchers and lack the depth to undertake such endeavours. Furthermore, these claims could also be levelled at the ERO reports on Multi-culturalism and Mathematics and Science education in New Zealand, Singapore, Korea and the Netherlands.

ERO should focus their activities upon their core activities and do those more effectively. I have commented elsewhere (Smith, 1997 & 1998) that they have in the past been unable to even keep up with their own scheduled reviews of schools and early childhood centres. In all of their *Annual Reports* there is always the comment that in terms of their imposed timeliness criteria they are always behind in this activity sometimes by over 30 per cent of the time. In my opinion they should stick with their core activities, complete these efficiently and leave other tasks for which they are not qualified to perform.

Not evaluators - perceptions of themselves

ERO have a very high regard for the value of their own work and have publicly commented that they are an "... internationally recognised leader in education evaluation" (ERO, 1998a: 31). I would contend based on my own research and discussions with actual evaluators, that they are not evaluators.

A prominent educationist with experience in international evaluation believes that ERO are not evaluators as the ERO state about themselves. Clinton (2000: 6) describes what they do as performance audit, not evaluation. Furthermore, she claims:

You need to think about ERO as an evaluator, they are not evaluators because they don't judge merit and worth, they simply review the process, their mandate, is not evaluation, their mandate is more to simply look at what is happening and simply make some kind of judgements.

(ibid.)

ERO's methodology has been well critiqued in the literature (Wylie/NZPF, 1997; Robertson et al., 1997; Thrupp, 1997; 1998; Smith 1997; 1998 and Thrupp and Smith, 1999). One of the biggest concerns I have is their use of aggregating the data from schools and centres' reports which were collected for a specific purpose and then making pronouncements, which masquerade as 'research' to make claims about the state on New Zealand education.

Whilst there have been some improvements and tinkering to the methodology it still remains somewhat flawed in principle, some examples are provided below.

Methodological flaws - still focusing too much on compliance - expecting schools in lower SES overcome problems

ERO still bases a great deal of their review data on compliance, their focus after 11 years in operation should move to the area of improvement. I have in previous papers (Smith, 2000a; Thrupp & Smith, 1999) noted concern with their treatment of the issues of socio-economic status. Whilst this is slowly adapting this is an area which requires significant work in order that schools in lower SES areas work is contextualised and better understood.

The SES Context

A number of New Zealand educational researchers have noted that ERO has chosen to ignore the effects of SES factors upon a school's performance (Gordon, 1994; Hawk, Hill, et al., 1996; Thrupp, 1997; Hughes, Lauder et al., 1997; Robertson, et al., 1997; Hawk & Hill, 1999 and Thrupp & Smith, 1999). Furthermore, Thrupp and Smith (1999: 194) suggested that:

ERO's ability as to hold that school staff are responsible for the success or decline of schools is also at stake here. Acknowledgment that the social and political context might create fundamental problems for schools would 'muddy the waters' making ERO's work much more difficult. As a result, refuting such contextual claims has been an important activity for ERO management with Aitken continuing to insist that "Socio-economic determinants do not control the quality of education" (Aitken, 1999 cited in McLoughlin, 1999: 70). Moreover, although there has been much more emphasis in some of ERO's more recent regional and NEER reports on the problems faced by low socioeconomic schools, to date these reports have always continued to conclude that such issues need not, and must not, be allowed to have an impact on schools (ERO, 1997b, 1998b, 1998c). But it is also too easy for low SES schools and their staff to be scapegoated for wider societal problems. In our view ERO's stance on this issue has become more contradictory than ever.

There has been a long-standing denial of the effects of SES on schools within ERO documents as the following passages highlight:

The socio-economic status of schools, while an important factor, is not necessarily the most useful indicator of a good learning environment for young people.

(ERO, 1994: 8)

Perhaps the most blatant disregard for research findings and an overtly hostile in relation to SES factors by ERO is to be found in their *School Governance and Student Achievement* report in which it was noted:

Many educational researchers consider that home and social factors (for example the level of family income and support) are more influential than school factors in contributing to student achievement. Some have even concluded that the schooling is relatively unimportant in influencing achievement since the effect of school is miniscule compared to that of the rest of society.

