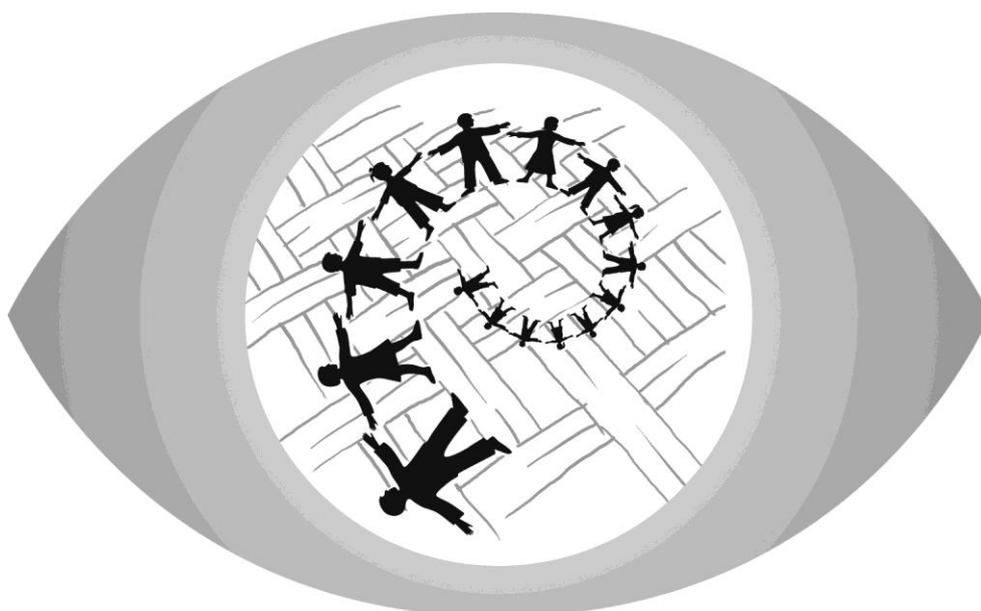




Evaluation at a Glance: 
Priority Learners in New Zealand Schools

August 2012



Foreword

The Education Review Office (ERO) is an independent government department that reviews the performance of New Zealand's schools and early childhood services, and reports publicly on what it finds.

The whakataukī of ERO demonstrates the importance we place on the educational achievement of our children and young people:

Ko te Tamaiti te Pūtake o te Kaupapa
The Child – the Heart of the Matter

In our daily work we have the privilege of going into early childhood services and schools, giving us a current picture of what is happening throughout the country. We collate and analyse this information so that it can be used to benefit the education sector and, therefore, the children in our education system. ERO's reports contribute sound information for work undertaken to support the Government's policies.

This report is the second in our *Evaluation at a Glance* series. It is a synthesis of material from 15 national evaluations and reports of good practice published in the last four years that, taken together, reveal three key issues facing New Zealand's education system. ERO believes that these issues, in particular, are hindering efforts to raise the achievement of New Zealand's lowest performing school students, our priority learners. In this report we discuss aspects of practice that have been especially helpful in raising students' achievement and fostering their engagement in learning.

Successful delivery in education relies on many people and organisations across the community working together for the benefit of children and young people. We trust the information in ERO's evaluations will help them in their work.



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August 2012

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Introduction

This report is a synthesis of findings from a wide range of evaluations carried out over recent years by the Education Review Office (ERO). As well as undertaking education reviews of schools and early childhood services, ERO produces system-wide evaluative information on significant educational issues, and publishes national evaluation reports on education sector performance and good practice.

Through ERO's programme of national evaluations, a large amount of information has been accumulated that identifies aspects of effective and less effective teaching, school leadership, and management practices that are impacting on students' learning. ERO decided to look across a range of recent evaluations to ascertain if there were patterns to the practices, with the purpose of identifying recurring themes that could be potentially addressed in schools, and by the Ministry of Education or other responsible agencies.

ERO has identified three key issues which evidence indicates are acting as impediments to New Zealand schools lifting their practice and, in particular, to raising the achievement levels of priority learners. This report also discusses aspects of practice that have been particularly helpful in raising students' achievement and fostering their engagement in learning.

Background

Priority learners are groups of students who have been identified as historically not experiencing success in the New Zealand schooling system. These include many Māori and Pacific learners, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and students with special education needs.

Their "success in education is essential to the Government's goal of building a productive and competitive economy...[and helping them develop] the skills needed to reach their full potential and contribute to the economy and society".¹

National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) data indicates a worrying gap between the achievement of Māori and Pacific learners, and New Zealand European learners.² In 2011, 77 percent of Year 11 Māori students, and 79 percent of Year 11 Pacific students achieved Level One NCEA Literacy requirements, compared to 91 percent of New Zealand European students. A similar picture is painted for the Level One NCEA Numeracy requirements, with Māori and Pacific students' achievement in 2011 at 81 and 84 percent respectively, compared to 93 percent for New Zealand European.³

The heartening news is that Māori and Pacific student achievement is improving. This is particularly encouraging given that more of these learners are being retained in the senior secondary school system.⁴ Nonetheless, too many priority learners are leaving school without the qualifications they need to enjoy economic security and contribute to New Zealand's economic growth. We owe it to these learners to make school a place in which they experience success.

¹ Key, J. (2012) *The Prime Minister's Results for New Zealanders*.p.3. Retrieved from http://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/all/files/The_Prime_Minister's_results_for_New_Zealanders.pdf (15 March 2012)

² Data accessed from <http://nzqa.govt.nz/assets/About-Us/publications/> on 10 May, 2012

³ Data sourced from NZQA website <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/qualifications/ssq/statistics/provider-selected-report.do?reportID=2135179> on 10 May, 2012

⁴ Data accessed from <http://nzqa.govt.nz/assets/About-Us/publications/> on 10 May, 2012

The Government's goal⁵ is that by 2017, 85 percent of 18 year olds will have attained NCEA Level Two or equivalent qualifications. This is the level of achievement that is deemed to equip students sufficiently to participate in employment and society in a productive and successful manner. Identified in Government policy are key levers that will have the biggest influence on improving their achievement – stronger teacher accountability for improving students' learning, information that is available to make appropriate decisions for and about students, and effective teaching. ERO has also identified through its own national evaluations that these factors are critically important for raising students' achievement.

