Principal Sabbatical Report, Term 3, 2019
Special Needs Students Surviving within an Innovative Learning Environment
Pam King – Wairau Valley Special School

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:

I would like to thank the staff and Board of Trustees for supporting this sabbatical as well as the wonderful teachers and Principals who took the time to meet with me and provide information that has contributed to this report. I also acknowledge the Ministry of Education and the NZEI for the provision of sabbaticals through PPCA and the importance of having these available to Principals who need time for reflection, renewal and revitalization from a rewarding but demanding role.

STATUS OF THIS REPORT:

This report is not intended to be an academic report. It is simply a record of readings undertaken and reflections of those readings as well as reporting of information gathered from educators who work with special needs students within an Innovative Learning Environment.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report attempts to answer; "How students with special needs (in particular ORS funded students) in the mainstream with special learning and behavioural challenges can have their learning needs supported within an Innovative Learning Environment". This investigation is intended to provide schools with some key findings and considerations for supporting the learner with special needs to succeed in an Innovative Learning Environment alongside their mainstream peers.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE:

As a Principal of a mainstream school, I believed that learners with special needs and ORS funded students, with the right support and resources, could succeed with their learning at their level, alongside their same age peers.

In the last five years as a Principal in a Special School setting I have seen an increase in requests for both the Outreach Service from mainstream schools and for enrolments of ORS funded students, who would normally cope in their mainstream setting, but now want to enroll in a Special School. Placements for student enrolments in a Special School is limited, so my interest in this topic is to find ways that we can better support mainstream schools to continue to deliver the curriculum effectively to special needs learners in their mainstream setting and in particular those who are learning within an ILE.

Our current educational situation is experiencing limited funding, teacher capacity, capability, expertise and resourcing, resulting in schools struggling with the increasing number of students with special needs and how best to support them.

Learners with high anxiety and sensory needs can struggle in a mainstream setting at the best of times and being placed in an Innovative Learning Environment may be making it even more difficult for them to cope at school. There is a lot of evidence to support the Modern Learning Environment or Innovative Learning Environment philosophy for the teacher and neuro typical

student however, it is unclear whether these learning environments are supportive for the learner with special needs.

Results from recent principal well-being surveys have highlighted the strain that supporting this growing population is having on schools. The 2018 budget provided funds for an additional 995 ORS students confirming the increase in learners requiring additional support.

The Ministry of Education population snapshot in October 2017 showed that in the Auckland School Network that the students verified with ORS (On-going Resourcing Scheme) were 1.1% of the student population or 2929 students. Of these 2929 students, 1014 were learning in a mainstream environment while the remainder (1915) were enrolled in a special educational setting. Of those students 69% were in satellite unit settings in host mainstream schools while still enrolled in their Special School.

METHODOLOGY:
My goal is to identify how learners with special needs can successfully learn in an Innovative Learning Environment, therefore keeping them in their mainstream setting. To make the task more manageable I will focus on learners supported by the Special School Outreach Services in New Zealand. By liaising with these Outreach Service Providers, I can more easily identify those schools that have successfully supported learners with special needs in an ILE mainstream setting.

2

The Outreach Services is a service funded by the Ministry of Education. Outreach teachers are teachers with specialist knowledge and experience of working with students with high and complex learning needs and are employed by Special Schools to support teachers and ORS funded students in their mainstream setting. This service helps to support those ORS funded students who can learn beside their mainstream peers in their local mainstream schools.

PURPOSE:
This report will use the following questions to guide the process:
1. What is effective pedagogy within an Innovative Learning Environment?
2. What does success look like for a learner in an Innovative Learning Environment?
3. What are some of the challenges for learners with special needs and their teachers in an Innovative Learning Environment?
4. How have schools with Innovative Learning Environments successfully dealt with the challenges of supporting learners with special needs?
5. How has the Outreach Service provided quality support for learners with special educational needs in an Innovative Learning Environment?
6. How can we implement best practice of inclusion within Innovative Learning Environments for our New Zealand students?

My learning activities included:

- A review of relevant literature.
- Interviews with Principals and teachers
- Observations of students working in an ILE

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE:

Provided is relevant information from the New Zealand Ministry of Education website that explains ORS and ILEs so the reader of this report has a clear understanding of these terms.

Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS)

The Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) provides support for students with the highest level of need for special education to join in and learn alongside other students at school.
https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/ors/

Criteria for Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS)

The Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) has nine criteria covering five areas of student need for learning and support: **learning, hearing, vision, physical, or language use and social communication.**

To meet ORS criteria, students must have:

- ongoing extreme or severe difficulty with any of the need areas, or
- moderate to high difficulty with learning, combined with very high or high needs in any two
https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/ors/criteria-for-ors/

Innovative Learning Environment (ILE)

3

"An innovative learning environment is an environment where the National Curriculum is being expressed in the way it is intended. It is capable of evolving and adapting as educational practices evolve and change – thus remaining future focused. This reflects the fact that education needs to keep pace with the world we are preparing young people for. Innovative learning environments are learner-focussed and emphasise valued learner outcomes. They encourage collaboration and inquiry, both for learners and teachers, and allow teachers to teach in the style that best suits the needs of diverse learners."
http://ile.education.govt.nz/

In the past the Ministry used the term Modern Learning Environments. While this was intended to refer to the wider environment, for many it became synonymous with property upgrades and new buildings. Some also didn't like the implications of 'modern'. So in mid-2015, the Ministry adopted the OECD's term, Innovative Learning Environments, to refer to the learning ecosystem, and Flexible Learning Spaces to refer to the infrastructure element of an Innovative Learning Environment. http://ile.education.govt.nz/talking-terminology/

OECD's Innovative Learning Environments

In 2013 the OECD published a report on Innovative Learning Environments. This publication proposes a 'pedagogical core' at the heart of each learning environment represented by four key elements and the dynamics between them. The publication represents the relationships as shown over the page:
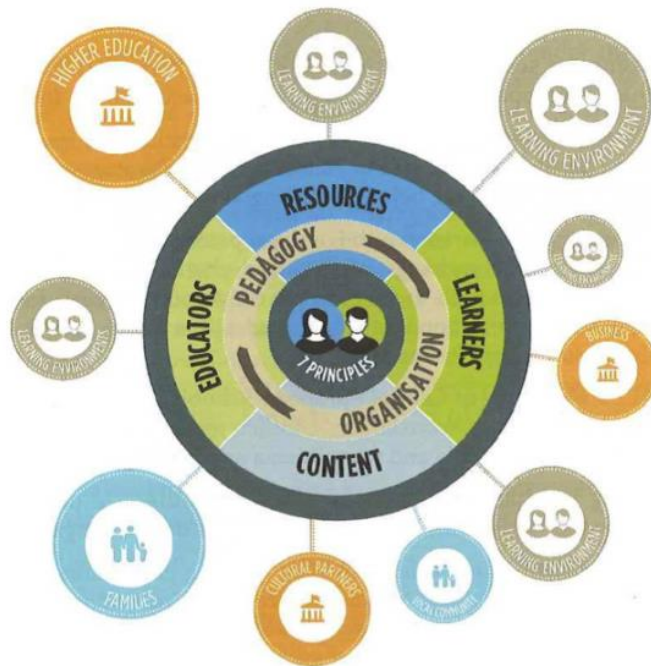
In 2015, the OECD published a follow up report, 'Schooling Redesigned: Towards Innovative Learning Systems'.

The OECD's work is based on a strong foundation of research and aligns very closely with the National Curriculum. OECD recommends seven principles for innovative learning:

4.
- Make learning central, encourage engagement, and be where learners come to understand themselves as learners.
- Ensure that learning is social and often collaborative.
- Be highly attuned to learners' motivations and the importance of emotions.
- Be acutely sensitive to individual differences including prior knowledge.
- Be demanding for each learner but without excessive overload
- Use assessments consistent with these aims, with strong emphasis on formative feedback.
- Promote horizontal connectedness across learning activities and subjects, in and out of school.

