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Sabbatical - Term 1 2015

Purpose:

Professional learning opportunities and resources around modern / innovative learning environments are currently abundant. This report aims not to replicate what is already available, but to provide a summary of key principles or themes I found through my sabbatical research. Based around growing modern learning practices and the development of the environment, key themes explored are:

• What's in a name - learning by design

• Starting with the why

• Considering all stakeholders

• Investing in professional learning

• Learner agency

• Looking beyond the walls

Part two of the report provides a summary of implications and possible actions for our school.

Sabbatical Background:

Selwyn Ridge school is a decile 6 school in Welcome Bay, Tauranga. The school was originally built in 1997 but was later found to have weather tightness issues, resulting in a full building remediation process which began in 2007, and was completed at the end of 2014. The seven years of the rebuild project were challenging, and following completion, we were poised to embark on more positive property and learning space development projects.

The completion of our remediation also coincided with updating of our 10 year property plan and five year agreement. We had a significant sum for our five year property development. As our school met all requirements for priority 1 (health and safety) and priority 2 (essential infrastructure) works, the focus moved to priority 3 (modern learning environments) and priority 4 (discretionary projects).

The vision for Selwyn Ridge School is to be a learning community preparing children to be inquiring learners, creative thinkers, skilled communicators, committed team players and responsible citizens who contribute as they soar into the future. This is underpinned by key principles of differentiated learning (Bloom, 1974), personalised learning, socially constructed learning (Johnson 1981), learning that is initiated by students (Ramey and Ramey, 2004) and learning that is connected to authentic contexts (Malone and Tranter, 2003). A combination of these elements has been identified as best practice for quality learning. Although these elements are apparent in our curriculum, to strengthen and grow student achievement towards our vision, I felt we had the opportunity to grow our environment to align better with what we know about the brain and student learning.

Through this sabbatical I aimed to increase my knowledge of best practice in the development of modern learning environments and the key principles behind successfully developing quality learning spaces and pedagogy to enhance student achievement. This

would result in further alignment of our school vision, strategic planning and practice with modern learning practice and modern learning environments.

Professional Learning Activities Undertaken

In planning the professional learning for my sabbatical I broke it down into four connected learning strands.

Strand 1 - Professional learning through Core Education Empower Programme: Modern Learning Environments (http://www.core-ed.org/professional-learning/workshop/empower-programme-modern-learning-environments). This was a 20 week course in four modules. Each module consisted of two synchronous sessions (one face-to-face where appropriate) plus online activities and support. Each module was five weeks long:
Module 1 - Educative purpose and modern learning practice: using your future-focused vision for learning.

Module 2 - The Site: designing learning that make the most of your community, your site and your opportunities for connectedness.

Module 3 - The Shell: making the most of the built environment (either new builds or existing spaces.)

Module 4 - The Stuff: how to equip learning spaces with the right furniture, equipment and fixtures to bring your pedagogical vision to life.

Strand 2 - Attendance at the World Forum Conference on Design and Nature which was hosted in Rotorua.

Strand 3 - Investigating schools in New Zealand that have established modern learning environments and philosophies of education that support successful learning and teaching in these environments. The goals from these school visits are: To meet with principals or lead staff and discuss the principles behind the implementation of modern learning in their contexts; how these link with the school vision and the intent of the New Zealand curriculum.

- To unpack how they professionally grow staff to teach in these environments

- To explore how the developments have been communicated with the wider school community

- To investigate the connection between the principles of modern learning environments with student progress and achievement

- To view the modern learning environments in action. To seek the views of students and teachers and to take a photographic record.

Strand 4 - Building knowledge of learning and teaching pedagogy to ensure that contemporary learning spaces reflect and support the pedagogy that goes with them. Development of long term strategic planning for school based on insights gained from research and school visits.

Findings:

Through each of the above learning activities a number of key principles came to the fore. When considered deeply, these principles would direct decision making as we developed our environment and further grew modern learning practices.

What's in a name?

As my sabbatical began, the term 'Modern Learning Environment' was used by the Ministry of Education and widely across the sector. This term came with diverse interpretation potentially leading to a lack of clarity around what the aims of moving towards modern learning environments were. This term tended to result in a focus on the physical aspects of the environment as the primary drive for school development.