However, on the basis of its field-based observations, ERO has developed the strong view that schools can and do make a difference to student achievement. In seeking to raise achievement levels, successful schools do not just focus on the factors they cannot control directly, but also adapt their efforts to accommodate the factors they cannot. The relative influence of factors within and outside schools in contributing to student achievement, and ways in which schools can combat the effect of home and social factors, are discussed in ERO's publication *Good Schools, Poor Schools* (1998).

(ERO, 1999c: 6)

There is a sense of arrogance and anti-intellectualism in this statement - and a paternalism, that ERO as experts know best! Furthermore, there is an implicit dismissal of the significant research base of 'contested' international literature on this topic. This denial of SES influence was supported by the Austin Committee (see Austin et al., 1997: 26-28) and negated by research literature reported in Robertson et al., (1997: 34-42, for a review of the differences in the usage of research between these two reviews see Smith, 1997 and Thrupp & Smith, 1999).

ERO recently castigated 'complacent' and 'cruising' schools in its *Annual Report 1998/1999* (ERO, 1999a: 16) 17). These comments were clearly in line with Aitken's (1999) comments. It is my contention that ERO has targeted these types of schools because their reviews have had little quantifiable impact upon schools in 'low' decile areas and that the negative publicity and increasing public perception of ERO's heavy handed inquisition (O'Neill, 1996) approach has meant they have had to temper their criticisms of the performance of schools located in 'low' decile areas.

Whilst there have been changes in this area though as noted in the positives section, ERO still have to adapt more in this area. ERO have consistently under-estimated the time taken for schools with serious socio-economic 'disadvantage' to improve their schools after an ERO report. Following a 'poor/bad' Accountability Review ERO does a follow-up Discretionary Accountability Review usually within a six-twelve month period. This is sometimes followed in another six months later with a further DAR. The schools are usually given a six month period in which to address the serious concerns raised in the ERO review. This time period is insufficient despite ERO's claims that the majority of schools have improved within this period. Their data suggests that approximately 54 per cent of schools had made satisfactory progress and to have improved sufficiently to be placed in the regular schedule of reviews (ERO, 2000b: 18).

I would contend that schools with significant 'problems' require much longer.

In the case of two South Auckland schools, the CRO made the following remarks:

... it had taken far too long to turn Hillary and Tangaroa colleges around. ...
Six to twelve months was sufficient time for any school to take serious
remedial steps to address ERO concerns

(Aitken, 1999 cited in Rowe, 1999: 10)

ERO has also been an advocate for closing schools which are consistently poorly performing in their (ERO's) assessment, for example they note:

In ERO's view, the Government should consider closing schools which have a long standing history of poor performance, and which are unable to show any substantial improvements over a two year period following an adverse ERO review.

(ERO, 1998a: 21)

The assessment of the time taken to remedy serious issues/problems in a school is seriously under-estimated at 6-12 months in the case of Hillary or Tangaroa or even two years as is advocated by ERO in their *Annual Report*. The research literature and evidence from the UK demonstrates the turn-around time for particularly 'failing' schools is longer than is advocated by ERO (Gray & Wilcox, 1995; Wilcox & Gray, 1996).

Furthermore, even ERO's counterpart OFSTED allows two years in the serious case of 'failing' schools (Wilcox & Gray, 1996). In a discussion of this issue Ferguson (2000: 105):

The time taken before a school is 'turned around' and is judged to be offering an acceptable standard of education varies. In 1999 it took 17 months on average for a school to be removed from the special measures register ... It is generally expected that schools will be removed from the register after two years although some have taken longer because of the complex nature of the problems to be resolved.