A flexible learning space has the right acoustics, lighting, technology, heating and air quality to support learning. The spaces can be easily configured and used in a number of different ways to support and enable a range of teaching and learning approaches on any given day or at any time of the day. They can support single teacher whole 'class' teaching practice, and can adapt to a broader range of teaching and learning practices and groupings as a school's education practices evolve over time. http://ile.education.govt.nz/talking-terminology/

Why create flexible learning spaces?

The principles of both the NZ Curriculum and Innovative Learning Environments can and should be present in traditional classrooms. However, both are enabled and can be enhanced in flexible learning spaces with collaborative teaching. Meeting the needs of learners requires a range of teaching approaches, a range of spaces and the highest quality resources. The most important of these three is the human element. Teachers and leaders comment flexible learning spaces allow the power of teacher collaboration to be maximised in ways not possible in traditional classrooms. http://ile.education.govt.nz/flexible-learning-spaces/

Shared Understandings from Schools with ORS funded students in ILEs:

Section 1. What is effective pedagogy within an Innovative Learning Environment?

All the schools visited or who answered my questions agreed that effective pedagogy in an ILE meant that learning would be visible, there would be an integrated curriculum that allows for differentiated learning with teachers and students working and learning collaboratively. Students should be in charge of their own learning journey and their 'voice' in the personalised learning process is extremely important. The ILE should cater for varied learning styles and tailor what's right for each student in the space. Building relationships with everyone in the space is important and being inclusive is imperative for all to succeed at their own pace, within a safe and secure space.

All agreed that staff working in the space need to have had professional development to understand and know what it means to successfully work in an ILE and have a shared vision of what it will look like, feel like and be like. Working in an ILE does not allow for silos and encourages team teaching in a positive way for both the teacher and the student. Collaborative planning and a shared responsibility for all the learners in a space with teachers sharing their strengths and teachers having the autonomy and flexibility to use the best team-teaching model that suits their learners, their space and the curriculum area being taught.

Collaboration is the key to success and it was quoted by many that following the philosophy of "stage not age" in an ILE will help teachers understand their role better in order for all students to achieve.

Section 2. What does success look like for a learner in an Innovative Learning Environment?

All questioned were clear that success in an ILE for learners is when they are actively in charge of their own learning journey. Students have to be responsible, independent learners who can discuss and monitor their own progress against the Learning Progressions. Their identified learning needs should be met by the ILE programmes in place and they should make progress both academically and socially while having the skills to self-manage their learning, time and work.

All learners including those with special needs need to have a sense of what success looks like for them in a happy and safe environment. If their learning needs are met at their level and it is individualised for them then measuring of success for them should be easy. Authentic and relevant learning tasks are important to keep students engaged and enthusiastic and all learning outcomes should focus on being strengths based. A good day for every student will look different in an ILE but it is important that teachers know what a that good day looks like.

Learning in an ILE should be one where all students and staff have a sense of belonging and feel they are valued members of their learning and team-teaching space. Students who are self-directed learners and can collaborate with other students taking risks and 'stretching' themselves feel a lot more success than when they learn alone. An ILE fosters this and when students are expected to set goals and work towards achieving those goals they will understand when they have succeeded. Students who have happy healthy relationships with the teachers and students in their ILE will have better social and emotional development to cope with both the challenges and successes they achieve.

5

Section 3. What are some of the challenges for learners with special needs and their teachers in an Innovative Learning Environment?

The bigger space and numbers in the ILE space can be more of a challenge for some children. However, multiple breakout spaces and the fact that it is a bigger space, allows for designated safe places for these children. Often an ILE can be noisy and cause a lot of sensory overload so it is important that there is lots of visual cues and instructions and less oral. A lot of students benefit from having the learning and instructions visually displayed so when catering for the diverse learner others will benefit too.

Some key areas that were agreed to support the learner with special needs in an ILE were that, if the student is learning to be self-managing then they can take responsibility for finding a quiet space when needed and will be encouraged to do so and not discouraged. They can find a space that is not highly distractible.

One of the challenges for learners in an ILE space can be having high quality teachers with clear expectations for learning and behaviour who have a shared understanding of how things will be dealt with when the time arises.

