PRINCIPALS SABBATICAL REPORT

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I would also like to thank the following schools, their Principals and senior management for their generosity of time and their willingness to share.

Central Normal School	Palmerston North
Riverdale School	Palmerston North
Terrace End School	Palmerston North
Clendon Park School	Auckland
Koru School	Auckland
Ashhurst School	Palmerston North
St Mary's School	Palmerston North
St James School	Palmerston North

PURPOSE OF THE SABBATICAL

To investigate the pedagogy behind successful modern learning environments (MLE) currently being implemented in low decile schools.
 To learn how schools have implemented a modern learning environment with limited physical changes being made.

The purpose of the sabbatical is to build an understanding of how modern learning environments work successfully.

Background and Rationale

Somerset Crescent School is a decile one school in Palmerston North. We have approximately 50% Maori and 33% Pasifika children. This is unique in Palmerston North therefore we do not have the opportunity to work alongside other schools of a similar nature and share best practice.

From a personal perspective this sabbatical will give me the opportunity to have the time to read relevant articles, think, and visit other schools in Palmerston North and outside Palmerston North who are experiencing success with MLE.

Our school Charter and strategic plan is very clearly focussed on raising student achievement. It is a constant challenge to accelerate achievement and it is very necessary for myself as principal to be able to investigate best practice relevant to the needs of our community. We have had and will continue to have professional development in literacy and mathematics. It is time for our staff and I to look at further ways that raise achievement and to have the children take ownership for their learning. From the reading already done about MLE's it appears that working in a MLE would support our Pasifika and Maori learners. However the sabbatical would give me the opportunity to see the evidence in action.

Our school has identified in our 10 Year Property plan that we will be upgrading our toilets and investigating working towards developing MLE's. Our school is 50 years old and the MLE developed will be within the structures that we have with some physical changes.

Methodology

- Visits to schools
- 6 Schools in Palmerston North
- 2 Auckland schools of similar decile and cultural mix
- Discussions with senior management of these schools about the extent of MLE implementation and how leadership went about leading the change.

- Readings of current 'best practice of MLE environments.

- Present the findings from the sabbatical to the BOT and staff in order to begin discussions about the way forward for our school.

When the term MLE was first talked about the impression was given that it was all about buildings and open spaces. As time has progressed it has become much more evident it is about teaching and learning and the impact that different environments have.
The first part of my sabbatical investigation was about looking at different environments and how schools physically made changes. Part of this was driven by our own need to upgrade the toilet areas in our school and whilst doing this, could we implement physical changes to support a MLE.
As a result of this initial investigation I found that I started to look deeper into what was making the MLE's work in order to create the best learning environment for the children. This led to readings from Mark Osbourne Core Education, the Ministry of Ed website information and Karen Boyes Spectrum Education, Nathan Mikaere Wallis and a number of other articles.
At this point I visited a number of schools similar to us in ethnicity, decile and the physical buildings. This led to further thinking about not just formulating a clear set of guidelines of what works in a MLE but also what does the leadership of a school need to do with staff before leaping into a MLE and taking the 'we'll work it out as we go along approach.'

What is a Modern learning environment?

The Ministry of Education on their website under MLE state

'The majority of buildings in NZ were built between the 1950's to 1970's. Since then the teaching practices and standards of learning have changed significantly. New technologies and building materials allow for new and vibrant and connected learning spaces. All students deserve to be taught in these Innovative learning environments and benefit from these new teaching methods'.

'Schools are encouraged to develop shared spaces between classrooms that encourage independent learning both individually and collaboratively making the best use of spaces'.

Mark Osborne states in his paper Modern learning environments – Core education white paper

'Modern learning environments can facilitate traditional pedagogies such as direct instruction if needed but they typically offer students and teachers much more:

- *Flexibility; the ability to combine two classes in one for team teaching, split a class into small groups and spread them over a wider area or combine different classes studying complementary learning areas.*
- *Openness: modern learning environments traditionally have fewer walls, more glass and often use the idea of a learning common (or hub) which is a central to teaching and learning space that can be shared by several classes. They provide opportunities to observe and learn from the teaching of others and be observed in return. They also provide access to what other students in other learning areas and level are learning, so that teaching and learning can be enhanced.*
- *Access to resources (including technology): typically a learning common is surrounded by breakout spaces allowing for a range of different activities, such as reading, group work, project space, wet areas, reflection, and presenting. There is often a mixture of wireless and wired technology offering access as and when the students need it, within the flow of their learning.'*

Initially viewing the Manawatu schools that have made significant physical changes to a learning environment it was obvious that a great deal of time and thought had gone into creating spaces that had flexibility, openness and access to resources. There was use of break out spaces with glass, small quiet areas and larger areas to team teach.