A realistic time-frame is required as Wilcox and Gray (1996: 131-132) noted:

The literature of school improvement and educational change would suggest that expectations of substantial implementation of inspection findings within short time scales will, for many schools, be overly optimistic. *{Furthermore, they note}* ... What a short-term post-inspection follow-up will yield is likely to be patchy and unconvincing. Across-the-board assumptions, therefore, about how long change takes are likely to be inappropriate; this will vary from school to school. We share the view that 'failing' schools should not hang around or, for that matter, be permitted to do so. Such limited evidence as we have available, however, suggests that really worthwhile changes (that is changes in schools' 'effectiveness' as institutions) will take years rather than months. Three or four years will probably be required for an 'ineffective' school to move into the pack and as long again for it to move ahead (see Gray et al. 1996b; and the follow-up study conducted by Louis and Miles 1992).

(Wilcox & Gray, 1996: 139).

This is an issue which ERO needs to do some substantive research in and not rely merely upon aggregations of their own data. Furthermore, I would recommend that ERO and the government seriously reconsider the recommendation made by Robertson et al., 1997: 11 & 210) that "That ERO develop tailored review methodologies to reflect and record the achievements and shortcomings of different types of schools".

This would certainly allow for much greater emphasis to be placed on contextualisation.

Are standards set too high? The case of DAR's

Are the standards that ERO assesses against too high? I have noted previously in this paper my increasing concern with the high number of schools receiving follow-up DAR reports by ERO. It should be of concern to educationists, researchers, ERO themselves and especially the Crown, the Minister as purchaser of ERO products that 26 per cent of schools reviewed by ERO required a follow-up or DAR.

There were 221 Discretionary Reviews conducted across the schooling sector in 1999-2000 (ERO, 2000b: 17) even accounting for the cheapest DAR in the primary school sector being \$4,000, and the cheapest in the secondary sector being \$5,000 in the past year this would represent a minimum of just over \$900,000 invested in follow-ups. The following questions require addressing:

- Are ERO demands on schools unrealistic?
- Is ERO's methodology biased in favour of some types of schools?

- Are the complexity of the tasks that schools must perform too great, are there too many demands?
- How can those deemed underperforming be assisted in improvement?

For me as a researcher I consider it politically unpalatable that over a quarter of New Zealand schools are deemed to be failing ERO's assessments, and I would consider why this would be the case.

The final section addresses some potential ways in which ERO might adapt their current practices and offers some approaches as a way forward.

The way forward: a renewed ERO?

Thrupp & Smith (1999) offered a challenge to ERO and its political masters last year by stating:

... any worthwhile future for ERO lies in a more realistic and genuinely educative approach to supporting the diverse cultures of schools and early childhood centres. Moving ERO in that direction needs to be a key goal for New Zealand educators over the next decade.

(Thrupp & Smith, 1999: 195)

What follows is my challenge to ERO to consider new ways of approaching their work and I offer some suggestions as my koha to the debate.

I want to see the Rodger Review Team and the Government get politically brave and show fortitude as this is an opportunity adapt some of ERO's the current practices. This will require ERO to approach their reviewing in a different way and to work more co-operatively with schools in a more genuine partnership rather than the way in which they presently operate and the climate of anxiety they engender.

What I am proposing is a return to one of the cornerstones offered in *Tommorrow's Schools* philosophy, yet it will unfortunately require more work for already overburdened educational professionals. Make the self-management of schools more tangible and let schools follow the self-review model. It will involve a greater focus upon schools' self-reviewing and less upon regular ERO-style auditing.

Hargreaves (1995, p. 120, cited in Ferguson, et al., 2000: 134) notes "... that the most effective audit of a school comes about by 'neither internal self-evaluation nor external inspection' and advocates 'a combination of both' ". Furthermore, as evidence these authors' observe:

Russell (1996) briefly reviews the research evidence and concludes that 'it is hard to find a strong research basis for the belief that effective leadership and effective schools depend on specific formal processes of individual and institutional review'

(p. 327, cited in Ferguson, et al., 2000: 135.

Ferguson et al, (2000: 135) further stated that "... OfSTED inspections tend to be 'done to' rather than 'done for' schools and it may be that inspectors' desire to maintain a proper 'distance' prevents them from taking more of a lead from school staff and governors".

This claim would also have resonance in New Zealand. I suspect many principals and educators would feel this way about the ERO reviews. Certainly, in the New Zealand context McKenzie (1995) proposed more peer-review in inspection and greater involvement of school staff (see Smith, 1997; 1998).

