

**Sabbatical Report 2019**  
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**How principals lead the pedagogy required for teachers to meet the learning needs for priority learners in innovative learning environments.**

## **Acknowledgement**

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## **Introduction**

*The purpose of this study was to explore the role of the principal leading the pedagogy required to meet the learning needs of children identified as priority learners.*

Innovative learning spaces are flexible, shared teaching spaces that support teaching approaches, different from the pedagogy of traditional single-teacher classrooms where students sat in fixed rows. This paper looks at the principal leadership and the impact it had in shifting teacher's pedagogy to align with innovative learning practice and the support of priority learners within these spaces. This was to better understand what specific characteristics effective principal leadership has within these environments. Information was gathered through interviews with principals, teachers and related stakeholders.

Currently innovative learning spaces are being developed and built nationally in New Zealand schools. An innovative learning environment is defined as a space that supports strengths based teaching and can offer students and teacher's flexibility, openness and access to resources (Osborne, 2013). The Ministry of Education (2014a) defines an innovative learning space as "flexible quality learning space, including adequate acoustics, lighting heating and ventilation," as well as "a tool that encourages schools to think creatively about the way they teach, and introduces breakout spaces -where students can work independently, or cross classroom in an informal environment" (pg. 58) These spaces are often referred to as innovative learning environments or modern learning environments.

Recent studies have found that the physical environment significantly affects the achievement of students and how they learn (Earthman, 2004). This relates directly to students identified as priority learners within these spaces

Walton, Nel, Muller, and Lebloane (2014) found that many teachers struggle with the knowledge and skills that are needed to teach priority learners in classrooms with diverse learning needs. Teachers are required to understand the needs of these children and their capabilities and the levels of assistance required within these spaces.

Currently the Ministry of Education has an expectation that "Creating modern learning spaces ensures quality teaching and learning opportunities, are available for every teacher, child and student."(Ministry of Education 2007 pg. 58) Furthermore, the Ministry of Education (2014a) has an expectation that requires school leaders to look closely at the ways they support teachers to work within innovative learning spaces and examine their styles of teaching in line with the above statement of intent and 21st century teaching.

Leading within innovative learning spaces requires principals to have a skill set that can meet this challenge. Principals need personal and professional qualities combined with professional knowledge and leadership skills to meet the challenges aligned with meeting the needs of priority learners. This view is supported by Stein and Spillane (2005) who believe that principals should have a strong understanding of teaching and be able to develop teacher's pedagogy by providing professional learning that supports this challenge.

## **Findings from the research of four schools and four focus groups**

The sabbatical research investigated principal leadership within innovative learning spaces with a focus on meeting the needs of priority learners. Relevant literature was read to support this investigation. These findings were from the interviews with principals.

The research question focused on the role of the principal leading pedagogical change in innovative learning spaces. The theory driving the exploration was that there are particular characteristics of effective leadership that are evident in leader's practice, in order for change to occur in the pedagogy of teachers working within these spaces. .

### **These are described under 3 sub-questions that explored:**

- The principals influence in changing the teachers pedagogical practices in meeting the needs of priority learners within innovative learning spaces.
- The benefits identified by leaders and teachers of innovative learning environments.
- The constraints identified by leaders of innovative learning environments.

### **Characteristics of Principals in Changing Teachers Pedagogical practice in meeting the needs of Priority Learners in Innovative Learning Environments.**

#### **My research identified these key characteristics for principal leadership:**

1. Shared vision
2. Professional learning
3. The principal as a learner
4. Collaboration
5. Trust

These leadership characteristics were mentioned by all participants as major factors defining and characterising innovative learning spaces .Constraints in pedagogical practice were also identified by all participants and these are described below.

#### **Shared Vision**

Teachers and principals both identified that it was important for a school to have a shared vision related to innovative learning spaces and the teaching of students identified as priority learners. This includes the identification of key people within the school who have knowledge of the new pedagogy, as well as ensuring the school is attuned to the wider community so that the vision of this paradigm shift is shared amongst all levels of the school community

All four principals mentioned shared vision as being an important feature of their leadership. They stated their leadership was supported by this shared vision and was the foundation of the school's strategic direction. The shared vision was seen as providing the direction for principals, "the road map", for meeting the needs of priority learners and for all other leaders within the school. The vision was seen as shared and in all four schools was co-constructed Understanding the school vision and being able to put into practice its goals was seen by one principal as a platform for developing leadership of others within schools. Two other principals spoke about the Ministry of Education policy that states all new builds and modifications to existing builds must be built as modern learning environments. They felt challenged by this as in both cases, they were given buildings developed as innovative learning spaces so they were not able to develop the teaching pedagogy necessary to meet a range of learning needs, aligned with priority learners prior to the builds.

## **Teachers and principals in all four schools stated that the shared vision provided the umbrella for strategic direction. The direction determined these things.**

1. High expectations for teachers.
2. Opportunities for teachers to engage in innovative learning spaces.
3. Collaboration and deprivatizing of their teaching practice.
4. Personalised learning.
5. Opportunities for leadership to be distributed.
6. Professional learning is connected to the development of pedagogy aligned with the teaching of priority learners within these spaces.
7. Resourcing - ensuring that the teachers were supported with necessary resources to work effectively within these innovative learning spaces.

