

**“Innovative Learning Environments and
Teachers Pedagogies that Support
These”**

Sabbatical Report

Term 2 2016

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Acknowledgements

The time I have spent reading research, visiting schools and taking the time to reflect and refresh has been of huge value and I know our school will benefit from the learning I have taken away from this experience.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Springdale School Board of Trustees for fully supporting my application.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank the Ministry of Education for giving me the chance to undertake my sabbatical.

Thank you to Angela White who took on the role as Acting Principal confidently and capably and also the staff for supporting Angela.

Thank you also to the principals and staff of the schools I visited. Your willingness to share your journeys setting up your innovative environments was much appreciated.

Executive Summary

- Modern Learning Environments offer students and teachers flexibility, openness and access to resources.
- Design must take into account areas for group teaching, peer to peer learning, clusters, individual work, connection to other people and provide a sense of belonging.
- Spaces in MLEs provide opportunity for group learning, direct instruction, guided teaching or individual inquiry and learning.
- Acoustic treatment is of critical importance.
- Teaching and learning should drive the design.
- MLEs support teacher collaboration and strengths based teaching.
- There are six commonly used co-teaching strategies.
- Students need to develop student agency, have the power or capacity to act and make choices.

Purpose

The purpose of my sabbatical was to have time to visit schools around NZ that have successfully set up ILEs, to see these in action and to speak to principals, teachers and students in these schools. I specifically wanted to see how different spaces have been designed, to see what collaborative teaching/ learning and student agency looks like. There is a wide range of literature available and I wanted time to read and research thoroughly.

At the end of my sabbatical I wanted to have a clear direction of where Springdale School should go in setting up our Innovative Environment. Our BOT want to ensure that we get the design right at the planning stages and we develop not only a modern space but also one where there is a shift in teaching pedagogy.

Background and Rationale

“An ILE is the complete physical, social and pedagogical context in which learning can occur. An ILE is capable of evolving and adapting as educational practices evolve and change. One part of creating an ILE is to modernise the spaces that teachers and students spend their time in.

We want all schools to have vibrant, well connected, innovative learning environments (ILE) that encourage and support many different types of learning”

Ministry of Education

Springdale School is a small, rural Full Primary in the Waikato with 69 pupils. Last year we started our new round of 5YP and to align with the Ministry’s priorities we are planning to create an innovative learning space.

We have two large classrooms with a library in between that would be an ideal space to turn into an Innovative Learning Environment. A challenge for us is the size of our school. With only 3 classes our options for collaborative spaces and teaching are limited. Do we put the senior class and the middle class in the space or the junior class and the middle class together.

The purpose of my sabbatical was to read literature about ILEs and visit schools who have created ILEs.

I set out to gain a better understanding of :

- What an ILE is
- How teacher pedagogy supports learning in an ILE
- What collaborative teaching and learning looks like in ILEs

I wanted to see how we can build a space and develop a class programme that meets the needs of our school and our learners.

Methodology

I visited 8 different schools all around NZ, schools that had a reputation for having well designed Innovative Learning Environments and teachers sharing spaces collaboratively. All but one of these schools had been working in these environments for more than 18 months.

The time spent talking to principals and teachers provided me with an insight into how their journeys had been, listening to their reflections on what was working and how change took place. Principals and teachers were very open and honest in their thoughts and their journeys.

Findings

Innovative learning Environments

An innovative Learning Environment is one that is capable of evolving and adapting as educational practices evolve and change, thus remaining future focused.

It is the transformation of a crowded classroom to a space that facilitates new and deeper ways of teaching and learning enabled by the physical changes.

‘ A learning space should be able to motivate learners and promote learning as an activity, support collaborative as well as formal practice, provide a personalised and inclusive environment, and be flexible in the face of changing needs.’

A lot of our schools’ buildings were not designed with modern learning and learning pedagogy in mind. The dominant pedagogy in the 50s and 60s was direct instruction. Innovative Learning Environments can facilitate direct instruction, but they typically offer students and teachers much more:

- Flexibility: the ability to combine two classes into one for team teaching, splitting 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 hub which is a central 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.
- Access to resources (including technology). A learning hub is surrounded by breakout spaces allowing 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 students need it.’
Mark Osborne

At Springdale School we have our library between two classrooms and it is this space that we want to open up and have one large environment for two classrooms. While being an advocate for the importance of libraries in schools Mark Osborne does say that students can access many of the spaces that have traditionally been provided by libraries without leaving the classroom : quiet, reflective, sanctuary spaces, collaborative co-operative group spaces, or even group learning spaces.

Teachers and students are able to access more and more resources electronically. Students can now read e-book versions of novels or magazines, watch documentaries online, and read high quality up to date non fiction without leaving their classrooms. Most resources and services provided by our library will be made available as part of our Innovative Learning Environments.

Design for ILE spaces must take into account:

Group teaching area- where flexible furniture arrangements can accommodate groups of varying sizes.

Peer to peer environments- where informal learning can take place.