Even OFSTED are beginning to move in this direction with a combination of external inspection and self-evaluation as Russell & Reid (1997: 179) note:

Changes in the second cycle of Ofsted inspections have acknowledge the link between the school's self-evaluation procedures and statutory external inspection and the *Framework for Inspection* (Ofsted, 1995) makes provision for inspectors to consider a range of evidence provided from a school's own internal review procedures. For there to be real benefit to the school there has to be an integration of the external and internal evaluation processes, the one informing the other, and both informing the subsequent action.

This new direction from OFSTED has been extensively outlined in the Ferguson, et al. (2000) publication, who noted some limitations with the approach and offered alternatives. These authors have consistently questioned OFSTED supposed 'objectivity' in the same way Thrupp (1997; 1998; 1999) has of ERO. In critiquing this objectivity they propose that schools could perform a number of the OFSTED tasks and would be in a stronger position to make judgements about their institution. They observe:

... to present inspection as an 'objective' process carried out by 'experts' tends to suggest that its value is confined to its outcomes. Involvement in the process is valuable in its own right because the insights gathered along the way may provide teachers with a better understanding of the aspects of their work in school that would benefit from further development.

(Ferguson et al., 2000: 135-136)

Furthermore, they propose (ibid.) the following:

... Continuous evaluation informed from a variety of perspectives and removed from the threat of 'naming and shaming' need not lay claims to 'objectivity' and need not be conducted in a public arena in order to stimulate improvements or draw attention to teachers whose teaching would benefit from support and additional in-service training. It must, however, be done systematically and be capable of making judgements about the standards achieved by pupils and the quality of education which is provided.

Ferguson et al. (1999:155-156) suggested that some of OfSTED's current functions can be fulfilled by processes of sampling, moderation and the verification of the schools' own 'self-inspection' processes. 'Self-inspection' should reduce the intensity of external inspection, diminish its emotional impact and allow schools to reclaim a sense of ownership of the improvement process.

However, they also cautioned that this new model would require support and buy-in from OFSTED. For example, the success of 'self-inspection' would depend on inspection teams' acceptance of and respect for information gathered and action taken as a result of schools'

internal management processes (ibid.). That recognition should include a willingness, subject to any necessary checks and moderation processes, to treat schools conclusions as valid outcomes for inclusion in their inspection report (ibid.)

These authors note that the following benefits would accrue if this option was adopted: (i) would also include a commensurate reduction in the external inspection process; and there would be (ii) fewer inspectors for less time in schools (ibid.).

Furthermore, they contend that the sole purpose of this 'slimmed-down' inspection would be to provide 'a health check' which commented on the effectiveness of the school and its significant strengths and weaknesses, its educational standards and the extent to which it provided value for money (Ferguson, et al., 2000: 136).

Other benefits of this proposed solution of self-review include the following:

... Self-inspection is, we suggest, a more effective route to institutional improvement because of its capacity to encourage a climate of critical reflection and continuous improvement, combat complacency and ensure that progress does not decline undetected between external inspections. ... We would want to see a system of self-inspection that was not simply subjected to scrutiny but signalled to schools that they can be trusted to play a part in their own inspection and benefit from the opportunity to contribute to its findings.

(Ferguson, et al., 2000: 137).

Other UK researchers have suggested a similar approach and Russell & Reid (1997: 179) have citing Moon (1995) proposed that schools adopt the following strategies/techniques in their self-reviews:

Moon (1995, p. 166) suggests that 'the school processes and procedures need to take account of the forms of evidence previously and necessarily left to inspection'. He lists these as performance measures: real routines for classroom observations, regular reported scrutiny of pupils' work, regular formal surveys of pupils' views on the quality of provision, regular surveys of parents, using criteria which allow indications of improvement to be revealed over time, and regular surveys of teachers' views.