In all four schools, principals clearly stated that a shared vision was the framework that was required for meeting the needs of priority learners within these spaces. The expectation of the Ministry of Education is that teachers will work effectively within these spaces addressing the diverse needs of students. This requires careful planning and strong effective principal leadership. Participants in four schools saw co- construction of this shared vision, as significant within the process of creating the change required to work in these spaces. Collegial collaboration was seen as a strength for meeting the teaching needs of priority learners. A shared vision was seen as motivating and was owned by all teachers as they were involved in the development and then the implementation of the shared vision.

### **Professional Learning**

Professional learning was strongly identified by principals and teachers as a critical part of the move towards developing the required pedagogy to teach priority learners. Participants identified this as important feature of change required in their teaching pedagogy to be able to work effectively in meeting the needs of priority learners.

Concerns raised by one set of teachers was with the leadership of their teaching team as well as personality clashes. The leadership of this team was viewed as not collaborative and teachers felt they lacked the professional development required to teach priority learners within these spaces.

Participants in all schools believed that professional learning was necessary to create pedagogically significant shifts required to work successfully within innovative learning spaces. Coaching leaders to be leaders was considered important and was done through leadership meetings. Visiting Viviane Robinsons open to learning conversations, talking about student agency, making sure students had a voice in their learning was considered to be very important within these spaces.

Professional learning communities were identified as an important feature of learning how to cater for priority learners within these settings. The learning communities were developed by the principal and team leaders, and provided scheduled times throughout the year when participants would meet to discuss a specific learning focus. The professional learning communities supported collaborative practice and provided further learning opportunities. The participants felt supported and safe and high levels of trust were evident between participants. Professional reading was identified by participants as another way of learning more about priority learners and how best to meet their learning needs.

The development of leadership in others, distributed in schools, was evident in the participant's responses pertaining to having opportunities to grow their leadership chosen areas, as part of their professional learning journey.

## **Professional learning needs of participants were determined in all schools by**

1. Individual teachers asking to explore a particular pedagogy required to be an effective teacher of priority learners.
2. Being determined by leaders within schools who were working alongside teachers
3. A schoolwide focus that was designed to build capacity around the required teaching pedagogy for priority learners
4. Self-review of professional learning completed and next steps for learning identified.

Performance appraisal was identified by participants as being an important part of professional learning. Performance appraisal was linked to professional learning and teachers used an inquiry process to determine learning goals linked to teaching students identified as priority learners.

## **The Principal as lead learner**

All participants identified the principal leading learning as a significant key to being successful in creating pedagogical change. Principals felt the principal participating in all professional development provided strong leadership for staff, with the principal role- modelling and showing commitment to learning and developing their knowledge alongside teachers. Principal knowledge was seen as credible leadership by participants in all schools.

Principals supported the view that a range of leadership styles was required to develop the pedagogy that supports the teaching of priority learners within these spaces. Context was seen as important and determined what was appropriate in terms of leadership style. Instructional leadership was seen as important when leading and developing teacher pedagogy.

Distributed leadership was mentioned in all four schools by all participants. This was seen by the teacher participants as a way principals could develop the leadership of themselves through being given opportunities to lead. Teacher participants commented on how they had been given opportunities to lead others when they had learnt from experiencing the teaching pedagogy from other leaders, usually when they were part of a teaching team.

All four principals discussed the importance of ensuring student outcomes were successful for priority learners within their schools.

## **Collaboration**

All four schools participants identified collaboration between staff as a defining factor when working with priority students within these spaces. Teachers in all schools noted this type of environment encouraged a shared pedagogy when working in these spaces. Teachers collaborated and developed professional knowledge that developed the collaborative practice within these spaces -planning together, sharing, and using tools like “google docs” so that all staff can see what they are doing.

### **One curriculum leader stated.**

***“Developing their thinking together, not just sharing their resources and planning , more than that ,it goes deeper, its true collaboration , where they are developing together what's happening within any given day , sharing student achievement taking shared responsibilities for priority learners and programmes”.***

The furniture within these learning spaces participants felt assisted with allowing collaboration for students and teachers participants felt it supported personalised learning. This was seen as a way of increasing the collaborative practice between teachers. Problems that occurred within the spaces, for example with student behaviour or learning support needs, meant that teachers shared the responsibility of providing the best instruction for priority learners.

One participant felt the furniture allowed them to work in lots of different ways that supported priority learners and their diverse learning needs. The participant stated;

***“Buying collaborative furniture to make our learning spaces a collaborative space with mixed tables and varied furniture and spaces where children are prompted and guided to work collaboratively and work in that non-traditional environment “ .***

The shift in teaching pedagogy was seen by participants as heavily dependent on the way teachers interacted with each other but most importantly collaborated together in the design of programmes of learning for priority learners.