If the 85 percent goal is to be achieved then a concerted effort is needed at every level in the schooling system to provide high quality teaching that accelerates priority students' achievement, and curricula that fosters their engagement in learning. A culture of responsibility for students' learning and wellbeing, and accountability for making a difference, must be the foundation on which all schools operate.

Methodology

The compilation of this 2012 Evaluation at a Glance publication⁶ involved analysis of 15 national evaluation reports. National evaluation reports make use of information gathered through regular education reviews of schools or early childhood services, or by specialist review teams. They are designed to present a perspective on what is happening nationally with identified aspects of educational practice that are of particular interest to ERO, the Ministry of Education and other education agencies.

The evaluations included in this analysis are listed in Appendix 1.

For this 2012 Evaluation at a Glance report, ERO pulled together recurrent themes across these evaluation reports, with a particular lens on how teaching, leadership and management practices posed barriers to learning or, alternatively, promoted the learning of priority students.

⁵ Key, J. (2012) *The Prime Minister's Results for New Zealanders*. Retrieved from http://www.beehive.govt.nz/sites/all/files/The_Prime_Minister's_results_for_New_Zealanders.pdf (15 March 2012)

⁶ An earlier evaluation at a glance report (*Evaluation at a Glance: What ERO Knows About Effective Schools*) was published in March 2011 and is available at <http://www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Evaluation-at-a-Glance-What-ERO-Knows-About-Effective-Schools>

Findings

ERO has identified three key interrelated issues that need to be addressed to significantly lift the achievement of students, particularly for priority learners. These broadly relate to how well schools are focussing on providing education that addresses the needs of students.

The fact that the issues are: apparent in both primary and secondary schools; involve many learning areas and contexts; and have been identified in a range of national evaluations, means we simply cannot ignore them. In addition, the fact that many of the issues impact on our most vulnerable students – priority learners – indicates there is an urgent need to address them.

Firstly, and most importantly, ERO encourages schools to develop systems, processes and connections that put students at the heart of learning and teaching, rather than on the periphery of school decision-making and the curriculum. Secondly, considerable work needs to happen before primary and secondary teachers and leaders understand the permissive nature and intent of *The New Zealand Curriculum*, and implement responsive curricula in their schools. Thirdly, improvements need to be made in the ways schools engage in assessment and evaluation processes so that these are dynamic and responsive to information about students.

The following sections discuss the three issues ERO believes are the most pressing for our education system, as identified in its national evaluation reports. These issues, if addressed by schools, could potentially make a significant difference for priority learners.

Issue One: Shifting the focus to student-centred learning

In the most successful schools, the trustees, leaders and teachers have an uncompromising focus on fostering students' interests and strengths, and on addressing their learning needs. They understand that their role is to serve students. Their philosophies about how students should experience education are lived out in rich learning programmes, thoughtful management of the curriculum, positive school cultures, and in effective leadership and governance practices. A synergy and coherence exists between these aspects that contribute positively to the whole experience of being a learner. Importantly, there is an ethic of care for students' current and future success.

These schools are characterised by a sense of optimism amongst teachers that they can improve students' learning. Leaders and teachers have the resolve to do this, and the disposition to creatively address the issues of students' achievement and engagement that present themselves in their schools. They approach the task of achieving goals for students through well coordinated systems, processes and plans. Students, teachers, leaders, trustees, parents, whānau and their communities are involved in supporting the initiatives that are taking place.

A 2010 evaluation of students with high needs in primary and secondary schools⁷ noted the features of schools in which there were inclusive practices. As well as caring about these students, the leaders and teachers typically:

- advocated strongly for the needs of students
- focused on adapting school systems, programmes and resources to meet the needs of the students
- were innovative in how they responded to students' learning needs
- had experience in working with students with diverse needs
- resourced programmes through creative problem solving
- worked effectively as teams
- had good practices in communicating with external agencies, families and whānau
- used information about students' strengths, interests and needs to develop and review programmes for students
- supported students well to manage transitions within and beyond the school.

ERO notes that while these practices are mentioned in an inclusion report, they are equally applicable to all school contexts. They reflect what is generally recognised as effective practice for all students.

We know about these practices, and the contexts in which they flourish, because they have been captured in ERO reports such as *Enterprise in the New Zealand Curriculum*, *ERO Evaluation: The Establishment of Trades Academies, An Evaluation of Service Academies, Careers Information, Advice, Guidance and Education (CIAGE) in Secondary Schools, Including Students With High Needs*, and *Promoting Success for Māori Students: Schools'*

⁷ ERO (2010) *Including Students With High Needs*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

Progress.⁸ The stories about leaders' and teachers' innovation and good practice in relation to priority learners can inspire others to do things differently and better.

Students as partners in learning

Mahuika, Berryman and Bishop assert that learning environments in which students' are honoured as partners in learning are "fundamental to the relationships that are developed [between teachers and students]."⁹ Partnerships that provide good opportunities for Māori students to "bring [into the classroom] what they know, and their ways of knowing and making sense of the world,...[signal to students] that their ways are valued, acceptable and accepted". These messages are important for building students' sense of themselves as competent and capable learners, and to achieving the objective of Māori enjoying educational success as Māori.

Examples of where this partnership is working well can be found in ERO's report *Working with National Standards: Good Practice*.¹⁰ Typically, good practice included opportunities for students to:

- understand their achievement in relation to the expected level and what they can do to make improvements
- set goals with their teacher
- make use of exemplars to support their learning
- talk confidently about their progress in relation to particular curriculum areas, learning goals and next steps
- keep informed about their progress in achieving goals such as through tracking sheets and teacher feedback
- take an active role in reporting their achievement and progress to their parents.