Clusters- where student work can take place e.g. project spaces

Individual work- in quiet areas wireless enabled devices and wireless networks can be used for technological based learning.

Adjacencies- connection to other people.

Psychological- provide a sense of belonging, private space, natural light, temperature, furniture.

The NZ Curriculum indicates that students learn best when they are:

- Actively involved in decision making
- Initiating learning
- Collaborating together
- Making connections within and across learning areas.

The physical environment in a MLE allows the teachers and the students to select the best location for learning. Well designed spaces provide opportunity for small or large group learning, direct instruction, guided teaching or individual inquiry and learning, together with the opportunity to create specialist learning zones within the environment. It is important when in the planning stages to ensure that building design provides opportunity for small and large ‘break out’ learning areas in addition to more open spaces.

Acoustic treatment is of critical importance when two or more classes share a learning space as are natural light, ventilation, insulation and connection to the outdoors. Teachers also benefit from having a shared space where they can meet for professional conversations, planning, assessment and problem solving.

Pedagogy

Physical space should not be the driver for change. Impressive new buildings, on their own, no guarantee that improved learning will be achieved. ILEs need to centre on issues of pedagogy rather than the physical environment. Teaching and learning should drive the design but it should support teachers to create an effective teaching and learning environment.

MLEs can effectively promote and support a range of pedagogies including delivering, applying, creating, communicating and decision-making. Often they are centred around a student 'home base' where a lot of the teaching and learning occurs, but these bases also allow access to other learning spaces. Not all classes will need all the spaces all of the time but students should have access to them should the need arise.

MLEs support teacher **collaboration** and strengths-based teaching. Better results will be achieved if students have access to different skills that teachers have. Open and flexible spaces also create more collaborative communities of practice for teachers. Having access to the teaching practice of your colleagues to model and be modelled supports the development of effective teaching practice far more than teaching in an isolated, private space.

Teacher collaboration not only improves the practices of teaching but also improves outcomes for learners. For many years New Zealand teachers have taken time to collaborate with colleagues to moderate assessment information, plan units of learning, problem solve and share the immense task of meeting the diverse needs of learners. Through the provision of innovative learning spaces teachers now have the opportunity to maximise teacher collaboration by working together in one physical space to best meet the diverse needs of learners.

The skills of collaboration, learning focused communication and interpersonal skills have a significant bearing on the success of teachers working in ILEs. Specific strategies and PLD may be required to support teachers to gain the necessary collaboration skills to maximise working with colleagues. Teachers currently working in

these environments identify effective communication and collaboration skills as being essential if they are to work together successfully.

There are six commonly used **co-teaching** strategies which have potential in an ILE. These are derived from the inclusive schooling movement (Friend and Cook, 2010). These six strategies have been developed in consideration of the research and evidence based practice in MLEs.

- **One Teach, One Observe.** In this strategy one or more teachers is teaching and one observes (taking notes or recording the session). This is likely to be no more than 15 minutes and is deliberately preplanned. Teachers can learn from one another's strengths and weaknesses. They could also decide to observe specific students or groups of students. There is a debrief about teaching strategies observed.
- **Learning Coach.** The Learning Coach has the role of moving around the space and coaching specific students. These students may be involved in individual or group inquiries and have requested, or are requested, to meet with the coach for challenge, support, or feedback. The learning coach is a responsive role requiring the coach to have a strong knowledge of content, process and the students. Teachers may pre determine who they will assist or it may be a responsive action. This strategy has the potential to provide 'just in time teaching' to support various learning needs and enables self regulated learners to learn at a pace suitable to them.
- **Targeted Teaching.** This is needs based targeted teaching and learning (usually in reading, writing and mathematics). Students are organised into groups and move to teachers for needs based instruction or opt into workshops to have their needs targeted. When not involved with teachers, other students are involved in meaningful learning activities that reinforce the most recent lesson. Group sizes will vary depending on need. A display will indicate what each group is learning and when. Independent learning activities will be organised in advance.
- **Station Teaching.** Sometimes it is useful to divide content and students. Each teacher then teaches one group and subsequently repeats the learning for other groups. This is most common in inquiry time where co-teachers create stations in relation to a topic and become a specialist in this area. Students rotate around teachers. This allows teachers to set up experiments, resources and space to support learning and have the students rotate to the space. Teachers should ensure they plan for reflection time toward the conclusion of the lesson.
- **Team Teaching.** In team teaching, both teachers are teaching a large group at the same time. Most co-teachers consider this approach the most complex but satisfying way to co-teach, but this approach is most dependent on teachers'

styles. This approach gives students multiple perspectives on the curriculum as each teacher interprets and presents the curriculum in a different way. Debriefs between teachers are needed with honest communication about talk time, value of contributions, amount of time the students had to sit and listen. Team teaching requires high levels of trust, respect and effective communication between the teachers.

- Experimental teaching. Teachers are working towards personalised learning in most ILEs. Workshops can be conducted using a number of co-teaching strategies above. Workshops are characterised by student agency. The student is aware of their learning needs and goals that they want to achieve regardless of the context.(Clarke 2014). To achieve this teachers offer a range of mini lessons throughout the week that students can 'book' into. These lessons can relate to maths, literacy, inquiry, the arts or key competency skills.