After the first few weeks a change was made with the Ministry of Education replacing the term Modern Learning Environment with Innovative Learning Environments. On their website (**http://mle.education.govt.nz**) the Ministry described the term and the reasoning behind the changes as ;

'A learning environment may be understood to be the complete physical, social and pedagogical context in which learning is intended to occur. An innovative environment is one that is capable of evolving and adapting as educational practices evolve and change – thus remaining future focused. In the past the term Modern Learning Environments (MLE) has been used. Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) has greater international recognition and the Ministry of Education is migrating to this term consistent with both international usage and growing discomfort in New Zealand with the term MLE'.

The move to Innovative Learning Environment aimed to broaden the thinking to include pedagogical and social elements as important elements alongside the physical environment.

During my sabbatical I explored both MLE and ILE terms. As my learning developed I connected more with a further term 'learning by design' and this became the overarching concept for my study.

I believe it is an important distinction that the term learning by design puts learning first. It encourages us to be deliberate in considering the learning we hope to achieve and then design the conditions to provide greatest opportunity to do so.

Key Principles:
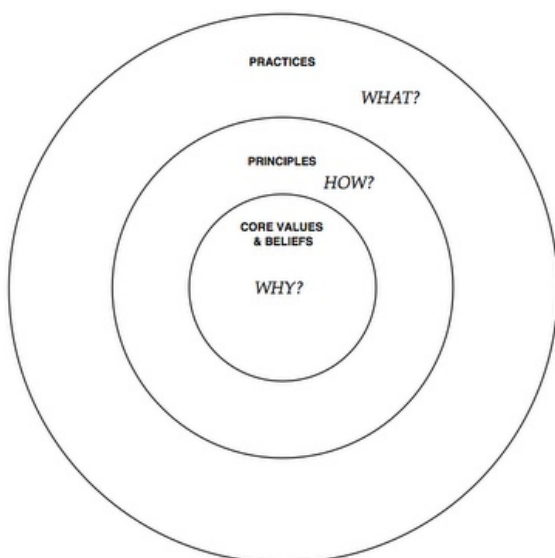
Start with the why

At the centre of learning by design is the school vision and educative purpose. I found that the greater clarity, ownership and understanding of the school vision by all stakeholders, the greater likelihood of innovative modern learning practices to be resulting in positive learning outcomes.

A key element of strategic planning in successfully transitioning to innovative learning environments was a sustained focus on explicitly connecting teaching and learning practices to key principles of learning. These were also connected with the school vision. The diagram shown is a tool developed by Dr Julia Atkin and can be used to design and reflect on this. The model encourages

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alignment between the why, how and what of our practice and was evident in a number of schools visited during my sabbatical.

In helping explain some of the 'why' education consultant Mark Osborne states that

"what we know about learning has increased dramatically over the last 20 years…and that modern learning environments that align better with what we know about the brain and student learning can facilitate traditional pedagogies such as direct instruction if needed but they typically offer students and teachers much more flexibility, openness and access to resources."

He believes that many of the modern learning environments built today effectively promote and support a range of pedagogies including delivering, applying, creating, communicating, and decision making and support strengths based teaching.

Considering all stakeholders:

Alongside the investment in the teaching staff, giving the opportunity for all stakeholders to be involved in the thinking around modern learning practices was also very valuable. Firstly acknowledgment that there will potentially be a range of viewpoints from parents /whanau, Board of Trustees members and students is a priority. Perceptions may be based on prior experiences of schooling, from what's heard from others, their children, or what they have read or heard in the media.

The uniqueness of context and community means that direct transplants of one innovative learning environment will not fit perfectly in another setting. Instead there is an imperative that leaders gather the unique 'voice' of all stake-holders in their own individual context. Views of students, parents, wider community, teachers, leaders and designers need to be seriously considered, taken into account, and acted on when planning, establishing and maintaining the innovative learning environment (Cooper 2013).

Starting with the 'why', sharing the moral imperative for change and investing time in all stakeholders had considerable benefits for the move towards innovative learning environments. A number of schools worked with external consultants, facilitating sessions with parents / whanau and helping to provoke thinking around the fast changing world and the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary to be successful now and for the future. Another common theme was brain-based research on learning. Considering that learning was not linear, but holistic, not uni-dimensional but multi faceted, and that as we move into the post knowledge economy we should be looking beyond the 'knowledge worker' who could now be considered a global commodity. Introducing a new learning paradigm that looks to a model where students learn different things from different people in different ways and at different times. The investment in involving parents / whanau in the conversation was seen as invaluable to growing understanding, ownership and momentum with the movement towards innovative learning environments.

