

Freedom to teach creatively Granted by MOE & ERO

Increasingly schools and teachers are being challenged to move learners deeper into gaining understanding, higher thinking skills, problem solving and collaborative learning. Most teachers would be happy to respond positively to these challenges yet feel very constrained and limited by time and external demands.

Most teachers would want the freedom to:

1. Define what good learning is for our pupils.
2. Create our own assessment criteria.
3. Deliver quality learning.
4. Have an effective and efficient assessment and recording process.
5. Review the whole process to meet the needs of our pupils.

Regardless of how good this sounds in theory, it seems to falter when teachers and schools come face to face with their perceptions of the realities of curriculum requirements, assessment requirements, ERO reviews and time.

The following questions highlight the perceived restrictive pressures affecting teachers and schools.

What about coverage of the curriculum?

What about assessment, recording and reporting requirements?

What about our next ERO review?

Where do I get the time?

On the presumption that we want to deliver high quality creative teaching, facilitate high-level learning and move our pupils from retention to understanding then we do need to seek answers to these questions.

What about coverage of the curriculum?

Many teachers would agree with the writing of educationalists like Brandt (1993) who challenge the concept of coverage as a major curriculum approach. Brandt states *“The greatest enemy of understanding is coverage. As long as you are determined to cover everything, you actually ensure that most kids are not going to understand. You have to spend enough time to get kids involved in something so that they can think about it in lots of different ways and apply it – not just at school but at home and on the street and so on”*.

So where does the coverage pressure originate from?

A major contributing factor has been our curriculum documentation combining the National Education Goals (NEGs), National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) and the National Curriculum Statements. Goal 5 from the NEGs, stating the expectation that we deliver *“a broad education through a balanced curriculum covering essential learning areas”* combined with NAG 1 that formerly incorporated the same focus on a *“balanced curriculum”*, created huge pressure on teachers and principals to ensure the delivery of a balanced curriculum with wide coverage.

Fortunately the NAGs were revised in 1999 and NAG 1 now contains the phrase “*breadth and depth*” which replaces “*balanced curriculum*”. The intent of the ‘broad and deep’ phrase of the new NAG1 is for schools to teach “deep” in the areas identified as meeting the needs of their pupils and provide exposure to and “ongoing study” in the rest, which is the ‘broad’.

The Ministry Of Education website discusses the implications of the revisions of the NAGs. The issue of balanced curriculum is addressed and the question “**Are schools still required to provide a "balanced" curriculum?**” is answered. “*The revised Nags make it clear that priority is to be given to student achievement in literacy and numeracy, ... the Ministry considers that the balance of essential learning areas and essential skills is a matter for each school to determine within the framework provided by the national curriculum statements.*”... “*The achievement objectives are intended to be: sufficiently broad and flexible to allow for local interpretation and elaboration ... to empower schools and teachers to design programmes which are relevant to the learning needs of their students and communities*”.

http://www.minedu.govt.nz/web/document/document_page.cfm?id=5133

Very clearly, the Ministry is stating that it is up to the school to determine the curriculum balance that will be delivered and that this decision is to be governed by the identified learning needs of the pupils.

The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (http://www.tki.org.nz/r/governance/nzcf/ess_learning_e.php) is a document that further outlines the Ministry stance on the curriculum that is to be delivered to pupils. It states “*All seven learning areas are essential for a broad and balanced education. Schools must ensure that all students undertake continuing study in all the learning areas during each of the first ten years of schooling*”. The requirement here is for “*continuing study*” in all the learning areas rather than full coverage of every area. This is further clarified by: “*Schools may achieve a balanced and broad curriculum in a number of ways; for example, by organising their programmes around subjects, by using an integrated approach, or by using topics for thematic approaches. Schools have the flexibility to plan programmes to meet their particular need In whatever way programmes are organised, they must incorporate the knowledge and understanding described in all seven learning areas*”. The document reiterates “*The essential learning areas are broad, recognisable categories of knowledge and understanding. **They provide the context within which the essential skills, attitudes, and values are developed***”. This highlights a focus, or approach, that seems to have been lost in many of our schools. The learning areas have become the endpoint of the curriculum in contrast to the intent of the framework document which states clearly that the learning areas are actually the context within which we are to teach, develop and extend the essential skills, attitudes and values.