Ferguson, et al. (2000: 43-44) contend that:

... If the OfSTED inspection became a less threatening experience and more concerned with school improvement, then inspection might be perceived as a service to schools which most heads would welcome. ... It is in this climate that schools would be more willing to provide 'warts and all' evidence of their own, apply rigour to systematic 'self-inspection' and be less likely to see the process as a contest or believe that the inspectors are cheating when they score points using ammunition that the school itself has provided.

Some of these approaches could be readily adopted in the New Zealand context. Self-review is now a mandatory process and it could be easily adapted for other purposes such as self-inspection. One disadvantage of this method however, would be that it makes the work of the audit agency so much more simple. ERO could simply come in and check what the school had achieved in terms of self-review thus essentially doing ERO's work for them.

Another negative feature could be that it creates a form of self-surveillance over schools (see Smith, 1998).

The next section outlines a proposed model for self-review based on an overseas scheme.

A model of self-review

Ferguson et al., (2000: 119) outline the approach to school review undertaken in the Australian State of Victoria the Assisted Self-Review model. Furthermore, they observe that the State of Victoria in Australia examined approaches to school accountability in other countries and devised a school review procedure in the early 1990s to try to balance the needs of accountability and school development. It requires schools to collect considerable quantities of data which are then compared with the data from similar schools (ibid.).

The Assisted Review involves three elements recently introduced into the accountability framework for Victoria's schools (Office for Review, 1997) are:

- school charter
- school annual review
- triennial school review

(Ferguson, et al., 2000: 120)

In explaining the schemes procedures and efficacy these authors note the triennial review report is scrutinised by an external independent verifier who is appointed by the verification group which holds the contract for that area. Every three years the annual reports are incorporated into a triennial review of the same issues. The statistics are compared for time trends and are also compared to 'like' schools and to the State average (ibid: 124-125).

Ferguson, et al., (2000: 128) evaluated the Australian scheme and noted the following implications for schools in England and Wales:

- The assisted school self-review process in Victoria is embedded in the context of the educational assumptions of its various stakeholders. Therefore, it will be necessary to translate that experience into suggestions for what might be helpful here.
- Firstly, it should be noted the triennial review is intended to be closely related to the existing school charter and its revision.
- Secondly the process is taken seriously not only because of the professionalism of the participants but also because there is an implied threat that if the external verifier were to suggest aspects of the school's operation which the school was not willing to tackle, the district office personnel would intervene.
- Thirdly unlike OfSTED inspections, the process does not reach classroom level. There is no direct observation of teachers. ...
- Fourthly, it has been recognised in Victoria that additional actions are needed for schools which are not seen to be capable of improving. The

review procedures are suitable for most schools but not for those which are struggling.

The authors observe (p. 128) that overall the evidence points to considerable potential for using comparative data collection as an input into school self-review. By using instruments for data collection with a substantial common core it is possible both to collect data which will be of value to an individual school and also to have results where there is common data from a number of 'like schools'.

In outlining what was essentially a cost-benefit analysis of the scheme they note the following advantages and disadvantages of the Assisted Self-Review System:

- Assisted school reviews are much more economical than OfSTED school inspections. The cost of external verification in Victoria is about 10 percent of the cost of an OfSTED inspection contract in England.
- However, a great deal is expected of school staff in the internal review - collecting and collating data, analysing the data for their significance and assessing the need for action.

(Ferguson, et al, 2000: 129)

Furthermore, they caution that while the Victorian approach could not be imported directly, its features could enhance the prospects for school improvement if they were taken up in England with LEAs collating and summarising the common data and identifying 'like' schools (ibid.). This approach does appear to engage the attention of teachers and the neutrality of the data seems to prevent the adversarial reaction which inspections and judgements by OfSTED inspectors sometimes engender. If, as seems likely, it encourages an evidence-based approach to teaching and management then it has much to commend it (ibid.).

I would recommend that ERO and the Government undertake some research or investigation into the Victorian scheme and see if it could be adapted for use in the Aotearoa/New Zealand setting. There is much of merit in this scheme both in terms of cost-effectiveness, efficiency and also the 'softer touch' approach to inspection which involves practitioners in a more meaningful way.

The final parts of this paper are potential avenues which the Government and ERO could explore to improve their performance.