ERO has found that while teachers are drawn to the notion of students being included as valued partners in their learning, and despite the proliferation of discourse about partnerships,¹¹ there is still more work to be done before their practice reflects the spirit of reciprocity.¹² If we wish to foster students as "confident, connected, actively involved,

⁸ ERO (2011) *Enterprise in The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Education Review Office; ERO (2011) *An Evaluation of Service Academies*: Wellington: Education Review Office; ERO (2012) *Careers Information, Advice, Guidance and Education (CIAGE) in Secondary Schools*. Wellington: Education Review Office; ERO (2010) *Including Students With High Needs*. Wellington: Education Review Office; ERO (2010) *Promoting Success for Māori Students: Schools' Progress*. Wellington: Education Review Office. *The Establishment of Trades Academies* was not publicly released.

⁹ Mahuika, R., Berryman, M., & Bishop, R. Issues of culture and assessment in New Zealand education pertaining to Māori students. *Assessment Matters* 3, p.186.

¹⁰ ERO (2012) *Working with National Standards: Good Practice*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

¹¹ These discourses include: *The New Zealand Curriculum* which is underpinned by the notions of students as: "informed decision makers" (p.8), capable of "reflect[ing] on their learning processes" (p.9), informed about "what they know and can do and what they still need to learn" (p.40), and have an understanding of "the desired outcomes and the criteria for success" (p.40); the scholarly work of Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998) *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*. *Phi Delta Kappa International*; and until recently, national professional development programmes in Assessment to Learn.

¹² ERO (2011) *Directions for Learning: The New Zealand Curriculum Principles, and Teaching as Inquiry*. Wellington: Education Review Office; ERO (2012) *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*. Wellington: Education Review Office; and ERO (2012) *Working with National Standards to Promote Students' Progress and Achievement*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

lifelong learners”,¹³ then we must do better. To improve practice, teachers and leaders are advised to: familiarise themselves with the intent of the curriculum principles (particularly the principle of learning to learn), and the tenets that underpin the assessment described in *The New Zealand Curriculum*. They should also explore ways to make available to students the opportunities described in the *Working with National Standards: Good Practice* report.

In the *Careers Information, Advice, Guidance and Education (CIAGE) in Secondary Schools* evaluation, pastoral care systems had a significant focus on developing an understanding of the “whole student” and on fostering good relationships with students and their families/whānau/aiga. Perhaps the best examples of teachers fostering effective relationships with students come from ERO’s evaluations of the provision for some of New Zealand’s most vulnerable and educationally alienated students. The *Good Practice in Alternative Education* report describes students in alternative education provisions as those with “a history of limited success at school”, and “likely to have been in conflict with teachers and principals in the past [who] may see school as a place that is unsupportive and a waste of their time”.¹⁴ Despite these circumstances, good practice providers were typically creating effective environments to re-engage students in learning. The report notes that relationships between tutors and students were “respectful, relaxed and supportive”.¹⁵ Factors contributing to this were tutors’ ability to relate to students, engender their trust, and to appropriately address the educational and social complexities of students. Tutors who had a similar cultural background to students helped to build connections with them.

Leadership for improvement

It is leaders who generally drive curriculum review and development and who influence the practices of teachers. Effective leaders have a strong sense of ethical commitment to making school a place that fosters students’ learning and wellbeing.¹⁶ They convey to teachers that education about students is as much about focussing on students’ pastoral care as on ensuring that they are successful. As Anthony and Walshaw state: “Teachers who care work hard to find out what helps and what hinders students’ learning”.¹⁷

Research is conclusive about the effects that good leadership can have on teaching and learning. The *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*¹⁸ identifies five leadership dimensions that have a small to large indirect effect on outcomes for students. Dimension 4: Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, heads up the list for impact on students. Practice is particularly influential where leaders are “sources of instructional advice and expertise” and “actively involved with their teachers as the leading learners in their schools... including promot[ing] and participat[ing] in staff discussion of teaching and teaching problems” (p.101).

¹³ This is the vision for New Zealand’s young people expressed on page 8 of Ministry of Education (2007) *The New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in years 1-13*. Wellington: Learning Media Limited.

¹⁴ ERO (2010) *Good Practice in Alternative Education*. Wellington: Education Review Office, p.4.

¹⁵ ERO (2010) *Good Practice in Alternative Education*. Wellington: Education Review Office, p.7.

¹⁶ Anthony, G., & Walshaw, M. (2007) *Effective Pedagogy in Mathematics/Pāngarau Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

¹⁷ Anthony, G., & Walshaw, M. (2007) *Effective Pedagogy in Mathematics/Pāngarau Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p.54.

¹⁸ Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009) *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Importantly, leaders cultivate teaching communities that are focused on improving student success. They do this through an intensive focus on understanding the connection *between* teaching actions/decisions and students' engagement and learning. Leaders support teachers to share "collective responsibility and accountability for students' achievement and wellbeing" (p.120). Students are at the heart of school business.

However, the *Teaching as Inquiry: Responding to Learners* report,¹⁹ shows that this connection between deliberate teaching and learning was not yet well developed in the primary sector, and even less so in secondary schooling. While some leaders created opportunities for teachers to look closely at students' results, many had not focused teachers on deep and critical analysis of the relationship between achievement, progress and teaching practice. To bring about accelerated learning, there must be this focus on the interrelationship between "how teachers teach and what students learn".²⁰ This practice works best where teachers and leaders are disposed to trying new or different approaches to teaching and learning that might benefit students.

ERO's work indicates that a potential barrier to such activity is leaders' tendency to adopt a 'soft' and affirming approach to teachers. It is important that leaders respectfully challenge teachers' thinking, including unpacking the assumptions that sit behind some of their habitual practices, so that the focus of their work is always on improving students' learning. If teacher practices are not bringing about the desired shifts in students' learning then teachers, encouraged and supported by their leaders, should be investigating why this is so.