The importance of the Essential Skills of Communication, Numeracy, Information, Problem-solving, Self management and Competitive, Social and Co-operative, Physical as well as Work and Study skills are strongly stressed in this document as having a prime focus. It states plainly that these are a major focus of our curriculum, “*All the essential skills are important if students are to achieve their potential and to participate fully in society, including the world of work. In planning learning programmes, schools need to ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop the full range of the essential skills to the best of their ability*”.

This is followed by further emphasis on the role of the learning areas as the context for the development of these skills. “*These skills cannot be developed in isolation. They will be developed through the essential learning areas and in different contexts across the curriculum*”. There is also an underlying emphasis on the important place and value of collaborative learning as the prime means for the development of these skills.

“*A number of the essential skills may be developed through group activities. Furthermore, many of the skills will enable individuals to operate more effectively in group situations Students will learn to work in co-operative ways, and to participate confidently in a competitive environment.*”

Consequently, and in accordance with the clearly expressed expectation of the Ministry, any school that has effective learning as the core of its values will demonstrate a focus on the essentials skills, with attitudes and values being developed within collaborative learning and problem solving situations. Schools have explicitly been given the freedom to structure their programmes to meet these criteria. The demand for coverage does not come from the Ministry, which means that where teachers are feeling pressured by curriculum coverage

demands they are robbing themselves of their own time and energy to teach creatively and effectively. In this situation it is up to the school to review its curriculum to allow the identified pupil needs to be within carefully selected and realistic curriculum requirements.

What about assessment, recording and reporting requirements?

Goal 6 (NEGs) states that “*excellence is achieved through:*

- *the establishment of clear learning objectives,*
- *monitoring student performance against those objectives*
- *providing programmes to meet individual’s needs”.*

A common interpretation has been that we need to cover all the achievement objectives and assess against them. The Ministry also addresses this issue by posing the question: “**Do schools still have to monitor student progress against achievement objectives?**” to which it supplies the answer: “*Schools do have to provide a description of how well their students are doing The objectives are not intended to be a checklist of assessments to be ticked off for each student or aggregated to report curriculum level ratings for students The achievement objectives are intended to be:*

... sufficiently specific to provide students, teachers, parents, and communities with clear information about what is to be learned and achieved during the years of schooling”

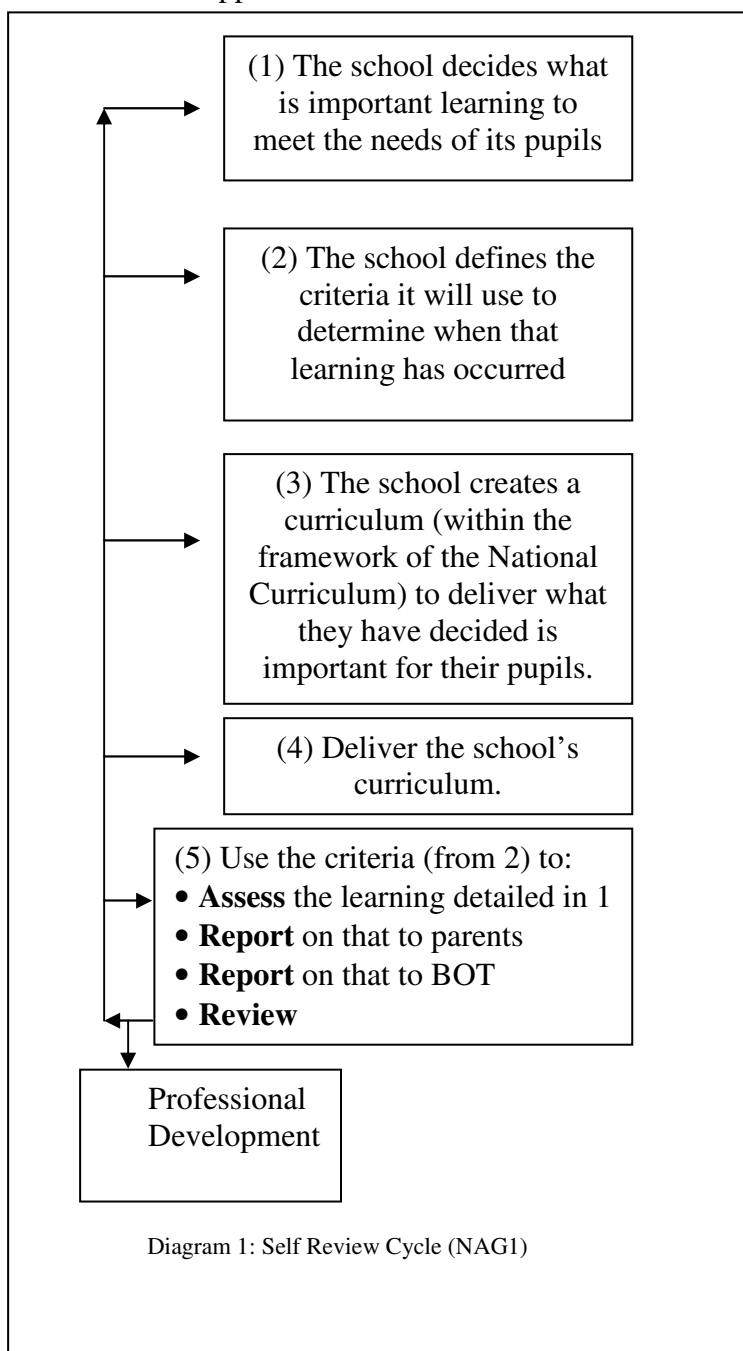
“A critical factor is that sufficient assessment information is gathered and analysed to enable sound judgements about achievement and progress to be made”.