Potential Strategies to transform/improve ERO

Need to have more explicit complaints procedures

As Robertson et al. (1997: 3) noted there is no accessible mechanism for contesting ERO reviews or lodging complaints about ERO processes. This is still the case in 2000. ERO prides itself on receiving few or no 'sustainable' complaints - this claim needs investigating as to why this is the case given the disquiet about ERO.

Increase the ERO Vote/Budget

Increasing the amount of money annually invested in ERO would allow the employment of a larger number of reviewers to conduct reviews. This would alleviate the stress of having to complete reviews quickly, mean that more reviewers could be involved in the process of

school and centre reviews and could make reviews more meaningful for practitioners as ERO would be in the school longer rather than a snap-shot approach which occurs presently.

Whilst external reviews will always have a sense of artificiality and not seeing the school as it always might be, the process of ERO being in schools for longer, with more observation and thereby more contact with staff will act to demystify their role and potentially improve relations between schools and ERO. By making their assessments more transparent and advising schools what they are looking for and assessing against, will create a climate whereby schools will be more open and less defensive when an inspection occurs.

I would maintain that ERO perform an important if not vital role on a very stringent budget (of approximately \$20 million) which represents a mere droplet in the total education annual budget of six-seven billion dollars. Even doubling ERO's present budget would allow it to operate significantly differently and to the benefit of practitioners.

Promotion of an advisory wing

ERO require an advisory wing to provide advice/guidance. ERO as an organisation with over 11 years of reviewing in schools, now has a stronger sense of purpose and maturity. The punitive/compliance aspect of their work whilst still being used has perhaps run its course. What is now required and always been asked for (see Wylie/NZPF, 1997; Austin et al., 1997; and Robertson, et al., 19997) especially since the demise of Inspectorate is a form of advisory service of where to get help and improvement post-review.

What is required is a wholesale rejection of the supposed 'independence and objectivity' of ERO, and the market/managerialist model it operates within and a transformation to a more 'friendly' organisation. It is time to reject the false-dichotomy notion that an inspection organisation can not provide both an accountability review function (quality assurance) and an advice/assistance function as well. ERO have in the past been too far removed from the consequences of their own actions and even if they wanted to assist schools in need, they have been hampered to do so by legislation which does not permit this to occur.

This change to ERO would increase its public profile and professionalism and sense of partnership with schools. Furthermore, it may release ERO from their 'police' role and allow them to be seen in a more positive light.

OFSTED operate with a 'help' division as do other organisations in other countries. OFSTED also have what is essentially a 'crisis' team which respond to schools in need and that is a position worthy of greater exploration. ERO have had a tentative beginning to this approach with the post-review assistance, but this division needs to be much more significantly funded and extended to help all schools in need. This division should include personnel from 'outside' ERO, researchers, advisors and practitioners with suitable skills to aid and bring depth to the team. This division could also have useful linkages to the Ministry of Education's School Support Project.

There should be some research into alternative models, their efficacy and whether they could or for that matter should be implemented or imported here. It is time to hear from the voices of 'professional educators' and to more usefully respond to their needs.

There needs to be a significant injection of finance into investing and purchasing research - on New Zealand school improvement and effectiveness strategies (see Roberston et al., 1997). Austin et al. (1997) had suggested that ERO act as something of an information

broker for schools places they can get advice and assistance and this seems to me a sensible and practical suggestion.

The use of multi-disciplinary teams

ERO reviewer-base should be widened to include multi-disciplinary teams. ERO's credibility would be enhanced with employing educationalists, practitioners (including both school executive management staff and teachers) and researchers from the tertiary sector (colleges of education, polytechnics, universities), plus trained evaluators.

The review teams need to include members other than ERO personnel. In the first instance, they could include others with professional expertise and experience such as senior school management who could be seconded to review panels. For example, when reviewing a primary school, another primary principal from a local district could be appointed. This could aid collegiality within the local education context and breakdown some of the negative effects of the educational marketplace which continues to develop in the current educational climate.

