

Principal's Sabbatical Report Term 2 2014

Lee Whitelaw - Principal Ohaeawai School

PURPOSE

The purpose of my sabbatical was to find out more about learning environments that are already having an effect on the engagement, motivation and achievement of students, especially in low decile schools.

The OECD has considered learning needs around the world and has suggested that schools "accommodate both the known and identifiable needs of today, and the uncertain demands of the future". They have also said that "schools should provide an environment that will support and enhance the learning process, encouraging innovation and fostering positive human relationships."

BACKGROUND

Ohaeawai School is a decile 2 school in the Far North District Council area with a roll of 150 children. 59% of our students are Maori. Our mission statement "To be the best I Can be" underpins everything we do at our school. Our school comprises of a mixture of buildings - ranging from a block that is over 100 years old to new buildings and also prefab buildings that have been remodelled and refurbished.

We are continually investigating ways that not only address the physical modern learning environment needs but also the modern teaching needs. We want to make sure that our students and families have access to dynamic, engaging and motivating 21st century learning environments that are future focused.

Our school has been part of a Learning and Change network which originally comprised three schools but which has recently increased to six schools. The original focus for the LCN was modern learning environments, but after some persuasion and encouragement from our facilitators the focus changed to have an achievement challenge of writing with "Learning together is empowering" as the focus to improve writing. Even though the focus changed from modern learning environments to writing we were able to mesh both together with a great deal of support and help from the Manaiakalani cluster of schools in Auckland and the achievement of writing in a modern learning environment became the focus for all schools in the cluster. We are now part of the Manaiakalani Outreach cluster of schools.

Our school's strategic plan includes a specific plan for Information Communication technology so that we could ensure that the use of digital technology is a priority for ongoing and planned development. This has clear links to our classroom refurbishment and development. Our strategic plan is also clear in its expectation "to ensure that the appropriate technologies are used across the curriculum to enhance student achievement and "to ensure the achievement of Maori students continues to be a priority".

Our Five Year Property plan has also been signed off with a major emphasis in this to be the continued development of a modern learning environment. During my investigation I found that the majority of the New Zealand school buildings were built between 1950-1970. Teaching and learning has changed significantly since this era. New technology and the needs of students has changed significantly as has the building codes of practice etc. The Ministry of education states in their documents that all students deserve to be taught in modern new learning environments with the appropriate and modern teaching pedagogy. Schools are required to upgrade the teaching and learning spaces by 2020. The Ministry of Education's property strategy also sets out the changes needed under three main goals - school property needs to be well managed, school property needs to be fit for purpose and there needs to be a high performing portfolio of schools throughout the country.

The Ministry of education in their current primary school sector priorities want to ensure that there are "stronger connections with families and whanau, and changes to resourcing arrangements which will better support student achievement". They also talk about "promoting collaboration between schools in a range of ways". One of the aims of my project was to investigate ways in which we could strengthen collaboration using 21st century learning tools and environments. The Ministry is clearly determined to raise achievement by support for high quality learning experiences for all learners in a modern learning environment.

The New Zealand Curriculum document has also very strong links to this investigation, especially in the area of e learning and pedagogy - "schools should explore not only how digital technology can support traditional ways of teaching, but also how it can open up new and different ways of learning."

The Aim of the Project

My aim in this report is to report back about what 21st century learning looks like in a variety of settings and what this could mean for our school and the network we are involved in.

Activities Undertaken

Visits

During my sabbatical I visited several schools around New Zealand and overseas, mostly in low decile areas. It was interesting that when I asked for suggestions of schools to visit in many instances I was disappointed in what I observed happening in these recommended schools. Many of these schools had dived into the modern learning environment without contemplating or thinking through what this might look like for learning. For many of them it was about investing a considerable amount of money into purchasing digital devices without thorough preparation or consideration of what teaching and learning looks like in a modern environment or what does a modern learning environment even look like ?

These observations made me rethink and question how some modern learning environments were any different to what had happened in the past.

Reading and Information

There are many articles, presentations and papers written about modern learning environments and what needs to happen to support them. From my observations and information gathered I consider the following to be some of the main considerations that kept being raised during my investigation.

- There have been massive changes over the last few years - students can learn from anywhere anytime.
- There needs to be a variety of learning opportunities and access to a range of environments..
- We need to give students maximum flexibility in their learning so that their strengths and talents can be used.
- It doesn't matter what we buy or what it looks like from the outside.
- The environment may look old from the outside - it's about learning not the building.
- Flash buildings and flash furniture does not necessarily mean "flash learning".
- Whatever the environment students need to be articulate what they are learning.

- Modern learning is not about deficit theorising.
- Design needs to get in the way as little as possible.
- Children are inspired by the learning spaces around them.
- Modern learning environments allow and cater for different learning styles.
- Flexible and modern learning environments increase the opportunity and likelihood for more personalised learning.
- The development of modern learning environments encourages and values student voice.
- Modern learning environments can support teachers as they collaborate with each other.
- A modern learning environment is nothing without a pedagogy shift.
- The relationship with the teacher is the key to successful learning in any environment.
- To be successful in any learning environment the learner needs to know their responsibilities as they learn.
- There are some very well designed modern learning environments inside some very old buildings.

FINDINGS

Following my visits to a variety of settings, my talks with Principals, research and talks with teachers and students I am firmly of the opinion that although the quality, attractiveness and design of buildings can have an impact on learning in the 21st century it is by no means the major factor that needs to be taken into consideration. An example of this was a very modern, relatively new school which I visited - the environment was new but lacked warmth when you walked in and the children in the classes that I visited were clearly not engaged or doing anything different than I had seen several years ago in a school with old style buildings.

I also saw the opposite of this in a school that was in the process of modernising their environment but still had some very old and shabby buildings. The children in this school were highly engaged in authentic learning experiences and very keen to share and talk about their learning. Their teachers and students were collaborating about their learning and in many instances the children were initiating their own learning experiences.

As we strive to provide a modern future focused learning environment for students we need to make sure that we are very clear about our underlying philosophy of learning. In New Zealand we have a busy and crowded curriculum. When we walk into an open, brightly coloured teaching space our first impression could be “wow”, however we need

to look deeper to make sure that behind the colourful exterior ,interior and mass of digital technology there is a clearly articulated pedagogy and plan to accommodate the modern styles of learning that will ensure our students are planned for a future that no one knows what will be like.

A modern learning environment planned with a clear relationship to the way students learn will clearly ensure that quality learning takes place. The extensive research that took place with all stakeholders in our network of schools in our LCN cluster found that children learn from one another. Modern learning environments being built now traditionally have fewer walls and better visibility and so promote and allow a range of pedagogies for students to access for their learning. Our LCN network has as it's vision "Learning together is empowering". This vision clearly supports teaching and learning in a modern learning environment. Even though all the schools in the network were built in the "traditional" era and are basically single cell buildings with some modifications and refurbishment, the teaching and learning pedagogy is indeed modern. Our teachers, students and their families are all collaborating and sharing their learning within the school, across the network schools and across the world. They are working with a range of devices and tools to make sure this happens. The tools and pedagogy is modern, even if the buildings are not purpose built.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Ohaeawai Board of Trustees for supporting my request to apply for and take sabbatical leave for term two 2104. Special thanks also to Liz Ross who acted as Principal in my absence and to all other staff who stepped up as leaders right across the school.

I would also like to thank the schools that I visited, especially the Manaiakalani team who have been such an inspiration and support as I visited and talked with them.

I would also like to thank the staff at Ohaeawai School who are so passionate about the achievement of their students and who strive to provide the very best learning opportunities for their students.

