

## Evaluation in the Shaky Isles

In September 2010, a magnitude 7.1 earthquake struck in Canterbury, a region in the South Island of New Zealand. This event damaged many buildings but resulted in no loss of life. The initial earthquake was followed by a sequence of aftershocks and new earthquakes, some of which have had a devastating effect on the buildings and infrastructure of Christchurch, New Zealand's third largest city. The most destructive was the 6.3 magnitude quake on February 22, 2011. The education community, like everyone else, has been severely affected by the ongoing earthquakes. This paper explores the impact of the crisis on evaluation practice in an education setting and the role that evaluation can play when faced with such realities.

The "Shaky Isles" was a nickname given to New Zealand in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by early immigrants to Wellington, Nelson, Wanganui and Taranaki.<sup>1</sup> They found the seismic activity alarming. New Zealand lies on the margin of two colliding tectonic plates, the Pacific and Indo-Australian plates. Earthquakes are common, particularly in the southwest of the South Island and in the central North Island. However, there was no awareness of the existence of faults underneath Christchurch or on the Canterbury plains. The Greendale fault that caused the September quake had not been active for 16,000 years. To date, there have been over 11,000 aftershocks since September 2010, 49 of which have been of magnitude 5 or greater<sup>2</sup>.

The Education Review Office (ERO) is a government agency in New Zealand whose role is to evaluate and report on the quality of education across the pre-tertiary sector: schools and early childhood centres. The Southern Region, Te Tai Tonga, comprises an office in Christchurch and one in Dunedin. The Christchurch office was situated on Cambridge Terrace in the central city area. When the destructive earthquake occurred in Christchurch on February 22, 2011, the building in which the local Education Review Office was located collapsed. The ERO office was on the third floor. Although 18 people died in the Pyne Gould Building, all our staff survived. Six of our staff were trapped in the collapsed building. Of those, five were rescued in the early stages and one, review services manager, Ann Bodkin, was only rescued after 25 hours trapped under her desk – the last person rescued in the city.

Nearly 150,000 students and over 10,000 staff were engaged in education in Canterbury when the February earthquake struck. Within minutes, staff across the region were making arrangements for the safety of learners. All tertiary providers, schools and early childhood centres across the region closed their doors until further notice. Not one child, student or teacher in the pre-tertiary sector who was in the school or centre at the time, lost their lives. Credit is due here to the response of staff and the preparedness of schools and centres for emergencies. The Ministry of Education<sup>3</sup> responded very quickly by:

- Relocating or co-locating 18 schools – [55% of secondary students experienced co-sharing]
- Providing transport for about 7,000 students daily
- Relocating students from three residential schools
- Attending to property needs, for example, portable toilets, re-locatable classrooms, safe water and sewage services.

As of February 2012, there were 5,400 fewer students enrolled in greater Christchurch schools than at the time of the February 2011 earthquake. A further 1,700 students had enrolled at another school in the city. Many families had moved out of the city, some temporarily and some permanently.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaky\\_Isles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shaky_Isles)

<sup>2</sup> Canterbury Quake Live website

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Education. Shaping Education. May 2012.

The principles underpinning the response from the Ministry of Education were to:

- Support children and students to achieve the best possible educational outcomes
- Secure sufficient levels of access to high quality education provision
- Prioritise the needs of target groups within the education system
- Focus on the future.

The Education Review Office supports these priorities in its work in the sector.

The immediate impact on ERO's evaluation work was that all education reviews in the city and immediate surroundings were postponed. With all physical files and resources in the office lost, essential equipment needed to be resupplied to the team and a business continuation plan put in place. Because our office was part of a larger organisation, all electronic records were saved on the ERO network. The process of ringing around all the schools and early childhood centres on the schedule for review to reassure them that all current work was on hold was quite emotionally draining. We quickly learned that the most important skill was empathy – phone calls involved listening to people's stories, listening with the heart – whakarongo.

The crisis changed the work practices for the evaluation teams as well. Evaluation staff were working from home, and generally travelling outside of Christchurch for regular work. While they were dealing with the immediate aftermath of the continuing earthquakes, for example, damage to their own homes, extended family, and changes in city infrastructure, regular reviews were continuing on the West Coast, North and South Canterbury and further afield. Review teams started to return with stories of wider impacts from the situation in Christchurch. Families were enrolling their children in schools outside of Christchurch. These schools in turn were experiencing roll fluctuations, the need to find more re-locatable buildings, and classroom impacts from children who were very stressed and finding it difficult to cope.