There needs to be a pool of generalist reviewers, but specialists such as financial reviewers, Maori reviewers and experts in specific curriculum areas are equally important. For example, the dynamics of assessing the early childhood sector are dramatically different to those required to review a large multicultural secondary school. Therefore all sectors need to be reviewed by specialists in their respective areas.

In addition the panel should include lay members such as parents and community representatives. There are examples of these practices occurring, these being the New South Wales' Quality Assurance Directorate based in Sydney, and the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) in England and Wales. Having 'independent' members on review teams would provide a number of benefits. Firstly, it would 'demystify' the role of ERO to the general public. Secondly, it would increase their legitimation and credibility throughout the education sector. Thirdly, while not undermining ERO's objectivity, the presence of lay members serves to enhance the professional accountability among ERO staff. Fourthly, having parents and community members involved in the reviewing process could promote a healthier relationship between the ERO and Boards of Trustees.

The provision of lay inspectors was envisioned in the original Picot and *Tomorrow's Schools* proposals. An alternative proposal of peer reviewers advocated by McKenzie (1995) provides a further possibility for change.

Whilst the proposals outlined above would be some of my preferred policy options in terms of quantitatively changing ERO, I believe for the better, they also involve major fiscal implications in terms of significantly increasing ERO's present budget. If the Government were to reject an investment in ERO in the ways proposed and were looking to make some efficiency gains the two suggestions below would assist in this process.

Gaining efficiency options

If efficiency is a consideration I propose two options for consideration.

While OFSTED operates on a regular cycle of reviews of schools every six years (Ferguson, et al., 2000: 4) they increased the length between visits in 1996, this period I believe is too long and I offer two solutions as alternatives.

Now that self-review is mandatory, all schools should annually furnish a comprehensive self-review report to ERO for consideration. Once this report is received ERO then proceed to one of the following options.

(i) A random audit of 20 per cent annually of all schools thus potentially all schools could be on a five year cycle of reviews. Certain schools might be targetted if the self-review was not returned or that it was incomplete. Schools would 'be kept on their toes' as they would not know much in advance whether it was their turn to be audited.

(ii) Targetted approach: by targetting yearly 25 per cent of all schools a year, thus a four year cycle with the proviso that those schools not furnishing returns or sending them in incomplete might be targetted.

Whilst I am not wholly convinced of the current approach by ERO to release some 'good' schools from regular review (the Taumata Rau scheme), this might be an effective way if correctly implemented and monitored, of some cost-savings and efficiency gains, and is potentially worth pursuing.

Gains associated with inspection costs

In the UK OFSTED inspections are rather expensive, Wilcox & Gray (1996: 144) it was noted the figures of £30,000 per secondary school inspected was widely quoted during 1992 when tendering for inspection contracts was being discussed. Fitz-Gibbon (1996: 205) also identified OFSTED's cost for a school review as £30,000 per school. Furthermore, she noted:

Does OFSTED provide value for money? An inspection apparently costs about £30,000 per school. Other costs are the time and effort spent on producing the documentation to give to the inspectors. Where is the evidence that schools with large amounts of documentation are doing any better than schools with less or none?

Fitz-Gibbons' questioning of OFSTED would also apply equally to ERO in New Zealand except this research has not been done here, and we simply do not know. Robertson et al. (1997) had recommended that the total cost of an ERO report and any financial implications for the school arising from the ERO review should be included on the schools' ERO report. This is a sensible strategy for public reporting and accountability purposes and for assessing whether the Government as purchaser is getting value for money from ERO services or whether it should explore alternatives.

However, in relation to costings of their OFSTED counterparts ERO reviews are comparatively less expensive. An Accountability Reviews ERO costs primary school ranges between approximately \$5,000 - \$34,000 (for low to high cost schools) and secondary schools \$15,000 - \$45,000 (same parameters) (Canning, 1999b). As a comparison Discretionary Accountability Reviews ERO costs primary school ranges between approximately \$4,000 - \$26,000 (low to high cost schools) and secondary schools \$5,000 - \$29,000 (Canning, 1999b)

By adopting either of the targetting methods outlined earlier, there are significant efficiency gains to be made when one sees the cost of the price of the average reviews - especially if these are to be achieved on a three year cycle.