To work effectively in a class space teachers are;

- ❖ Open to and invite feedback on their planning, teaching, interactions and assessments
- ❖ Plan carefully and take on the challenge of strategically planning a transition to co-teaching
- ❖ Aware they will make mistakes, but will learn from these and be open about the process
- ❖ Invite feedback from students, parents and colleagues
- ❖ Understand they will need to practice new strategies and possibly new pedagogies
- ❖ Prepared to create new strategies to improve teaching and learning in an ILE.
- ❖ Persist to ensure students achieve positive outcomes
- ❖ Ask questions of themselves and constantly reflect on how they are working together and when progress is not evident they collectively look inward and not outward
- ❖ Seek data (evidence of progress) to determine effectiveness of co-teaching
- ❖ Engage students in a growth mindset culture
- ❖ Value depth over speed

Students need to develop **student agency** (having the power or capacity to act and make choices) and be active managers, regulators and directors of their own learning. They need to know 'how' they learn if they are to learn to the stage where they genuinely own the learning.

Learners must have a belief that their behaviour and their approach to learning will make a difference for them in their learning context. The learner is not working in isolation doing their own thing and what suits them, there is connectedness.

Every decision a learner makes, and action she or he takes, will impact of the thinking, behaviour and decisions of others and vice versa.

Agency includes an awareness of the responsibility of one's own actions on the environment and on others.

'When moving from a structured, and often heavily teacher-dominated classroom, to a less formal student-led environment it is paramount students understand their role and responsibilities as the learner, and indeed the learning process. Teaching students to be independent and self directed learners needs to be at the centre of a successful MLE and this does not happen overnight. It requires scaffolds, stepping-stones and a safe environment.

Important questions to consider.

- Do you believe all students can learn?
- Do you like learning?
- Is learning always a simple process?
- What happens when learning is hard?
- How do you define learning?
- How do you know when something has been has been learned?

These questions apply equally to the teachers as well as the students. Learning is finding out what you don't know. Learning what you don't know is hard. "Everything is hard before it is easy"

Create a space where students are free to give ideas a whirl, make mistakes, fail and use what they know. Redefining mistakes and failure is crucial' *Karen Boyes*

All classroom processes in an ILE need to be directed towards supporting and enabling students to be the best managers of their own learning they can be. Students can choose to work independently or collaboratively. The role of the teachers is to model and scaffold the processes of learning.

To build their ability to support student agency teachers must

- Set high expectations and give every learner confidence they can succeed.
- Establish what learners already know and build on it.
- Structure and pace the learning experience to make it challenging and enjoyable.
- Inspire learning through a passion for the subject
- Make individual learners active partners in their learning (support students to set goals, display goals, monitor the progress they are making, review and set more goals)

- Visually present the success criteria for learning to help students talk about what they are learning and how to achieve the learning
- Develop learning skills in the learner
- Help students identify where they have been successful in their learning and identify areas they find challenging and need support

Students will improve most if they understand the aim of their learning, where they are in relation to this aim and how they can achieve the aim (or close the gap in their knowledge)

Personalising learning means students

- Understand how they learn
- Own and drive their learning
- Are co-designers of the curriculum and their learning environment.

Empowering students to become more self-directed learners and helping teachers and parents further develop these skills in their children can significantly increase students' motivation and achievement in school. (Cleary and Zimmerman 2004)

Implications for Springdale School

Visiting schools and seeing different designs and how these spaces were being used gave me a clear idea of what a well designed innovative learning environment looks like. After talking to many principals and teachers I realise it is going to be a lot of work with lots of highs and lows to get our ILE up and running.

We are currently working with our architect working on a preliminary design for our ILE space.

Our teaching staff are using a Teachers Only Day early in Term 4 to visit a school that has well designed ILEs and good teaching pedagogy.

Our Board of Trustees will be visiting the same school on another day.

Teachers and our BOT will all have input into finalising the architect's plans.

We will be having a meeting with our community to discuss ILEs, the direction we are heading, for teachers and students to work and learn collaboratively, developing student agency and share our designs for our space.

Teachers professional development will be focused on developing student agency and collaborative practice.

This year there has been a shift in teacher's pedagogy as we have started developing student agency in all classes. We run our literacy and numeracy timetable at the same time and cross group so students are working with a teacher and group that is a best fit for their learning. Students are co-constructing learning criteria with teachers so they

have better ownership and understanding of what they are learning. Two classes and teachers are working collaboratively on Genius Hour once a week.

We need to start teaching students the skills they need to work in these environments from the juniors up. It is much harder for students in the senior end of a primary school to move into an ILE, and teach them the skills to be agents of their own learning and how to work collaboratively, than it is to learn these skills as a new entrant and further develop these every year. Several principals said if they were to start again they would start with the juniors. Our first space will be for the 2 junior classes.

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