Perhaps the way forward is to build the capacity of leaders to take up their roles as provocateurs and advocates for students. MacBeath²¹ describes this as "subversive leadership" that is "restlessly and creatively discontent" in the pursuit of a good educational deal for students. It involves "constantly reminding colleagues of education's sacred mission" (p.245), and fostering "a climate in which critical inquiry is simply the way we do things around here" (p.246). Schools wanting to know more about how to foster such cultures should refer to the publications listed below.²²

Leaders in some of the most effective schools in the *Teaching as Inquiry: Responding to Learners* evaluation had well coordinated systems for supporting teacher professional learning. These systems were evidence-based. They intentionally focused on addressing individual teachers' professional learning needs by identifying how, through their practices, teachers could better meet the learning needs of students.²³ For example, on the basis of

¹⁹ ERO (2012) *Teaching as Inquiry: Responding to Learners*. Wellington: Education Review Office. Teaching as inquiry, embedded in school culture, and operating as a continuous cycle of improvement, has significant potential to bring about better teaching and learning.

²⁰ Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009) *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p120.

²¹ MacBeath, J. (2007) Leadership as a subversive activity. *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 45 no.3, p.242-264.

²² Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009) *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education (2008) *Kite Aotūroa: Improving Inservice Teacher Educator Learning and Practice Te Whakapakari i e Ratonga Whakangungu Kaiwhakaaka*. Wellington: Learning Media (especially the sections on Inquiry and Evidence-based Practice).

²³ Schools wanting to know more about how to do this should refer to Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007) *Teacher Professional Learning and Development Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

classroom observations and/or discussions about the progress of priority learners, leaders provided teachers with individual guidance, coaching and feedback about aspects of practice.

Issue Two: Knowledgeably implementing a responsive and rich curriculum

ERO's national evaluation reports identified that, generally, schools are not developing and managing their curricula in ways that are responsive to learners. Firstly, some schools do not make use of the information they have about students to design a curriculum that responds to their strengths, interests and learning needs. Secondly, there are gaps in many schools' understanding about a key element of *The New Zealand Curriculum* – the curriculum principles. Finally, there is evidence that aspects of the curriculum are being neglected in some schools. This is partly because of teachers' limited content and pedagogical content knowledge, and partly because of an erroneous perception that literacy and mathematics should be prioritised at the expense of other learning areas.

Knowledge of the New Zealand Curriculum

There is good evidence that some teachers and leaders do not have an adequate understanding of *The New Zealand Curriculum* introduced into schools in 2007. In 2010 and again in 2011, ERO undertook evaluations in schools to explore how the curriculum principles,²⁴ which are a key element of *The New Zealand Curriculum*, were being used to plan the school curriculum for students in primary and secondary schools. The first 12 pages of *The New Zealand Curriculum* guide teachers and leaders to engage in deep thinking about what really matters for their students, and the curriculum principles are the touchstone for designing and reviewing that curriculum. They are expected to be the foundation of responsive curriculum planning, implementation and review in each school.

When they are used well, as they were in about one-third of schools involved in ERO's 2011 evaluation,²⁵ the principles put students at the centre of teaching and learning. When they are not fully enacted, students do not have opportunities to experience a broad and deep curriculum that caters for their interests, strengths and learning needs, and promotes their independence, self responsibility and engagement.

ERO found that the principles were more likely to be evident in primary schools than in secondary schools. This may reflect the greater subject-specific focus in secondary schools compared to more integration of teaching across the curriculum in primary schools. Certainly, primary school leaders and teachers appeared to have spent more time thinking about the principles than their secondary colleagues. Either way, given the absolutely crucial role that the principles play in ensuring that the curriculum serves students, it would be worthwhile for secondary schools to gain a better understanding of them. This includes developing a better understanding about how they could be enacted in school practices and classrooms to enhance secondary students' learning.

In the group of schools (primary and secondary) where the principles were not so evident, teachers and leaders did not have a clear idea about what they were, how they could be planned for, or how they could be used as a framework for curriculum review. It was clear that four particular principles were not well understood – future focus, coherence, cultural

²⁴ These principles are: high expectations, Treaty of Waitangi, cultural diversity, inclusion, learning to learn, community engagement, coherence, future focus.

²⁵ ERO (2011) *Directions for Learning: The New Zealand Curriculum Principles, and Teaching as Inquiry*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

diversity and Treaty of Waitangi. These principles are so pertinent to priority learners it is crucial that schools improve their understanding of them.

A curriculum that is based on students' strengths and interests

New Zealand prides itself on its child-centred approach to learning, yet ERO's national evaluations would suggest that practice is not matching the rhetoric. ERO has found that some schools are not positioning students at the centre of learning and teaching. Students have simply been forgotten amongst the daily business of "delivering" education, including meeting the requirements of NCEA.²⁶ In some schools, there is a perception that the curriculum is crowded, and that only literacy and mathematics matter.²⁷ Students in these schools do not have the opportunity to enjoy a curriculum that includes all learning areas. For students whose strengths and passions lie in science, social studies, health and physical education or the arts, there can be long periods of time when these learning areas are not part of their curriculum.

Too many of our most vulnerable students, especially in secondary schools, are the unlucky recipients of a curriculum that is fragmented and bears no relationship to their cultural backgrounds or to contexts that have relevance and meaning for them. The curriculum they experience takes no account of their strengths, interests or next steps. Too many teachers and leaders are not sufficiently curious about how effectively students are learning. The outcome is that too many students are at high risk of making poor progress and of leaving school with few qualifications.

ERO's 2012 report *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*,²⁸ noted that most teachers did not make use of information about students' strengths, interests and next learning steps in classroom programmes. Instead, the curriculum was predetermined and sat apart from any information gathered about students. Far from being dynamic and responsive, the curriculum was an artefact prescribing what must be taught. The implications of this for priority learners are profound. These students are already in jeopardy because their achievement and progress is behind that of their peers. A curriculum that does not take account of students' prior learning places them at even greater risk of failure and disengagement from school.