Conclusion

I believe ERO are at a cross-roads and the outcome of the latest Ministerial Review plus the change of Chief Review Officer (around the end of 2000) may transform both the philosophy and dynamic of the organisation. ERO are smart operators who shift their position quickly and often by stealth. They have been correctly reading the changing political terrain in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the past year and have adjusted their policies accordingly. What might have been unpalatable to educators under the previous government with its deliberate policies aimed at increasing competition and marketisation of education supported and perhaps I might say even encouraged by a melding of philosophies between senior national Ministers and ERO executive managers - is now no longer the case.

Aspects of the marketisation of education such as abolishing the derisive fully funded option (bulk funding) and reinstating zoning policies are already beginning to reverse the previous trends and eroding some of the effects of the previous administration. The relatively new coalition government are increasing expenditure social policy areas. I would maintain that ERO are developing in these new directions as a direct response to new political masters and a changing regime in education.

Furthermore, what I believe we are seeing are the tentative beginnings of 'new' more responsive to 'stakeholders' version of ERO (although it is still too early to assess this). Moreover, I would contend this is a further tangible example of ERO not so subtly shifting the terrain yet again. Many of its previous posturing and cajoling of teachers/and teacher educators would have been politically supported by previous governments. The current coalition government is traditionally more closely aligned with the educational community. I predict what we are observing is ERO transforming in order make itself more 'acceptable' to its political overlings. In addition I speculate that these changes represent ERO pre-empting and carefully positioning itself in readiness for the outcomes of this present ministerial review. This is at one level perhaps noble and worthy, yet at a deeper level it represents and organisation partially struggling for its political survival in the new political environment. While there has not been an overt discussion for some time about the potential fate of ERO from either the Prime Minister or the Minister of Education/responsible for ERO the original policy from Labour in opposition was to reabsorb ERO into the Ministry of Education. Given that these two organisations have a somewhat uneasy relationship this might potentially prove to be disastrous.

Attempting to speculate upon the outcome of the next ministerial review of ERO would be unwise, however, if some of the strategies outlined in this paper were to be at least considered, and investigated this would be at least a start. There is a deep-seated distrust of ERO as agency as it operates presently, it is seen as somewhat removed and divorced from the education sector. This distrust has culminated in another review occurring to investigate its practices. There is already a small, but growing literature from a large variety of sources critiquing its methods, approaches and public reporting of educational 'failure' (see Smith, 1997; Thrupp & Smith, 1999). I would recommend that educators/researchers and particularly the Rodger et al. (2000) panel revisit the recommendations/issues raised in the scholarly criticisms by Wylie/NZPF (1997) and Robertson et al. (1997) plus my own critique of the Austin Review (Smith, 1997). Read these then question and evaluate how far ERO have adapted in the past three years.

The suggestions raised in this paper as potential ways forward for ERO to transform are worth exploring. The following of the self-review model as advanced and implemented in Victoria provides a useful model, the implementation of self-review in conjunction with external audit is a useful strategy with could be investigated in further detail.

It would take a particularly courageous panel and government to recommend and then implement increasing ERO's budget but changing its structure in the ways mentioned - yet it would be worth doing. The voices of teachers have not been heard much in the past decade since *Tomorrow's Schools*, and it is time to consult, and to genuinely listen to how practitioners would view self-review, and how this could work for them in conjunction with some form of external evaluation.

It is my sincere hope, that in a year's time I will be able to report that the review has made a tangible difference in transforming the ERO into a valuable 'real' education evaluation agency with credibility amongst educators. It would be positive to report that ERO has improved its collegial relationships with schools and early childhood centres and has actually achieved its mission statement and strategic intentions.

What I hope not to have to report was that the Ministerial review was a waste of taxpayers money, and that as I did in 1997 that the Austin Review represented a lost opportunity to actually fully review the whole office organisation and to change its ethos. Ultimately, I concluded the review process was merely a 'legitimation exercise' (Smith, 1997) which I am confident that the present one is not - yet as the old maxim goes 'time will tell'.

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