

PRINCIPAL SABBATICALS

SABBATICAL REPORT

**CLASSROOM DESIGN &
LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS**

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**Sabbatical Period
TERM 3 2010**

**The aim of my sabbatical was to investigate and carefully consider
the discussion around learning spaces in schools,
and to consider learning environments and how their design / layout
might encourage best practice by teachers,
and consequently raise student achievement.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I visited a number of schools during term time, and also outside traditional tuition times including weekends and school holidays.

Research was also undertaken through school internet websites and detailed analysis of school classroom plan views.

Thanks to those schools who hosted me knowingly or unknowingly

- * *Schools in Hamilton*
- * *Schools in South Auckland*
- * *Schools in the Bay of Plenty*
- * *Schools in Southern Christchurch*
- * *Schools in Australia*

PURPOSE

The purpose of my sabbatical study was to

(1) analyse existing research on successful school classroom design

Te Rapa Primary School is 10+ years into utilising our current campus, and with 3+ highly successful ERO reviews behind us, and a solid and stable staff we are well qualified to identify and share what has worked well and what has not regarding school classroom design.

(2) visit other new and / or upgraded schools in the Waikato region, and also Auckland and BOP regions (and other NZ / Aust. schools) to gauge the thoughts and opinions of current school colleagues on what works well re. the concept design of their school classrooms.

Note - An emphasis would be placed on classrooms and / or teaching spaces.

With a number of new schools built within New Zealand, and many more remodelled and / or upgraded, colleagues are well advanced with first-hand experience. They are now able to offer their peers advice and guidance on what they would do again and what they would not do again.

(3) meet with current practicing teachers, support staff and leadership personnel to determine their thoughts on what are the realistic design characteristics necessary in a modern NZ classroom thus encouraging “best practice” and “raising student achievement”.

Many effective New Zealand teachers have strong opinions on classroom design within a set budget, and they are clear on what is necessary to foster best practice to raise student achievement. Their thoughts are valued, but unfortunately little is heard from them in this area.

INTRODUCTION - SUMMARY

Through my research I found that many primary / intermediate aged students harbour different expectations from their teachers, and that teacher expectations although often very forward thinking are understandably based around their own learning experiences from a generation ago.

Teachers are certainly open-minded and are certainly willing to explore modern learning activities, and they are endeavouring to do just this with groups of students who have grown up in a society that has definitely changed and grown significantly more complex within just one generation.

The gap between the teacher's life experience(s) and that of the children they teach today is far greater than any teacher – student gap ever before.

The growing influence of technology in the learning environment has had a huge impact on my research, and although traditional models are still appropriate it is refreshing to see schools looking to embrace new technology and new design to further enhance learning environments for their students and staff.

Our modern New Zealand student cohort is now more diverse, and far less traditional. I have found out through my research that to best meet the needs of a modern student professional discussion needs to be centred around the implementation of technology and the context for learning coupled with the physical design of classrooms, rather than the actual design of a classroom alone.

In addition to this the importance of positive reciprocal relationships between “teacher and pupil” could not be overlooked. Infact the most influential finding of a modern learning environment was more about communication and relationships, than the actual make-up of classrooms and their interior design.

Building and maintaining a positive student : teacher rapport ensured students felt supported, and teachers more fulfilled and satisfied in their work.

This lead to school culture and pedagogy (first and foremost) both of which determined the learning environment in a school. It is this ‘thinking’ that I realised shaped the design / layout of a school's classroom environments and encouraged best practice by their teachers and consequently raised student achievement through positive engagement.

FINAL REPORT

Includes ...findings, implications and conclusions

After initially focussing on physical learning spaces and how the 'modern' layout might look I began to think more about learning environments inside and outside. This change of focus away from architectural design came after visiting other schools, searching on-line and talking to teachers and students, and reading current educational information.

With modern learning environments changing rapidly and school's having greater involvement in determining their own destiny I turned my attention to the context around learning spaces and investigated the broader concept of learning environments with an emphasis on technology and relationships.

I found that schools in general ie. school leaders, are collectively very aware of what the future could hold for the children of today, and although we are not sure of exactly what that might look like what we can do is appreciate the world is changing rapidly and technology will play a substantial role in what the future holds for us all, as will our ability to successfully "interact" with others.

Employers too are increasingly looking for individuals who can function effectively in the workplace where working collaboratively and creatively are key requirements, and technology is key.

I also found that the a school's teaching philosophy / pedagogy was instrumental in changing classroom layout, and even school design / refurbishment.