Listening to the stories from schools and centres in Christchurch and beyond, it became clear that there were responses and solutions to the crisis situation that could provide useful learning for others in the wider New Zealand community. We decided to add to our evaluation framework for schools and centres an investigation about resilience and innovation in Canterbury schools and centres. The aim was to gather and share some of the learning that had taken place in institutions as a result of the natural disaster. Review teams collected examples of innovative and/or successful practices that board members, managers, education leaders and teachers in Canterbury schools and centres had used during the recent and ongoing earthquakes.

We wanted to find out how successfully schools and centres had supported their children, families and community during the period of significant disruption and loss caused by the ongoing earthquakes and aftershocks in 2010, 2011 and 2012. The project plans to identify innovative and successful crisis management practices that should be shared with teachers across New Zealand to help them learn from the experiences and responses of Christchurch schools/centres to a significant natural disaster, and the over-riding need to keep their children safe, settled and learning.

The approach we have taken draws from appreciative inquiry theories. The evaluation inquiry focuses on finding out what worked and why. We listened to the stories told by students, teachers and managers and encouraged participants to unpack the positives from the experience. We wanted to steer people away from focusing on the negative aspects: fear, panic, or potential dangers, and look at how things worked when they were successful.

Preskill and Catsambas (2006) wrote about appreciative inquiry:

*“By helping organisations envision a future based on past successes, appreciative inquiry is able to energise and motivate them to strive for more peak experiences because they know what is possible”.*

Preskill cites Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) who consider that *“appreciative inquiry is about conversations that matter”*. Questions need to be learning oriented, reflect on past successful experiences, foster creativity and innovation and stimulate excitement and a sense of accomplishment.

Evaluation writers agree that the appreciative approach works because:

- It builds relationships where people are valued as individuals
- It creates an opportunity for people to be heard
- It encourages people to be positive.

The “appreciative” part is about recognising the best in people and affirming past successes. It is still an “inquiry” or evaluation however, because it involves asking questions, exploring and investigating why something worked and what can be learned from the story.

This approach fits well with current approaches to evaluation in ERO. Recent changes have been designed to make ERO’s reviews of schools and early childhood centres more responsive to their different contexts. The Canterbury context is unique and different schools and services have experienced its impact in varying ways. The principles underpinning ERO’s evaluations include being transparent, collaborative and participatory. ERO evaluations are informed by evidence and one of our aims is to build evaluation capacity through the review process itself. Several evaluation researchers have found that appreciative inquiry has much in common with participatory, collaborative and learning approaches to evaluation.

In the principles and guidelines for the design and conduct of an ERO review, responsiveness is described as taking account of each school’s unique context, situation and circumstances and of the diverse perspectives of stakeholders. ERO’s procedures are based on the principle that inquiry, through action and reflection, should underpin the progressive development of a school’s self-improving cycle. We were confident that the evaluation framework currently in use in ERO was sufficiently flexible to be able to respond to the different contexts of our schools and centres in Canterbury.

The evaluation competencies that are most important in this context and approach are around relationships. The *anzea* (Aotearoa New Zealand Evaluation Association) evaluator competencies refer to *“engaging in mana-enhancing relationships”*. The explanation for this behaviour talks about this being the expression of *manaakitanga* (hospitality and kindness to others). This way of engaging with people in ways that demonstrate care for their spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual dimensions as a person is particularly important in the emotionally-charged contexts in the Canterbury region. Building such relationships provided opportunities for shared learning.

ERO’s own competency structure refers to:

- engaging in positive and constructive interactions with groups and individuals
- identifying and responding to a range of review contexts
- active listening.

Our values, or *mātāpono*, expand on this concept of listening. *Whakarongo* involves listening with the heart, giving people time and space to tell their stories, listening with respect and without

jumping to conclusions, and listening with all the senses. Evaluators need to give themselves and participants in the evaluation time to ponder and reflect. Listening with empathy has been easier for Christchurch staff because of the range of personal experiences people have had during and after the major seismic events. Empathy was an authentic response, the shared experiences creating a stronger basis for effective communication.

This evaluation was integrated into the regular ERO Frameworks for reviewing schools and early childhood services. For schools, our key evaluation question is: *How effectively does this school's curriculum promote student learning – engagement, progress and achievement?* For early childhood services: *How well placed is this service to promote positive outcomes for all children?* Within these frameworks we invited participants to share what they had learned from their response to the crisis, things that worked well they thought would be worth sharing more widely. The initial findings included the following themes.