(The New Zealand Curriculum Framework, page 23).

The Ministry states unequivocally that the Achievement Objectives are **not** intended to be a “*checklist of assessments*”. It is sad to see the long hours and huge effort that are being expended in so many of our schools to track pupil assessment against massive collections of achievement objectives. This focus has most definitely had the effect of, draining teachers of time, energy and creativity. Fortunately, the Ministry of Education has now clearly stated that this is neither required nor expected.

The expectation is for focused, purposeful, useful and relevant assessment of pupil achievement in carefully selected aspects that is then used for assessment, recording, reporting and review as illustrated in diagram 1.

There is now no pressure in terms of quantity of assessment coming from any source other than the school itself. Schools have been given the freedom to create their own assessment load. The challenge is



to create an assessment package that effectively measures pupil progress against identified learning needs and to use the resultant data to review all relevant aspects of the school's learning programme.

What about our next ERO review?

Schools seem to be placed under huge pressures in terms of compliance, curriculum delivery and assessments when faced with ERO reviews. "This is the culprit!" is the cry of many teachers, BOTs and principals. It follows then that we should examine ERO's documentation, especially as we are moving into a new era of ERO reviews, 'The Education Review'.

(<http://www.ero.govt.nz/EdRevInfo/ERprocesscontents.htm>).

What is the focus, the drive and purpose of the new review system? This is answered very clearly in ERO's Framework for Reviews document <http://www.ero.govt.nz/EdRevInfo/Framework.htm>.

"ERO's approach to reviews:

- focuses on student achievement; and
- builds on schools' existing processes of self review.

The purpose of ERO reviews is to contribute to improved student achievement. When ERO reviews schools it has a key interest in information that the school has on student achievement and also looks at the way in which school programmes and processes contribute to achievement."

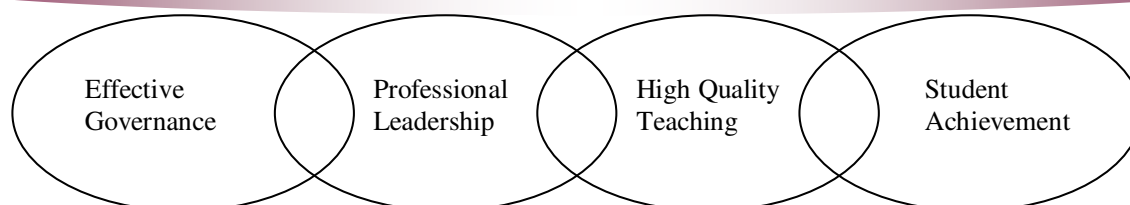
Pupil achievement is the focus and this will be identified primarily through examination of the school's own self review. "A key component of each Education Review is information from the school's own self review

....