With this in mind school leaders were looking to explore learning environments that complimented the school's pedagogy, and this all tied in nicely with modern furniture in a classroom where all of the necessary tools were available for ready students to learn.

What I saw in schools mirrored what was evident in our ever changing world.

School leaders and their staff were however having to do this when resourcing was stretched, and also in an economic climate that is constantly under pressure from a variety of key players looking to change compliance expectations in their schools.

I was impressed with the vision of schools and the creativity of principals and Board of Trustees as they looked to maximise budgets where they could yet still try to create learning environments in their schools with only limited funding.

The New Zealand “number 8 wire” was very apparent in our schools, and was also evident to a lesser degree in the Australian schools I visited.

Through my research & analysis I noted that most modern or refurbished classrooms had enjoyed significant teacher input.

Throughout my school visits I listened to teachers, and also listened to their students. These discussions confirmed for me that effective New Zealand teachers do indeed have strong opinions on classroom design. They are realistic and many felt “good things” could be achieved within a fair budget.

They were also clear on what is necessary to foster best practice in a ‘learning environment’ to raise student achievement, and felt that teacher : student relationships and the ability to communicate effectively was paramount.

It was obvious to me that often little is heard from the “teacher at the chalk face” in this area.

The building design characteristics in a variety of New Zealand schools where best practice can be directly and / or indirectly enhanced through possible links to modern school architectural classroom design had seen teachers actively involved in the design process.

Who better to design a home than the person / people who will live there !!

The aim has always been to keep ‘learning and teaching’ the central focus, and the student(s) and the teacher(s) are the key to this.

Improving the quality of teaching and learning, and therefore raising student achievement through classroom design is the key constant through my research, but so was the relationships enjoyed between students and their teachers, and visa versa.

As Te Rapa Primary School’s principal I have enjoyed being actively involved in consulting with others to both design and build our school’s new campus here at Te Rapa (Hamilton).

The relocation of the school was completed in 6 stages over what has been a 16 year period (stage #1 opened 1997). Stage #6 began late term 4 and continued into term 1 2010.

Throughout this period I have visited many New Zealand and Australian schools, both old and new. I have also proudly hosted many colleagues to Te Rapa in an effort to seek (+ & -) feedback and to carefully consider any suggestions received.

In addition to this we consulted stakeholders at our school, and gathered their thoughts / opinions on what they felt was important in a modern learning environment.

Information was gathered accordingly and has come from hundreds of school personnel, parents and students working at every level within our education system (early childhood to tertiary).

The findings however continued to confirm that

.... although “bricks & mortar” were important, of more importance was the relationship(s) teachers looked to develop and foster with their students.

Their teaching style(s) and how this infused into the schools pedagogy was paramount to how the internal organisation of a classroom and therefore a school might shape up.

Basically the pedagogy of the school and the people who worked there was the catalyst that determined classroom and school design. A school’s journey never ends it seems, so schools were constantly reflecting on the current position and then deciding “where to next” before carefully considering “how do we get there”.

The entire approach seemed cyclic.

For many years school leaders and board of trustees around New Zealand have been relying heavily on the advice and guidance of a number of MOE approved architects and property consultants operating within their specific regional area.

School stakeholders have taken on-board their suggestions regarding current trends and what concept designs are working best in our schools. Rarely however did school stakeholders get the opportunity to look at previous school design concepts, or to get to carefully ponder over specific design characteristics that have worked well in other schools with a similar teaching approach.

With this in mind I felt it necessary to record the following key steps as part of the cycle ...

- Analysing progress and achievement
 - Reflective practise
 - Inviting stakeholders to be creative
 - Setting a direction
 - Embarking on a journey together
 - Along the way 'embedding in' what's working well
 - Tailoring programmes according to pedagogy
 - Up-skilling established staff, and recruiting strategically
 - Designing learning spaces to suit
 - Furnishing accordingly
 - Resourcing 'learning spaces' to ensure student engagement (technology etc.)
 - Delivering learning experiences to best meet the needs of students
 - Monitoring progress and achievement
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- Back to "Reflective Practise"

It is extremely pleasing to see more and more schools now taking an active role in their designs and how their classrooms might look.

The role of the MOE approved architects and property consultants is also critical, but what I am pleased to report is that it is the schools who are leading the design process, and inviting input from designers once they have a concept in mind.

School stakeholders are certainly well qualified to interpret and consider current trends and concept designs, and are far more willing to seek the input from designers once they are ready to do so.

This ensures the people who work in our classrooms and in our schools do get to carefully ponder over specific design characteristics that will be best suit their school's pedagogy, and in doing so are able to influence both the internal and external environment(s) to best meet the needs of their students.



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