Some teachers noticed that many of their students with special learning needs had difficulty with being self-directed learners and this is imperative for a learner in an ILE space. If there is too much noise, activity, distractions in their learning space, this can lead to difficulty with self-management of themselves, their behaviour and their learning tasks. Sometimes students have difficulty forming and maintaining friendships with the larger group of students in ILEs and larger numbers of adults in the space. Listening to and following instructions in the busyness of the space can cause stress and anxiety and needs to be identified and managed early so the student can succeed.

What all participants were clear about was, that when positive and trusting relationships are established and the child is included, 'belongs,' and feels safe then challenges specific to an ILE can disappear.

Section 4. How have schools with Innovative Learning Environments successfully dealt with the challenges of supporting learners with special needs?

When teachers and students understand what works well in the ILE for them then implementing behaviour plans and support plans can be done in a collaborative, transparent way. Many found that where learners with needs find it most difficult in an ILE, was because there was a lack of routine, the space was less controlled and the noise level in the environment was not well managed. They felt if you get this right then everyone will benefit.

All participants felt that the teachers in an ILE need to know all the learners with special needs and all take responsibility for supporting them and have a mind-set where figuring things out and being solutions based rather than problems based. Where teacher aides are in ILEs having them work as part of the staff in the space and not attached to students works a lot better.

Continuity with teacher aide support is important and the concept of working in small groups invaluable. Developing friendships can be easier for all students in an ILE as there are more people and personalities to relate to and more support when needed.

Some schools found that where possible a transition plan from a smaller teaching space into and ILE space can work well ie from the reception rooms into the ILE. The length of the transition is dependent on the student and how well they can cope. They also felt this is sometimes beneficial for teachers as well who are new to ILEs.

Some said in an ILE they actively tried to enable disability, as more than the students with special needs have disabilities that they have to cope with every single day, so celebrating those disabilities was encouraged so that everyone feels valued.

IEPs need to be managed well and all teachers need to take ownership for the student who has an IEP and support them to meet those IEP goals across the school day. Developing individual programmes for students based on their strengths helps them to succeed. There should never be a deficit model in and ILE. There needs to be genuine team teaching and shared resourcing of personnel and equipment to support the learner with special needs.

Section 5. How has the Outreach Service provided quality support for learners with special educational needs in an Innovative Learning Environment?

7

The Outreach teachers by the majority of participants considered them an extremely valuable resource. They felt they supported ORS funded student in the mainstream setting in ILEs with expertise, knowledge, and practical suggestions. The service in many schools has assisted in providing some teaching resources to the teachers and helped them to provide individualised special education programmes for their students. Although this support can be dependent on the individual outreach teacher, all were very positive about the service.

Forming good relationships with staff and students is imperative for the service to work well. Many teachers felt that outreach teachers empowered them to provide appropriate programmes, assessment and gain access to resources.

The Outreach Teachers were thought of as having a deep understanding of special needs pedagogy and they were very experienced on how best to support special needs learners while also knowing the best way to access extra MOE support as needed. They provided focussed learning support for the students and worked collaboratively with the teachers and TAs.

Participants felt it was important that Outreach teachers needed to have a good understanding of the uniqueness of the school and how best to provide support within the school's context for the partnership to work. They should also value the teachers input and work alongside the teacher in a highly supportive manner in order for the relationship to succeed. Being realistic and mindful about the demands on teachers always helps to build a strong working relationship with all those involved in support the ORS funded student.

Sections 6. How can we implement best practice of inclusion within Innovative Learning Environments for our New Zealand students?

Staff who work in an ILE space have to be very inclusive within the space and work together as a team. Teachers need to understand that belonging is a fundamental need, and all staff should go out of their way to ensure all students are included in all 'in-class' and 'out of class' activities. These include trips, class and school performances, as well as the everyday in-class and outside activities.

The inclusive mentoring model works well for both students and teachers and effective pairs or groups of teachers can mean they and the students are exposed to varied teaching styles and practice. Some felt that an ILE can be a place for some students to slip through the cracks where they are disengaged and go under radar with doing busy work. Leaders who observed this knew this was not a successful ILE and needed to be addressed quickly.