- The importance of reviewing and renewing crisis management systems
- Communicating is the key –giving the right information to the right people
- Supporting families after the crisis
- Incorporating emotional resilience in education programmes
- Provision of emotional and practical support for staff members
- Impact on schools and centres in the rural areas of Canterbury and further north and south.

A key message coming through from the schools and centres is the importance of placing a strong emphasis on providing calm, predictable, supportive environment for children and their families.

Another major way in which ERO responded to the crisis in its evaluation work was in the way we managed reviews during 2012. In 2011 we postponed all reviews in the more severely affected parts of Christchurch, particularly in the eastern suburbs. Moving into 2012, we realised that if we were to be true to our whakatauki, that the child is the heart of the matter – *Ko te tamaiti te pūtake o te kaupapa* - we needed to return to these schools to evaluate outcomes for these vulnerable students. Again, we looked at our evaluation methodology and framework for review to design a specific approach for these schools. The framework proved flexible enough to adapt to the particular context of this group of schools.

The approach fitted well with our complementary<sup>4</sup> approach to evaluation. ERO as the external evaluator and a core government department has a particular role in providing accountability and promoting improvement. We recognise schools as being the primary evaluators of their own work. Regular and ongoing self review should be an integral part of school operations. Self review provides accountability for the board and the government and promotes ongoing schooling improvement. ERO's external evaluations are usually on a three-year cycle, not part of an annual cycle. The review process begins with what the school knows from its own self-review processes. ERO makes a judgement about the quality of the internal evaluation work that has been happening. Is it sufficiently robust and comprehensive for the board to be able to sustain improvements over time? Is it supported by convincing evidence, for example, records of students' learning progress and survey data from stakeholders?

A cluster approach to sixteen of the affected schools on the east side of Christchurch was taken. Four teams of two reviewers worked with a cluster of four schools in the same suburb. One team member was from the Christchurch office and the other from Dunedin, providing a more impartial /

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<sup>4</sup> Mutch 2009. Complementary Evaluation theoretical development. Education Review Office Framework for Reviews.

independent perspective. Principals and board members of these schools were invited to a meeting where the evaluation approach was discussed and agreed to. The project leader met with the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery authority (CERA) education group to gain a closer insight into the situation in this part of town, in terms of property, resources and personnel. Some reports indicate that 2012 is not better and possibly worse than 2011 as the uncertainty around the recovery process continues and the initial rush of adrenalin evaporates. All evaluators became very familiar with the particular contexts and the stresses and challenges the schools were facing.

Some of the adaptations included:

- reducing the time spent with students and teachers, observing in classrooms, so that ERO was not creating additional stress that might negatively impact on learning
- having a greater focus on what the leaders and managers, and governors, knew about students' learning and well-being
- evaluating the quality of the board's existing planning and reported information
- focusing on the boards' current priorities.

Yolande Wadsworth<sup>5</sup> talks about the therapeutic value of evaluation. Inquiring into or reflecting on human activity is or should be an ongoing emergent process in the cycle of life. The inquiry process can stimulate learning and promote change. The process of reflection or evaluative inquiry can be regenerative and energising. It affirms what is going well and projects us forward into the future into another cycle of action and monitoring. The evaluation process affirms people as observant and adaptable. ERO intends that, through flexible and responsive processes, evaluations of schools in the quake-affected east side of Christchurch will be a positive and creative experience for the schools involved, promote ongoing improvements in schools and contribute to improving educational outcomes for the students concerned.

This project is being evaluated in Term 3 by an external evaluator. The project will help ERO identify trends and issues that might affect other reviews in Christchurch. It might also give us information about how flexible and innovative ERO evaluation methodology proved to be in this specific context. Initial feedback from schools indicates that the evaluation process was both robust and useful. One principal described it as a: "*really reflective reciprocal type of review*".

Ritchie and MacDonald (2010) concluded their article on Evaluating Disaster and Emergency Management as follows:

*There is an old adage: "To know what you know, and to know what you don't know, is to know". In their view, evaluating and monitoring responses to disasters can contribute to what we know and to what we don't know. Evaluation is a process that discerns what can be known with some certainty and can help provide a clear vision of targets for the future.*

Our hope is that the stories we have gathered from schools and centres in the Canterbury region will contribute to learning:

- knowing what works
- confidence that we are doing the right thing in an emergency
- building resilience in the knowledge that we can do it
- sharing innovative ways that people have responded.

We hope we have also demonstrated the value of evaluation in the aftermath of an emergency. Evaluation methods are adaptable, responsive and contribute to community learning.

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<sup>5</sup> Keynote address at anzea conference July 2012, Hamilton, New Zealand.

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