The review will focus on factors in the school that are most likely to make a difference to student achievement. In particular, the aims for the review are:

- to identify the specific areas for investigation, through discussion with school management and board members either in advance or at the initial stages of the review;
- to use the knowledge that is available in the school and its community through the school's self-review processes (this may need to be augmented by ERO's own investigation where self-review information is limited); <http://www.ero.govt.nz/directions/EducationReviews.htm>

Positive and safe school environment



Involved families and communities

Diagram 2: The Chain of Quality

It is the "Chain of Quality", diagram 2, (<http://www.ero.govt.nz/EdRevInfo/Framework.htm>) that provides the scope of the Education Review with the focus in each area on:

"How well do students learn at the school?"

"How good is the school's information and analysis on student achievement?"

In terms of this article the pertinent areas are Student Achievement and High Quality Teaching.

Student Achievement

(<http://www.ero.govt.nz/EdRevInfo/Framework.htm>)

"The reviewers will have a range of questions they will seek the answers to:

- *What is the extent and quality of the information the school has about individual student achievement in relation to the essential learning areas, essential skills, attitudes and values, and what the school's community thinks is important in terms of achievement?*
- *How well is this information used, both formally and informally, to develop programmes to meet the needs of individual and groups of students?*
- *Do students reach a satisfactory standard in relation to the levels of the curriculum?*
- *Is the rate of progress of students reasonable in relation to what could be expected?*
- *How well does the school use information about student achievement to identify individual or groups of students who might be of particular interest or concern (for example, special abilities, special needs, gender, Māori, Pacific, other)?*
- *How well do the school's programmes meet identified needs of students who might be of a particular interest or concern?*
- *How useful is the school's reporting to parents on student achievement?"*

It is vital to read the first question in its entirety because the context is in terms of “*what the school community thinks is important*”. The expectation is not to assess students across every aspect of the curriculum but to assess against what the school identifies as being important for their pupils. This is the scope that the rest of the questions operate within.

This gives schools a mandate (as outlined in diagram 1) to:

- identify clearly the learning that will meet the needs of its pupils
- collect adequate, valid and useful data pertaining to pupil achievement in those aspects use that data to:
 - develop and review programmes aimed to meet the identified learning needs
 - identify individuals or groups of students of concern
 - report on relevant pupil progress

High quality teaching and learning

(<http://www.ero.govt.nz/EdRevInfo/Framework.htm>)

“*The focus of reviewers will be to find answers to these questions:*

- *How effectively do teachers develop and share expectations for student learning?*
- *How well do teachers use assessment to improve learning and achievement?*
- *How well do teachers build on students' prior knowledge?*
- *Are the learning opportunities provided by teachers as effective as possible in terms of meeting student needs? If not, how could they be improved?*
- *How well is the time available used for learning purposes?*
- *Are learning difficulties identified sufficiently early and in a valid way?*
- *How effectively is support provided for students who are not achieving, who are at risk of not achieving, or who have particular learning needs?*
- *How well do teachers respond to changes in the curriculum and utilise pedagogical knowledge effectively in the classroom?*
- *How effectively do teachers respond to community interests and concerns for student learning?"*

We see here a focus on effective teaching that is targeted at meeting identified needs, utilises assessment as an effective tool, builds on pupils' prior knowledge, is responsive to curriculum changes and is based on sound pedagogy. This raises two questions.

**Where is the emphasis on curriculum coverage?
Where is the emphasis on time consuming assessment and recording?**

The answer is clear. It no longer comes from the Ministry or ERO. There is a very strong expectation from ERO that schools will be innovative and creative in developing and revising their instructional programmes to meet the needs of the pupils within the scope of the National Curriculum Framework. Some teachers are then likely to ask, skeptically, whether this theory will be carried out in practice. To check this, we can examine the reports being posted on the ERO website as a result of the new Education Reviews. Though we have only a small number of these new reviews, it is informative to examine and compare some of the comments made by ERO in terms of the three issues of Assessment, Self Review and Curriculum Coverage. (The following are direct quotes from published reviews but the specific schools will not be identified here.)

Assessment Systems:

School A: "...have developed a system that generates useful and reliable assessment information in all areas of the curriculum. They implement a summative assessment plan and make appropriate use of assessment data to make judgements about student achievement and progress."

The indication above is that the system is effective across the curriculum and facilitates decision-making and review processes. Note the contrast with the following statement indicating that assessment and recording are occurring, but in a manner that is ineffective for any review of learning.