In some schools there has been a particularly innovative approach to designing the curriculum so that students are engaged in learning and are achieving useful skills and qualifications that will equip them well to enjoy future workplace success. For example, in some of the case study schools described in the *Enterprise in the New Zealand Curriculum* report,²⁹ leadership was focused on building staff capacity to foster enterprise learning, teachers were responsive to the emerging interests and directions of students' enterprise initiatives, the curriculum was enriched by increased opportunities for students to learn within and beyond the school, and teachers used a variety of ways to know about students' learning.

²⁶ This finding is particularly apparent in ERO's 2012 report, *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

²⁷ ERO's 2012 report *Science in the New Zealand Curriculum: Years 5 to 8* showed providing students with a curriculum that addressed literacy and numeracy priorities came at the expense of providing high quality science learning programmes.

²⁸ ERO (2012) *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

²⁹ ERO (2011) *Enterprise in The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Education Review Office

Four of the 44 schools involved in the *Careers Information, Advice, Guidance and Education (CIAGE) in Secondary Schools*³⁰ evaluation had a well coordinated, innovative and responsive approach to managing the curriculum so that students can identify, plan and strive for their aspirations for the future. Leaders played a particularly pivotal role in making sure that “students’ aspirations had a high status across the school”. Evidence was found that there was “a school-wide emphasis on authentic learning that [was] relevant to the workplace” (p.9). Good opportunities occurred for students, in collaboration with their families/whānau, to set and review goals that linked well to students’ passions and to resources that could help to realise the goals. Importantly, there was a range of ongoing curriculum opportunities that were informative, inclusive of students, and involved rich and meaningful learning.

The responsive and inclusive curriculum

The function of *The New Zealand Curriculum* is to “set the direction for student learning and to provide guidance for schools as they design and review their own [local] curriculum”.³¹ In acknowledging that context matters, the intent of *The New Zealand Curriculum* is that schools develop curricula for their own students that are challenging, engaging and relevant. Building into the curriculum aspects which have particular significance for school communities ensures that learning has meaning for students, and is supported by their families and the wider community. Thus each school’s curriculum is a bespoke piece of collective thinking about what matters to them at particular points in time.

While a school’s curriculum framework is intended to provide information about the requisites and boundaries of students’ learning, best practice indicates that teachers must have latitude to interpret and adapt it in light of what they know about the students in their own schools and classes. Therefore, the curriculum would rarely look the same for any two classes or in any particular year. ERO’s findings indicate that a significant number of teachers, particularly in the secondary sector, are not developing responsive curricula, and that what is being offered to students constrains their learning in ways that are likely to inhibit their achievement, progress, and engagement.³²

Many of our priority learners are Māori and Pacific. Schools should be places where learners’ cultural and ethnic identities are acknowledged, celebrated and promoted through the curriculum. This point is highlighted in ERO’s 2012 report on Pacific students’ achievement³³ and also in our 2011 and 2012 reports on the curriculum principles. Bishop et al, emphasise the importance of Māori students’ culture being at the centre of interactions in the classroom so that learners “are able to make meaning of new information and ideas by building on their own prior cultural experiences and understanding”.³⁴

³⁰ ERO (2012) *Careers Information, Advice, Guidance and Education (CIAGE) in Secondary Schools*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

³¹ Ministry of Education (2007) *The New Zealand Curriculum for English-medium teaching and learning in years 1-13*. Wellington: Learning Media Limited, p.6.

³² ERO (2012) *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

³³ ERO (2012) *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

³⁴ Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Tiakiwai, T., & Richardson, C. (2003). *Te Kōtahitanga: The Experiences of Year 9 and 10 Māori Students in Mainstream Classrooms*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p.201.

ERO has a vital interest in supporting Māori learners to achieve their potential. ERO understands the importance of teachers, school leaders and trustees having a good understanding of Māori world views (te ao Māori), the aspirations Māori have for the success of their children and young people, and of the progress and achievement of every single Māori student.

Regardless of the number of Māori students on the roll, ERO would expect to see these aspects reflected in school planning and review (including in the charter and targets set for priority students), in the nature of the curriculum policies, and in enacted classroom programmes.

The *Pasifika Education Plan*,³⁵ the blueprint for better education outcomes for Pacific students, expresses the view that success in education “is about positively harnessing Pasifika diversity and multiple world views within an enabling education system that works for young people, their families and communities” (p.3). The curriculum should reflect these multiple world views and the richness of the diversity that comprises these communities.

ERO’s 2012 report on *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners*³⁶ noted that: “As schools develop their curriculum they should take into account the cultures, interests and potential of all their students, including those from Pacific cultures. The reality is that most primary and secondary schools in this evaluation had not drawn upon contexts and themes that were relevant to Pacific learners. Indeed, while references to Pacific students might appear in the overarching statements of a school’s curriculum, classroom planning and practice frequently missed opportunities to reflect the culture, knowledge and understanding of these learners.”

This report, as well as *Directions for Learning: The New Zealand Curriculum Principles, and Teaching as Inquiry* (2011), and *The New Zealand Curriculum Principles: Foundations for Curriculum Decision-Making* (2012), noted that many teachers were not making use of valuable information about students’ cultural backgrounds to plan programmes that celebrated and further extended students’ understanding of their own and others’ rich and diverse cultural backgrounds.

ERO’s Pacific report concludes, when a school’s curriculum “fails to connect learners with their wider lives it can limit their opportunities to respond to a particular context or to engage with and understand the material they are expected to learn”.³⁷ For Māori students, a curriculum that has limited or no connection with students’ language, culture and identity is not one that contributes to their self worth, to their sense of themselves as culturally located persons,³⁸ or to Māori achieving success as Māori as outlined in *Ka Hikitia*.³⁹

³⁵ Available at

<http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/PasifikaEducation/PasifikaEducationPlan.aspx>

³⁶ ERO (2012) *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners*. Wellington: Education Review Office, p.2.

³⁷ ERO (2012) *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners*. Wellington: Education Review Office, p.2.