One school had opened up two rooms by creating a wide gap between the two rooms, they had incorporated the old cloak bay area into a much more practical working area so that a quiet area could be utilised. Other schools had much larger areas that several classes were working in. All of these schools had made an allowance for different types of spaces, eg quiet working areas and larger areas. What was very evident in all of these MLE's was the sense of space was everyone's, no one teacher or group of children owned a particular space.

The MLE's physical appearance in all cases was light, bright and felt welcoming. Furniture was varied from high to low desks, bean bags, round tables, plus the traditional desk. There was technology evident in all areas, with interactive TVs present and children using hand held devices.

Access to the outside areas was also encouraged, this was managed in different ways for each school.

What does learning look like in a MLE

Current knowledge about how the brain works and what is happening in the brain when learning is occurring has led to a greater understanding of how learning occurs.

Mark Osborne states in his paper Modern learning environments – Core education white paper

' *we know that quality learning is a combination of the following elements:*
- *Personalised learning; no two individuals learn the same way, nor do they bring the same prior knowledge to a learning experience.*
- *Socially constructed learning (Johnson, 1981): the collaboration, peer tutoring and reciprocal teaching that occur when students work together results in a deeper understanding of the material being covered.*
- *Differentiated learning (Bloom, 1974): the prior knowledge we all bring to a task means individuals require different levels of challenge pace content and context.*
- *Learning that is initiated by themselves (Ramsey and Ramsey 2004): typically when a student initiates and learning experience they learn more.*

Leaning that is connected to the physical world and authentic contexts: children learn through interaction with others and the physical world.

Following on from visiting schools to look at the physical environment I visited schools to find out what was actually happening within a MLE with regards teaching and learning. I also wanted to know what PLD had occurred, if any, when the schools were moving towards developing a MLE.

The eight schools I visited were all very different with regards their stage of development and the way they were developing their own MLE. It was a privilege to see and hear about the schools successes and challenges.

Two schools had only just moved classes into the new large MLE. The children were working in a variety of ways, some without the teacher in small groups, others with the teacher in small groups, and a larger group with a teacher. There were quiet spaces however these were not being used fully as yet. (Both these MLEs had only been opened a matter of days). A comment made by the Principal of one school was that the staff felt that at this stage there were a lot of meetings initially to get it up and running.

I was impressed by the way the students knew in a short space of time what to do and where to go. They were engaged in their activities and appeared to be enjoying having the space to work in. The groups working independently worked together well and interacted positively with each other.

I got the impression that time had been spent with the students about how to work in the new environment.

Three other local schools had been working in a MLE – all large areas, for some time. Again, as with the other two schools there were a variety of areas to work, plus children working in a variety of ways. What was established in one school was a licence system that the students worked towards different levels of independence. The lower level meant the student must work within close proximity to the teacher, whereas the highest level of independence meant they had qualified to be very independent and were designing their own timetable. They were able to complete tasks and self-direct their learning

independently. For example, one group of children were outside doing some physical education, what was interesting to note was the students with strong leadership attributes were ensuring this activity was successful. Not a teacher in sight telling them what and how it should be done! Inside the classroom the children were able to tell me what they were doing, why and where they were headed. There was a natural hum of interaction about the learning tasks.

One of these schools had developed their MLE where some of the time the whole group worked together and other times they were with their 'home teacher in their own space.

One school I visited was in the initial stages of developing a MLE and had worked with the staff on how to plan and work together collaboratively. The classes still remained in single cells but children moved between the two classes for set times. The initial thinking behind this set up was to get staff to work collaboratively together. This was working very well. Staff and management felt that there was a better understanding of learning needs and how best to cater for them. Shared ideas and problem solving was a big part of the collaborative approach.

The final two schools visited were larger than our school but very similar in that they were decile one, multicultural schools. Both schools worked in single cells but had both begun in different ways to develop MLE's. In one school the staff planned collaboratively in teams and students had very strong student voice. They had a very clear understanding of their own learning needs and the direction they needed to go. They very clearly enjoyed this and were highly engaged in their own learning.

The second school had worked with Bobbie Hunter (Massey University) who undertook maths PLD, in which the students take ownership for their learning, they are expected to participate in groups and be active members as problem solvers. They were just beginning to work with an outside PLD provider to support them to move towards working in a MLE as the whole school was being rebuilt and would all be a MLE.

In both these schools there were a high percentage of Maori and/ or Pasifika students. The Principals, senior management, and the students that I spoke to, all said that the understanding of the clear direction of their learning, the ability for the students to be a part of the way forward and have a voice has meant a much higher level of engagement. The expectations of the students commitment to learning was very clear in these schools as was the expectation of involvement in learning. In the area of maths for example the children problem solve in mixed ability groups and it is the norm for all children to be a part of this process.