It was evident that teacher tolerance and understanding of all learners is essential for inclusion to be a success for all learners. There is more likelihood for greater socialisation for learners with special needs as there are more students for them to connect with. If they feel safe they are less likely to withdraw. Having access to multiple teachers can be such a positive outcome for learners in an ILE as well as for the teacher who can share the load in times of challenge. Successful inclusion in an ILE happens when everyone understands that inclusion is positive for everyone.

8   **SUMMARY:**

From all of the information shared from the many leaders and teachers in schools I found that for ILES to work inclusively then individual learning programmes based on students' strengths are needed. Students need to feel they are part of the class, engaged in learning with their peers and happy to be at school. All students should feel they have a sense of belonging and feel valued. There needs to be a strong transition to an ILE environment and on-going monitoring and support. A strong partnership with parents and valuing parent in put about their child's learning is paramount and teachers and families have to have a strong partnership with external professionals to support the learners with special needs. In order for ORSs funded students to succeed successfully in an ILE, there needs to be a high level of extra support in place especially in the junior years and this support needs to be reviewed regularly and modified as needs change.

Breakout spaces are a key to ILEs working well for everyone and that may not mean a room but can be just a designated space where any child can remove themselves to when they feel overwhelmed or when they just want to work independently. Quality professional development about working successfully within and ILE is essential for all that work in the environment. Along with this many felt that professional development on working with ORSs funded students would be beneficial and this is where the Outreach Teacher Service was valued and praised for the support to students and staff.

From my observations and discussions had with schools, there was a strong sense of success for students with ORSs funding included in ILES. Where there was a school culture with school values where staff and students were enacting and living by those school values in every interaction they had with each other all the students were enthusiastic learners in the ILEs.

CONSIDERATIONS

It is clear that the Ministry of Education in New Zealand favour Flexible Learning Spaces with Innovative Learning Environment pedagogy as all the new schools being built have all been Flexible Learning Spaces following the pedagogy of Innovative Learning Environments.

"The move to Innovative Learning Environments (or ILEs) is in part a response to the growing diversity in communities, the varied needs of our students, and a desire to provide physical environments that educators can use to meet these diverse needs" (2019: 3) Mark Osborne Innovative Learning Environments, Auckland, New Zealand

Whether this is an economic choice or based on current educational philosophies, it is the reality and students with learning challenges in the mainstream setting will need to learn and succeed within these environments.

New schools and those who are being refurbished to include flexible learning spaces should consider the following to support all students including those with special needs:

9

- All staff in the ILE need to have a shared responsibility for the learners
- Encourage engagement for all
- Foster individualised learning and focus on strengths not challenges
- Ensure learning is social and collaborative where all are included
- All learning should be motivated by focussing on the student succeeding so make sure that teachers are aware of learner's motivators is important
- Staff should understand the emotions, anxieties, triggers for the learner to anticipate where support might be needed
- Everyone including peers should be sensitive to individual differences and open communication for all in the ILE is important
- High expectations for learning and behaviour that is transparent and visible for all learners (No hidden agendas or surprises)
- Understanding of learner capability and capacity to avoid work or sensory overload
- Quality assessments in place that are consistent and fit for purpose and the learner has an understanding of the assessment and it's purpose for supporting them
- Formative feedback that focuses on what has been achieved and where to next
- A curriculum that has connectedness to the learner and across all learning areas
- A range of teaching approaches needs to be used across the day
- Student voice, choice and decision making has to be fostered
- Learning spaces need to maximise learning and meet the needs of the learner
- Quality resources should be equitable and be able to be accessed by all learners including the teachers as a resource

The learner of the future will have many challenges in coping with the complexities of the world around them and so too will a learner with special needs as well as additional challenges. For the learner with special needs we don't just want them to survive in the growing number of Innovative Learning Environments, we actually want them to thrive alongside their mainstream peers.

USEFUL REFERENCES

https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/ors/

https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/ors/criteria-for-ors/

http://ile.education.govt.nz/

http://ile.education.govt.nz/talking-terminology/

http://ile.education.govt.nz/flexible-learning-spaces/

2013 & 2015: The OECD 'Schooling Redesigned: Towards Innovative Learning Systems.

2019, 3: Mark Osborne Innovative Learning Environments, Auckland, New Zealand

10