³⁸ Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Tiakiwai, T., & Richardson, C. (2003). *Te Kōtahitanga: The Experiences of Year 9 and 10 Māori Students in Mainstream Classrooms*. Wellington: Ministry of Education, p.99, refer to cultural location occurring where teachers create learning contexts characterised by a pattern of learning and teaching relationships and classroom interactions wherein young people are able to bring who they are to the classroom and make sense of the materials and strategies used in ways that affirm their own emerging identities.

³⁹ Ministry of Education (2009) *Ka Hikitia Managing for Success: Māori Education Strategy 2008-2012*

School leaders have an important role to play in requiring teachers to position learners at the centre of classroom programmes, including ensuring that the curriculum has relevance and meaning for students. This might mean that their leadership role is less about monitoring that the school's mandated curriculum is followed to the letter, and more about reminding and checking that teachers are creatively and appropriately responding to their students.

Learning that leads to deep understanding

In addition to the points above about the adequacy of the curriculum which students experience, ERO found in its report *Science in the New Zealand Curriculum: Years 5 to 8*,⁴⁰ published in 2012, that there was a disturbing neglect of important aspects of the science learning area. Specifically, there was a tendency for teachers to subsume science into other learning areas, with the result that students had few opportunities to experience science as a pure discipline. Opportunities were missed whereby literacy and mathematics learning could be meaningful promoted through the science programme. Schools' approaches were lacking in attention to both the science curriculum knowledge strands, and the overarching Nature of Science strand, meaning that students' learning was neither balanced nor comprehensive.

An impediment to good science programmes was teachers' limited subject/content knowledge, and knowledge of the most effective teaching practices for fostering science learning. Typically, students' science programmes lacked depth and coherency, and a necessary focus on interactive and experiential learning that leads to deep understanding and engagement.

Examples of rich, inclusive and active learning are illustrated in the case studies included in the second iteration of the *Quality Teaching for Diverse (All) Learners in Schooling Best Evidence Synthesis [BES]*.⁴¹ The draft case study, *Developing communities of mathematical inquiry*, describes how two teachers progressively built cultures in their classrooms where students were empowered and equipped to engage deeply in collaborative learning. This learning challenged students cognitively and built their capacity to interact well with others. Practices included opportunities for students to: “engage in talk that probed mathematical ideas”, assimilate new ideas through “thinking time”, present their ideas through constructive argumentation, and be supported as they adjust to the “norms of behaviour” required for successful and respectful participation in the learning community (p.7). There was a particular focus on promoting the success of students through careful selection of peer support and strategic help from the teacher.

⁴⁰ ERO (2012) *Science in the New Zealand Curriculum: Years 5 to 8*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁴¹ The *Quality Teaching for Diverse (All) Learners in Schooling Best Evidence Synthesis [BES]* is currently under development by the Ministry of Education.

Issue Three: Using assessment information to know about, and plan for, students' learning

The curriculum that children experience from their early childhood to the senior secondary school “should prepare them for, and connect well with the next [stage in their learning]...[Students should] have a clear sense of continuity and direction” in their schooling. Their curriculum should (a) be coherent,⁴² and (b) promote students' successful learning, thereby laying the foundation for future achievement and engagement.

These objectives can only be met when teachers at every year level have a clear understanding of:

- (a) the expected learning students *should make* (developmental or achievement expectations)
- (b) the learning students *have made* (prior learning *and* achievement and progress)
- (c) the learning they *need to make* (the gaps between expectations and prior learning and achievement)
- (d) the impact that the curriculum has had on students' learning.

As already noted, it is essential that teachers also have knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds, including their bicultural foundations, so they can ensure that the curriculum which students experience is culturally and ethnically relevant. With a strong knowledge of all of the aspects mentioned above, teachers are well placed to plan a curriculum that links to, and builds on, students' interests, strengths, and learning needs.

Knowledge of expected learning

Documents such as the *Literacy Learning Progressions: Meeting the Reading and Writing Demands of the Curriculum*,⁴³ *The New Zealand Curriculum Mathematics Standards for Years 1-8*, and *The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing Standards for Years 1-8*,⁴⁴ describe the learning students are expected to make. The National Standards, for example, give teachers, parents/whānau and students a clear idea of how children are achieving in relation to the reading, writing and mathematics standards. Being clear about what needs to be learnt at each year level, identifying who is not meeting the standards and what help they need to reach a standard, means that underachievement can be more effectively addressed.

In its 2012 evaluation,⁴⁵ ERO found that 22 percent of schools (439 schools in the sample) were working well with the National Standards, and a further 50 percent were developing their systems and processes to work with the standards. Issues and challenges for the 50 percent of schools still developing their systems included helping leaders to better understand the standards so that they were in a stronger position to help teachers make judgements about students' achievement, progress and next learning steps.

⁴² Coherence is defined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (p.9) as an education that is, “linked within and across learning areas” and provides for “coherent transitions” and “pathways to further learning”.

⁴³ Ministry of Education (2010) *Literacy Learning Progressions: Meeting the Reading and Writing Demands of the Curriculum*. Wellington: Learning Media.

⁴⁴ Ministry of Education (2009) *The New Zealand Curriculum Mathematics Standards for years 1-8*. Wellington: Learning Media; and *The New Zealand Curriculum Reading and Writing Standards for years 1-8*. Wellington: Learning Media

⁴⁵ ERO (2012) *Working with National Standards to Promote Students' Progress and Achievement*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

There are implications for priority learners who are currently in the schools where the standards are not being implemented well or fully. Without a clear knowledge of what is expected of students at particular year levels, robust processes to identify who needs help, and a clear plan about how to help them, these students risk further failure in the system.