School B: "As yet, there is no school-wide system to collate the information on curriculum coverage. This is recorded by individual teachers for their own classes. The absence of an overview limits the ability of the principal to formally monitor curriculum delivery and to assure the board that all students receive appropriate breadth and depth in each curriculum area."

School A: "A sound school-wide framework provides clear direction for the gathering and recording of assessment information. Teacher implementation of the school's procedures is consistent. ... School-wide aggregation and analysis of student achievement information provides the basis for in-depth reviews of targeted curriculum areas." For this school there is a difference in the depth of assessment and recording across the curriculum areas. The system in place values teacher judgment, which is supported by effective data used for reporting and planning. By contrast we find a comment like this for school B, *"The teachers need to make sure that assessment provides information that helps students in their learning, and enables teachers to evaluate and report the effectiveness of learning programme"*, which expresses concern that the assessment carried out is not useful in terms of measuring pupil achievement against the identified learning needs. What a waste of time for busy teachers!

Self Review:

School A: "Through its internal quality monitoring processes the management team has identified that the next developmental steps should focus on further refinement in specifying learning outcomes in unit planning. The Office agrees with this finding. More specific outcomes should lead to improved planning for focused teaching, learning sequences and assessment tasks". This interesting comment indicates a school that has a good self review process in place, through which they have identified a need, ERO agree and support the next step. Elsewhere we can find comments like this one for School B, *"At present trustees receive insufficient information about student achievement for them to identify the trends and patterns of student achievement for groups of children over time. As a result, they do not know how well they are promoting student achievement"*. The concern here is the inability of the school to identify any trends and patterns over time, therefore contributing to inadequate self review.

Curriculum Coverage:

What is ERO saying about this?

A search of the ERO reports for the phrase "curriculum coverage" (carried out on 23.5.2002) turned up 629 reports containing the phrase. Of these the phrase only occurred in 7 of the 71 new Education Reviews. One school requested that ERO look at "curriculum integration" and the ERO comment is *"A partially integrated model of curriculum delivery has been adopted. Reading and numeracy, however, remain as discreet (sic) entities on classroom timetables. Other strands of the English curriculum are taught in the*

context of other essential learning areas. This model was adopted to develop language in meaningful contexts and to meet **curriculum coverage** requirements. Advisory support has assisted teachers to plan and implement the model.” This school has created its own solution to meeting language needs by using curriculum areas as the context for its language programme. There was no emphasis from ERO on coverage; the emphasis came from the school. This occurred in 2 other schools that requested ERO specifically to look at some aspect of curriculum coverage.

Another school received this comment: “Unit plans identify achievement objectives chosen for assessment without a focus on planning to meet the curriculum coverage requirements outlined in school policies”.

The issue here is that the school has policies that outline the expected curriculum coverage but there is no link between the assessment and the expected coverage. The focus from ERO is on a mismatch between documentation and practice and this was the finding in the remainder of the reviews that mentioned curriculum coverage.

The major pressure for curriculum focus that we have historically associated with ERO has been replaced with a new focus on identifying pupil learning needs and having a process in place that aims to meet those needs.

The problems being identified under the new reviews fall into four main categories.

1. Assessment is not providing an adequate enough foundation for the school to make well-informed decisions in their review process.
2. Their self review process is inadequate
3. Schools have no valid review process in place.
4. Processes put in place are ineffective in terms of facilitating learning.

Where do I get the time?

This question has been answered by the other two. The message is that teachers do have time. We have our pupils in class for roughly 5 hours a day, 5 days a week. We have the challenge to define what we consider as important learning for our children and the freedoms to make that learning a reality. We must ensure that we do not allow ourselves to be robbed of this time because we have not defined the learning we really want to occur and because we are not delivering relevant learning opportunities.

If we want our pupils to achieve better thinking and learning strategies, problem solving skills, communication skills, collaborative and social skills then surely these are what we should build into the curriculum for our school and then actually teach these aspects. We have been given permission, if not a mandate, by ERO and the Ministry to do just this. However, these revised expectations have one further hurdle to overcome before they become reality in our schools. This obstacle is identified by David Perkins (1992, p52) who criticises most educational settings because they “neither labour very hard to build teachers’ knowledge of new educational perspectives nor allow teachers the flexibility or freedom from the coverage fetish to pursue more enlightened instruction”. This is a new perspective and it is up to the leadership in our schools to ensure that these freedoms become a reality in our schools for the benefit of all concerned.

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