Invest in professional learning:

Two schools visited during my sabbatical were to move into new purpose-built learning environments in the near future. In both cases, school leadership were investing much time engaging their staff in thinking and challenging beliefs about teaching and learning. The concept of 'mindset' introduced by Carol Dweck was evident with the expectation that all staff were open to exploring and challenging their thinking in a positive and supported environment. Teacher appraisal and attestation processes were aligned with school vision

and key principles of learning. These schools also engaged outside expertise from external consultants to help them with their processes.

Collaboration was highly visible as a key principle in many schools that were growing their thinking around modern learning practices. For some, this was a necessity as the environments being constructed were physically designed to encourage collaborative practices. In other schools, the principle of collaboration was leading to changes in physical spaces in schools, eg with walls between traditional single cell classrooms being removed and spaces opened up. Again, the schools who spent time engaging their staff in thinking around the 'why' for collaboration tended to have cohesive, owned and driven practices around this in their classrooms. Innovative learning environments, with their open and flexible spaces "create more collaborative communities of practice for teachers … (and) … the 'de-privatisation of practice' means that honest exploration of teacher strengths and weaknesses can take place in an open and supportive environment" (Osborne, 2013a, p.5).

Investment in teachers is a critical aspect of development towards innovative learning environments. Principal of Whitiora School, Paul Copper, believes school leaders have to go beyond the standard approach of simply providing professional learning opportunities for growth. The challenge for school leadership is to 'create synergistic effects' (Silins and Mulford, 2010, p.19) through its decisions. Leadership ability to facilitate "teacher capacity to undertake serial redesign through visits to other schools/sites to investigate ideas" was seen as critical to the success of innovative learning environments (Blackmore etal, 2010, p.46).

It was also observed that where the investment in staff development and ownership wasn't as great, then outcomes were often substantially decreased. The physical environment may have changed, but teaching practice didn't; and in some cases teachers put up their own walls.

Learner agency:

Another common element in schools working towards innovative learning environments was a focus on developing learner agency. Learner agency can be described as learners being actively involved in their learning and the decisions about their learning. This focus encourages learners to have greater involvement in the learning process. Ownership and understanding are key features and when learning in innovative learning spaces help to frame the learning sequence. In some schools, the layout of classroom space and furniture choices was built into the curriculum. Students were active participants in building understanding of the goals / vision for the learning and the different types of learning modalities that could achieve this. They were then given opportunities to design the learning environment accordingly, and in some cases to make choices for the purchase of furniture and resources. Learners having agency resulted in them having greater understanding of the 'why' behind learning decisions and often lead to higher levels of engagement and ownership for the spaces developed.

Looking beyond the walls:

Great opportunities exist to apply modern learning principles and practices beyond the classroom and beyond the school. A growing number of schools have recognised the potential of their grounds and are now providing outdoor spaces and experiences that support children's learning and wellbeing. In *The Good Playground Guide* the Scottish

government states that regular access to quality natural spaces can help address some of the most pressing challenges facing children today. It adds that

Good outdoor environments encourage children to be physically active and to develop physical skills and confidence. They can foster the development of collaboration, social skills, creativity and positive behaviour. Regular access to nature provides a refuge from bustle and hassle, helping to alleviate stress and support positive emotional wellbeing… Teachers are discovering that the outdoors is often a better place to learn than indoors, bringing learning to life and opening up opportunities that are simply unavailable in the classroom. And when children are closely involved in developing and looking after their outdoor environment, it helps to develop their sense of belonging, participation, respect and pride. Together, these factors can contribute positively and significantly to children's physical and emotional health but they also encourage health promoting habits and attitudes that have a lasting impact into adulthood. (p.2)

As we strategically plan development of learning spaces, we should also view use of school grounds and outdoor spaces as an integral part of the learning environment, ensuring that landscape design is at a par with building design. This should connect with our 'why' and school learning vision, encouraging the development of the skills and attributes we desire for our learners. A reflective question to consider is 'is our school playground a place to enjoy or a place to endure?'