Knowledge of learners' achievement and progress

ERO has identified⁴⁶ that schools have issues in relation to knowing about the achievement and progress students have made. Firstly, ERO notes that leaders needed to more actively guide teachers to use effective assessment practices. Secondly, there is a clearly identified need for many leaders to develop their capacity to use achievement data for monitoring students' achievement and for school self review. This point was made in *Reading and Writing in Years 1 and 2*,⁴⁷ *Working with the National Standards: Raising Student Achievement in Reading, Writing and Mathematics*,⁴⁸ and in *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*.⁴⁹

Highlighted in the latter report was the need for better monitoring of Years 9 and 10 students' progress and achievement. Typically, teachers tested Years 9 and 10 students at the beginning and end of the year. Little assessment occurred in the interim that could inform teachers about how well students were achieving or progressing. Where information was gathered, it was often not used to adapt the programme to promote students' achievement and progress.

This finding is further supported by the *Promoting Success for Māori Students: Progress Report*.⁵⁰ Of the 60 secondary schools involved in this evaluation, only about one-quarter could provide detailed, reliable data on Māori student performance in literacy and numeracy in Years 9 and 10. A similar pattern was found in secondary schools' knowledge about Years 9 and 10 Māori students' progress in numeracy.

In the *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners* report⁵¹ ERO found a disappointing lack of focus on recognising and actively responding to the achievement disparity of Pacific students. Specifically:

- most schools did not carefully analyse Pacific learners' assessment results to determine actions they could take to accelerate their progress
- only about one-quarter of secondary schools specifically looked into how Pacific students achieved in mathematics and reading
- fewer than 20 percent of secondary schools investigated Pacific students' writing achievement and progress
- approximately half of the primary schools collected high quality information on Pacific student achievement in mathematics and reading
- only one-third of primary schools also collated data on Pacific students' writing.

⁴⁶ See footnotes 45, 46 and 47

⁴⁷ ERO (2009) *Reading and Writing in Years 1 and 2*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁴⁸ ERO (2011) *Working with the National Standards: Raising Student Achievement in Reading, Writing and Mathematics*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁴⁹ ERO (2012) *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁵⁰ ERO (2010) *Promoting Success for Māori Students: School Progress Report*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁵¹ ERO (2012) *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

A key understanding is the need for schools to recognise and cater for the significant diversity that comprises the Pacific populations in schools. As the above report notes, “it is not enough for schools to analyse and respond to achievement information of a notional Pacific ‘cohort’. Schools must also promote the learning of individual Pacific students, based on evidence they have collected and analysed about these learners’ cultural assets, interest, achievement and next learning steps” (p.2).

Meeting the needs of *individual* students, regardless of whether they happen to belong to a particular ethnic or cultural group is the cornerstone of current thinking in education.⁵² In fact, the National Standards policy is predicated on this very principle. If we wish to make a distinct difference to the achievement of priority learners, then we need to engage in a more fine-grained analysis of what is happening for *individual* students as one of the first steps in bringing about students’ success.

ERO’s evidence suggests that students with special education needs fare no better. The 2010 report *Including Students with High Needs*⁵³ found that the achievement and progress of these students was not monitored well, and that leaders needed to report to their boards on the actual achievement gains made by students, rather than on general progress, improved attitudes or programmes undertaken.

With gaps in some leaders’ practices in relation to assessment, it is not surprising that some teachers are also struggling to undertake effective assessment in their classrooms. Already mentioned is the significant gap between assessment information and the curriculum students experienced in Years 9 and 10. There appeared to be no imperative from leaders for teachers to use assessment information for planning.

Given that Māori, Pacific, and students with high learning needs are the main constituents of the priority learners group, it simply does not make sense to not know how well they are achieving and progressing in our schools, or to be making effective use of achievement information to plan appropriately focused, personalised programmes.

Knowledge about the learning which students must make

Many ERO reports have identified that schools are not taking a strategic approach to raising the achievement of priority learners. In the report *Promoting Success for Māori Students: Schools’ Progress*,⁵⁴ ERO identified that only 17 percent of primary schools collected, analysed and used achievement data well, including using it to set appropriate targets for improved Māori student achievement.

Secondary schools also need to make significant improvements in their practice. Of the 68 schools involved in the evaluation report *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*,⁵⁵ only a handful had set targets to raise the

⁵² For further information about this refer to Alton-Lee, A. (2012). *The Use of Evidence to Improve Education and Serve the Public Good*. Paper prepared for the New Zealand Ministry of Education and the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, Canada, April 2012.

⁵³ ERO (2010) *Including Students with High Needs*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁵⁴ ERO (2010) *Promoting Success for Māori Students: School Progress Report*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁵⁵ ERO (2012) *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

achievement of priority students. Where they had, ERO noted that these targets were frequently too broad to meaningfully guide teachers or to be measured.

Perhaps the most useful evaluation for pinpointing the issues for primary schools is ERO's 2012 report *Working with National Standards to Promote Students' Progress and Achievement*.⁵⁶ Setting targets for students was explored as part of this evaluation. ERO found that about three-quarters of the 439 schools in the sample had set targets in their 2011 charters related to National Standards. ERO also notes that these targets varied in their nature and quality. The following issues were identified:

- targets not being informed by school-level data
- trustees not receiving information about student achievement against the National Standards
- trustees not being involved in setting targets or decisions about resources for targets
- teachers not being included in decisions about, or aware of, the targets that had been set for students
- very broad or general targets that were difficult to measure progress towards
- targets not being focused on students below or well below the standards
- a lack of processes to monitor progress over the year
- trustees not receiving regular reports to enable them to monitor progress towards targets.

As the above report noted, targets are only effective where there is collective responsibility for improving students' achievement, and teachers are actively working towards the targets in their everyday work with students. In only 15 percent of schools were teachers aware of the targets. This indicates a clear lack of understanding about the purpose of targets and the necessary connection they have to teaching action. Targets on paper will not bring about the gains that must be made for students.