It became very obvious to me after seeing such a variety of MLE's, at all different stages, that in order for MLE's to work successfully what went on prior to 'jumping in' was critical.

The discussions I had with Principals and senior managers were about how was the change in the way these schools were working, introduced and embedded into the culture of the school. Once again there were a variety of ways schools had done this. All of the schools had worked together to get a common understanding of what MLE means for each school. Four schools had employed an outside facilitator to work through this process with them. In one school the team working in the MLE developed their own set of understandings of how it would work. Most schools, staff had identified goals around the school focus for their teacher inquiry.

The other aspect to note is that not all schools had their whole school embarking at once, for most it was a graduated approach. Others acknowledged that it was necessary to still have single cell classes for some students and teachers.

Karen Boyes (Spectrum Education) – states in her Blog..

That she has concern that without a shift in pedagogy, there is a danger that students will experience learning just in a bigger classroom with flash new furniture. She makes the point that MLEs will only work where there is a sound student /teacher relationship. It is critical that students learn about their learning. Teaching students to be independent and self-directed learners needs to be the absolute ingredient in a successful MLE. The transition from a single cell classroom requires careful planning that is delivered in a structured and scaffolded way.

She also states the following

1. Be clear on your underlying philosophy for learning. Does the schools MLE learning philosophy align with the statements in the school Charter and are reflected in the school's curriculum policy statements.

2. Develop a safe environment. Students learn from new challenges and importantly from their own mistakes. Make it safe for students to experiment, take risks and expect a few falls.

3. Teach children about ownership. Students need to learn about being accountable and show responsibility.

Implications for the way forward for Somerset Crescent School

From the visits and reflecting on the readings some clear implications became evident for our school. What appeared to me to be the most successful was when this process was undertaken with the whole staff so that a culture of collaboration became something that the school feels and believes is important. It was also evident that when there was a very clear common understanding of what student voice and ownership of learning meant there was a shared expectation that this would occur in every setting across the school.

What will be critical for any change to be successful for the staff and students to embrace a MLE philosophy will be the maintaining and enhancing of the positive relationships that the staff and students develop with one another. This is a strength of the school where everyone is valued for who they are. Cultural diversity is celebrated and is seen as something that adds value to our community. There is a belief of inclusion for all in the school and that the school must make adaptations for the learner to learn to their full potential. This must be sustained with any changes taking place.

As with any change it is critical that everyone is part of the process. This will require the staff and BOT collectively working together to determine a way forward for the school. The development of a sound philosophy of learning will be evident in the Charter.

It is a huge mind shift for staff to go from working with one class to working collaboratively with others, with shared ownership for a larger group of students. In order for this to be successful, how this will

look will be developed with the staff. This will be a key element to the long term success of the development of a MLE. Also as part of this process will be the sharing of ideas on how this can work in a school that has the traditional single cell setting until modifications can be made in the near future. Whether the school get outside PLD support or work develop this themselves will be discussed.

Providing a safe environment is an area of strength for our school. We are a PB4L school that works very hard to provide an environment that supports learners to take risks and learn from their mistakes. The discussions will mainly be how this can be sustained in a different working environment.

Developing a mind-set of student ownership of learning is an area for growth and development for the school. From my observations of other MLEs and my readings, in order for the MLE to be successful and for learning and achievement to be accelerated, this must be understood by all and implemented well.

Physical changes to buildings, these will be limited because of limited funding and space, however having the opportunity to see what can be done has given me a clear idea of what is needed. The ability to create space and a variety of spaces is essential.

Conclusions

I believe the pedagogy behind MLEs will lead to further collaboration amonst staff. Giving them the opportunity to observe others best practice, share ideas and expertise. This will not only enhance the teaching practice taking place but will benefit the students and their learning hugely. The development of the students knowing about their learning and the direction they need to go will help raise student achievement. This will also foster a sense of responsibility and engagement in learning.

The opportunity to visit and talk with other Principals, staff and students has been invaluable. The time to be able to read and think has helped clarify what is needed to be done in our school. I have had the opportunity to see such a huge variety of MLEs, all different, with some clear similarities and some big differences. It has been a chance to talk with others about the successes and challenges of implementing huge change. I have felt very privileged to have been able to do this without the everyday constraints of running a school. I am excited about returning to our school and discussing my findings with the BOT and staff.

REFERENCES and Readings

Cheryl Doig- Think Beyond- readings, case studies and Blog

Karen Boyes Spectrum Education, Blog

Nathan Mikaere Wallis – Brainwave Trust

Mark Osborne; April 2013 Core Education White Paper – Modern learning environments

Ministry of Education: MLE publications and website