

## Sabbatical Report

Shane Tong 2018

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### Introduction and background

Saint John's College is a year 9-13 boys' school of 800, operating in a Marist Catholic tradition. As a principal of a boys' school I am interested in how boys are performing in Modern learning Environments (MLEs), now renamed Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs) or sometimes Flexible Learning Spaces. While the Ministry of Education (MOE) state that they do not tell school boards or Principals how to run their school they are instructing schools how to build them. The MOE is currently committed to all new builds in schools being ILEs from 2021.

In the process of writing this report I visited 10 Primary and Secondary schools with ILE classrooms and spoke with staff, students and senior leaders who work and learn in these environments. I have read various articles and literature on the topic, mostly those on the Ministry's site such as the 2015 OECD report, 'Schooling Redesigned: Towards Innovative Learning Systems' but also looked at the work of other academics who hold quite a different view to the MOE. A search on the internet will throw up numerous media articles from the past 12 months about the advent of ILEs which are worth reading, although almost all are naturally negative and alarmist in nature. I also completed analysis of NCEA data of ILE schools and compared this to similar decile traditional classroom schools. Naturally this report is simply the views of one individual based on the above sample and should be taken as such.

It is acknowledged that some of the perceived negatives of ILEs could equally apply to some traditional classrooms. It is also true that some of the perceived positives of ILEs can be achieved in traditional classrooms (traditional in this context is to be read as single cell, one teacher, one class).

To an extent the exercise became one of considering various elements of teaching and learning from a dual perspective i.e. ILEs, pros and cons.

Potential Pros for ILE	Potential Cons
Will continue to adapt and evolve over time.	May not adapt for the better. There will always be a lag with research and findings.
Interdependence of learners. Potential to build a stronger culture with increased team and group work.	Less ability for staff to connect to 'their' individual class of learners while working within a large class.
Opportunities for student voice with the ability to manage and plan their own programmes.	Difficult for staff to keep track of an individual student's work and progress, can become a clipboard tick off exercise. Poorly organised or motivated students have the ability to cruise.
More collaboration between staff, opportunities to learn from each other and plan.	Increased workload and less flexibility for individual teachers as staff need to plan together regularly and teach as a team.
Staff can complement each other's strengths and weaknesses and learn from each other.	Less individual accountability for teachers with an ability to 'hide' or to blame other staff for poor student performance.

	Unmotivated staff may rely on others to do the work.
Better prepares students for a future where collaboration and open plan offices exist.	The future is always unknowable. Open plan offices are not generally noisy environments, break out spaces (enclosed rooms) are for conversations rather than quiet spaces which appears to be the reverse of the ILE model.
The traditional 'industrial' model of schools no longer prepares students for the 21 <sup>st</sup> century and for a future where industrial style work will likely become redundant.	The industrial style of education regularly cited by proponents of ILEs is from teaching as it was decades ago. Teaching and learning the "traditional classroom" is markedly different in 2018.
Enables students to work across multiple disciplines at once and make genuine connections between traditional subjects.	Students no longer have access to specialist teachers but rather facilitators and generalists. Not everything can be 'googled' out of context, a basic understanding of content from traditional subjects remains relevant.
Students can use technology to free themselves from learning content and focus on projects they are passionate about.	We want physicians and engineers etc who innately know their area of expertise and not have to search the web for answers. Technology can be as much of a distraction as a useful tool. There are already concerns about how much time teenagers spend in front of screens, should they be doing likewise at school?

#### Observations:

- The pedagogy and mind-set of the teachers is far more important than the actual environment itself.
- This appropriate 'mind-set' from teachers is easier for new build ILE schools, rather than those that have introduced ILEs into an existing school, as staff and students have made a conscious decision to work in an ILE environment.
- All leaders in the ILE schools believed that ILEs were the way of the future. They were clearly hard working and passionate about their schools.
- In the secondary area teams there has been a shift from teams of 3 teachers to teams of 2 which appears to be working better. In primary it appeared that 2 was already the norm.
- Most staff commented there has been an increase in workload mostly as a result of regular planning meetings. This was not necessarily intended as a complaint.
- Many staff felt invigorated by the opportunity to co-teach across a variety of curriculum areas while others were somewhat uncomfortable having to teach in an area they knew little about. One example was a teacher who was about to embark on a three week food technology course and they had no knowledge or experience in this area.
- I mostly observed teachers working with/speaking to groups of students. On two occasions staff were surfing the net or texting while the other teacher in the room worked with students.
- In discussion with staff most said they enjoyed the process and believed in the pedagogy, others found that they were merely 'checking off completion tasks' for students and not able to form real relationship as a result of the large numbers.

- Some staff found the constant noise difficult when trying to work with groups. This was most evident in Primary schools where often two teachers would team teach two classes for part of the day and then look to take their classes independently in the same space.
- Some staff in Primary commented that they found the unfocussed disruptive boys struggled to cope in ILE environments. One team of teachers who had worked together in an ILE the previous year had chosen to teach their classes independently this year as a result of too many disruptive boys who could be better managed in a single class setting. They had put up visual barriers to create two areas to teach and would look to see if glass doors could be retrofitted. It was similar when speaking to students in that many enjoyed the freedom and self-direction while others disliked the lack of direction and distractions.
- Some staff enjoyed working outside of their specialist area whilst others felt frustrated that they were often unable to teach their area of expertise and passion.
- Students were most often working on a device either provided by the school or their own. They had certain tasks that they were to work their way through mostly under their own direction.
- Most students said they liked the way the school operated, one group who had previously been in a traditional single cell 'top' class the previous year said they found the environment distracting.
- Students in secondary schools were often listening to music while working. Music, particularly with lyrics, has been shown to negatively impact on student learning.
- Almost all groups of up to five were talking. Without a teacher present the talk at these tables appeared most often not to be related to their schoolwork but more social in nature, although they insisted they were still working. These groups were mostly boys.
- In every classroom at all times there was constant background noise which has been shown to negatively affect student learning.
- I observed and spoke to the few students (generally boys) who had taken themselves off to the quiet breakout rooms. These students stated that they preferred the quiet environment to work.
- The new standards of lighting, acoustics and ventilation from the Ministry help make these new environments attractive on many levels.

### Conclusions:

- ILEs might well prove to be a success in the long term or the concept may well go the same way as National Standards and Charter Schools, i.e. a failed experiment. Only time will tell.
- There is little research on education outcomes to support the universal implementation of ILEs in New Zealand. Naturally with the passing of time and more ILE schools in action more meaningful research and analysis of data will be available.
- NCEA data shows that boys are demonstrably achieving better in boys schools, the vast majority of these schools remain single cell traditional environments. The NCEA data available from ILE schools does not support improved outcomes for students.

Without achievement data that demonstrates ILEs are performing better than traditional ones there is little incentive for our school to adopt this model. However this research project has helped to highlight certain classes within our school which I believe would benefit from increased collaboration between students and between staff which we will explore.

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