Together, these findings indicate an urgent need for leaders and teachers to strategically address the achievement of priority students. From a fiscal point of view, through identifying at-risk students early, and providing them with the help they need, they are less likely to need even more help at later stages in their education. The earlier their educational needs are addressed, the less likely it is that students will be permanently affected by poor motivation and a sense of diminished self efficacy. Timely and focused teaching and monitoring can contribute to students making good gains as we have seen in the research on schooling improvement.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ ERO (2012) *Working with National Standards to Promote Students' Progress and Achievement*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁵⁷ Such initiatives include Te Kōtahitanga evaluated by Bishop, R., Berryman, M., Wearmouth, M. & Clapham, S. (2011) *A Summary of Te Kōtahitanga: maintaining, replicating and sustaining change in Phase 3 and 4 schools*. Wellington: Crown; Otara: The Learning Community evaluated by Knight, N., Kirton, N., & McCaulay, S. (2008) *Developing Partnerships for Improving Student Outcomes*. Paper presented at the International Congress for Schooling Effectiveness and Improvement Conference Auckland, New Zealand 6-9 January, 2008; and Tamaki Achievement Pathway evaluated by Taylor, K (2008) *Community involvement in raising student achievement*. Paper presented at the International Congress for Schooling Effectiveness and Improvement Conference Auckland, New Zealand 6-9 January, 2008.

Knowledge of the impact that the curriculum has had on learning

Many schools know little about the impact that their programmes or initiatives are having on outcomes for priority students, or for students in general. In *Directions for Learning: The New Zealand Curriculum Principles, and Teaching as Inquiry*,⁵⁸ ERO notes that leaders' attention to reviewing the curriculum was not well developed in many schools. At a school level, review was not systematic or regular, and in classrooms, evaluation lacked a sharp focus on critical reflection about the impact of teaching on students' learning and engagement. The result was that leaders and teachers knew little about what is most effective with respect to learning and teaching. It was rare for school leaders to systematically evaluate the gaps in teachers' practices, and to address these through focused professional learning.⁵⁹

An example of poor internal evaluation practice is described in the report *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*. When students were involved in learning support programmes, information did not flow well between the learning support teachers implementing the programme and students' teachers. This meant that important insights about priority students were not known to the range of teachers with whom these students worked. Nor was the information used to adjust programmes so that students experienced greater success.

Perhaps the greatest current gap in practice relates to the failure of many school leaders to inform boards of trustees about outcomes for students, and to involve them in important decision-making, such as how to resource initiatives to improve priority students' learning. The report *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success* found that boards received little useful information about these students. Contributing to this situation was that very little information was gathered and analysed by school leaders that could be reported to trustees. In addition, where this information was available, it did not reach the board of trustees in a timely way so that it could usefully inform their decision-making. These findings point to a clearly identified need to build leaders' understanding of the strategic and collaborative nature of school decision-making.

In the report *Reading and Writing in Years 1 and 2*, ERO identified the need for leaders to provide trustees with more regular information that clearly showed the extent of underachievement in these year groups. Three years later a similar message was being conveyed in other ERO reports. The *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners report* revealed that fewer than 50 percent of boards of trustees received reports about Pacific students' achievement. These reports were infrequent and thereby limited trustees' ability to monitor the interventions they resourced.

ERO's report *Working with the National Standards: Raising Student Achievement in Reading, Writing and Mathematics*, indicated that trustees needed more support to understand and work with the standards as part of their governance role and responsibilities. What is

⁵⁸ ERO (2011) *Directions for Learning: The New Zealand Curriculum Principles, and Teaching as Inquiry*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

⁵⁹ Educators can find out more about this important practice by reading Timperley, H., Wilson, A., Barrar, H., & Fung, I. (2007) *Teacher Professional Learning and Development Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration [BES]*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

clear is that when schools have poor assessment and analysis processes, there is a flow-on effect in terms of the quality and usefulness of the information that feeds through to trustees.

Conclusion

In many ways New Zealand can be proud of having an education system that positions us amongst the better performing nations in the international educational rankings. However, we know that the significant gap which exists between our top performing students and our lowest performing students (the priority learners) must be urgently addressed. All New Zealand children and young people deserve an education that meets their needs, and it is up to us all to play a part in seeing that this happens.

This report has argued strongly for a greater focus on the ethics of teaching, particularly on the absolute necessity for knowing about learners as individuals who possess interests, strengths, and capabilities, and who are endowed with cultural backgrounds and knowledge that can contribute so richly to the curriculum.

Leaders generally undertake their work well in developing and reviewing the curriculum, in establishing assessment policies and practices, and in promoting aspects of teacher learning. ERO's challenge to leaders is to now consider how they can promote the deep and individualised learning of teachers that will raise the achievement of students in their classes.

Highlighted in this report are instances where teachers, leaders and trustees have dared to be innovative and creative in their response to "at risk" students. It is gratifying to know that some of our most vulnerable and alienated students have been the beneficiaries of the initiatives these schools and other organisations have put in place. ERO argues that innovation, creativity and responsiveness should be the norm in all schools and for all students.

Appendix 1

ERO (2009) *Reading and Writing in Years 1 and 2*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2010) *Good Practice in Alternative Education*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2010) *Including Students With High Needs*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2010) *Promoting Success for Māori Students: Schools' Progress*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2011) *An Evaluation of Service Academies*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2011) *Directions for Learning: The New Zealand Curriculum Principles, and Teaching as Inquiry*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2011) *Enterprise in The New Zealand Curriculum*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2011) *Working with the National Standards: Raising Student Achievement in Reading, Writing and Mathematics*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2012) *Careers Information, Advice, Guidance and Education (CIAGE) in Secondary Schools*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2012) *Improving Education Outcomes for Pacific Learners*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2012) *Literacy and Mathematics in Years 9 and 10: Using Achievement Information to Promote Success*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2012) *Teaching as Inquiry: Responding to Learners*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2012) *The New Zealand Curriculum Principles: Foundations for Curriculum Decision-Making*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2012) *Working with National Standards to Promote Students' Progress and Achievement*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2012) *Working with National Standards: Good Practice*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

ERO (2012) *Science in the New Zealand Curriculum: Years 5 to 8*. Wellington: Education Review Office.