The type of outdoor space we provide for our children can have significant impact on how active they are during break times. For many children, school play time is the most active part of their day, so providing features that stimulate a range of physical activities is one of the most powerful ways of supporting them to be active. This is particularly important for children who are not naturally drawn to sport or competitive rule based games.

Growing of physical literacy is another opportunity when developing outdoor learning spaces. Physical literacy is described as the ability to use a range of basic movement skills in a competent manner and in a range of settings. It includes skills like climbing, jumping, balancing and being able to negotiate uneven terrain. Physical literacy is seen as not just having the ability to do these things; it's also about developing an enjoyment of doing these things. It's a crucial foundation for developing competence across a wide range of sports and for becoming an active and healthy adult. It is valuable considering physical literacy and also including student voice in the development process for outdoor spaces.

Having loose materials available can also have a positive impact on learning opportunities in the playground. Children seem to have an innate desire to manipulate their physical environment and loose materials offer a huge range of opportunities for non- prescriptive play. Different materials can stimulate a wide range of play activities including building huts, construction, and the creation of fantasy and small world creation. They are particularly effective in stimulating children's creativity and encouraging teamwork and collaboration.

Part 2

Implications and resulting actions for Selwyn Ridge School:

The findings and experiences from my sabbatical have resulted in a number of key developments for Selwyn Ridge School. These have influenced strategic planning, school goals and priorities for the next 3-5 year cycle. Amendments to 10 year property planning and the resulting 5 year property funding have been made to align with the growth of thinking around innovative learning spaces and learning by design. The following have also been actioned;

- Comprehensive review of our school vision and key principles for learning. The Board of Trustees have designed and are completing a comprehensive self review. This involves consultation with community, whanau, students and staff. Modern learning principles and key skills, attributes and knowledge required for learners now and for the future have been considered.

- Parent / whanau information evenings have been held. These have been shared with other local schools and have involved external education consultants facilitating sessions around global developments, research about the brain and modern learning practices.

- School parent focus group sessions have been held to share possible directions and to seek feedback. These have been invaluable conversations and have fed back to the wider school community.

- Staff professional development has involved focused thinking and development around modern learning practice. This has included external facilitation alongside school lead professional learning. Teams have engaged in in-depth teaching as inquiry focuses around one of three strands; assessment for learning, environments for learning, IT for learning. An umbrella theme of 'growing learning agency' sits above each strand. This has allowed for a personalised approach to professional learning but maintaining strong connection to school vision and practices that align with key modern learning principles.

- The school outdoor environment has been enhanced to give greater opportunity for learning beyond the classroom. Deliberate decisions around the use of outdoor spaces and learning outcomes have been made. School vision and key principles of learning are to the fore with all planning decisions.

- There has been further commitment to the Kaupapa of the Enviro-schools programme. Key principles (empowering students, learning for sustainability, Māori perspectives, respect for the diversity of people and cultures and sustainable communities) are built into the school vision and curriculum implementation. These principles are also considered across all self review processes.

- Collaborative teaching and learning opportunities have been grown. This has included opening up and development of classroom spaces and the ability for greater flexibility and collaboration across classes and in teams.

- Opportunities for learning beyond the school have grown. We are fortunate to have a reserve and park that borders closely to our school. Teachers and children are being pro-active in using this to connect with nature and create authentic learning opportunities. A research project in partnership with Waikato University has been

undertaken that investigated the links between learning through the outdoors and the Health and Physical Education strand of the New Zealand Curriculum.

- Considering development of physical literacy in the redesign of playground spaces. Also considering the use of natural resources and having loose materials available.

- 10ypp and 5ya priorities have been reviewed and adapted to allow for development of innovative learning spaces. This has included spaces such as a 'kids kitchen', performing arts room, radio station and media centre. Spaces for storage of resources have been consolidated to allow opportunity for innovative use of these spaces for learning purposes.

Conclusion:

It was a privilege to be given this sabbatical opportunity and to spend time investigating the development of learning spaces and modern learning practice. It is an area that has great attention, information and resourcing around it. Decision making around space development goes to the heart of a school culture and vision and therefore the investment of time to explore, research and develop school plans is invaluable.   The aim of this report was not to replicate what is already available, but to provide a summary of key principles or themes I found through my sabbatical research. I welcome any visitors to contact me should they wish to view developments or discuss further the findings from this sabbatical.

Acknowledgements:

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