## **Trust**

All participants were able to talk about feeling safe to practise their pedagogy within a context of learning. Collaborative conversations where teachers shared their expectations were identified in all schools as extremely important. The development of teaching teams was discussed by participants in all schools. The selection of appropriate teachers to work together was done with an expectation of professionalism and high degree of trust. Participants saw this as very important when catering and meeting the needs of priority learners within these spaces. Trusting the leadership and allowing the process to be transparent and being comfortable with the final decision, was highly valued by participants being a participant in this selection process. Trust was seen as a critical part of the leadership in this selection process.

## **Summary of Findings**

### **The Principals influence in Changing the Teachers Pedagogical Practice**

For principals to lead pedagogical change they need to have specific characteristics/capabilities, evident in their leadership. These characteristics are particularly useful in a time of change. Change can be challenging and principal leadership determines the success of establishing effective innovative practice and meeting the needs of priority learners, within these spaces.

### **The Benefits Identified by Leaders and Teachers Working in Innovative, Spaces**

Principal leadership in schools within innovative spaces relies on the principal’s leadership style being more than transactional. Instructional leadership is seen as necessary for pedagogical shifts to happen successfully.

This research has identified that when a principal leads learning and participates collaboratively with all aspects of the professional learning, the change in the pedagogical shift required is successful. This view is supported by Katz et al. (2009), who identify student learning as dependent on major changes. Their research identified teaching practice, the ways schools are structured, professional learning and collaboration as being key to effective change. Strategic leadership developed around a shared vision builds a cohesive community of learning that reflects, self-reviews and improves innovative practice. This process is ongoing and relies on a strongly designed strategic direction based on regular inquiry and self-review.

## **The Challenges Identified by Leaders and Teachers in Innovative Learning Spaces meeting the needs of Priority Learners.**

Within this research the principal participants felt challenge was a positive part of shifting teachers' pedagogy to align with innovative learning practice and meeting the needs of priority learners. High expectations from principals requiring professional learning created challenges in the way teachers looked at their practice. This challenge of learning was identified as an important feature of leading pedagogical change.

Appointing staff to work within innovative learning spaces was seen as a challenge. Finding suitable staff was seen as challenging also. Finding staff to work within innovative learning environments required personalities that understood the pedagogy of the innovative space. Personal qualities identified and useful within this innovative learning space were teachers who had first-hand knowledge of meeting the needs of priority learners through their adaptability and flexibility within their teaching practice. These teachers see challenge as an opportunity for new learning based around a willingness to share, trust, make mistakes and collaborate.

The research identified the challenge of teachers moving from a traditional single cell classroom into innovative learning spaces, without the capabilities mentioned above. The most successful transitions to innovative learning spaces occurred when teachers were open to learning from others informally and formally. The research highlighted the importance of a common understanding of the pedagogy in schools that provided high levels of support adopting this practice and meeting the needs of priority learners. This assisted with the transition of teachers into innovative learning practice.

Furthermore, aligned with this type of challenge, was the need for principals and leaders to be supported. Principals identified this challenge also within their schools where teachers could not make the shift and were resistant to change. These teachers moved to other educational settings because they were struggling to meet needs of students identified as priority learners. It was clear that the professional learning provided was a necessary part of moving into these spaces.

Challenge within innovative learning environments provides a context and platform for professional learning when principal leadership identifies and differentiates support for teachers when addressing the needs of priority learners. This is supported by Leithwood (2012), who stated that principals need to build organisational contexts. These organisational contexts provide pathways for professional learning that facilitates and builds collective collaborative capacity (Fullan, 2010). Challenges, therefore, were viewed as an important part of identifying problems or concerns, ideally to be used as a way of improving practice through, for example, professional learning group inquiry and performance appraisal, organisational contexts that were led by the principal.

### **Recommendations**

1. That the Ministry of Education, when building innovative learning environments in schools, provides tailored professional development that supports the new pedagogy required to meet the needs of students who are priority learners. How best to meet and plan their needs within these open spaces is necessary for priority learners learning needs to be met effectively.
2. Principals need to be trained in the pedagogy that supports meeting the needs of these students within these spaces. They need the knowledge and specific leadership capabilities to support teachers moving into these spaces as part of the Ministry of Education initiative that all schools building or modifying buildings will be innovative learning environments

When designing these spaces educational experts/advisors, experienced with meeting needs of priority learners act as the interface between the school and the architects. This is so there is a



clear understanding of pedagogical issues involved in meeting the needs of priority learners within the design of these spaces.

3. The school community should have involvement in the innovative learning space developments and be represented in the process and change towards this new teaching pedagogy. Parents need to understand that these spaces are appropriate for their children and their learning needs.

4. Professional development should be available on what an effective school vision looks like for schools moving into innovative learning practice and how to co construct such a vision addressing specifically the needs of priority learners.

5. Guidelines could be developed for employment of staff within these spaces. What specific qualities do principals need to be aware of when recruiting staff to work with priority learners within these spaces?

6. Principals need to understand how to resource these spaces strategically with appropriate furniture that supports the teaching pedagogy.

This research with principals, and the teachers they lead, has cast light on the innovative learning environments that are becoming the standard arrangement of space within New Zealand schools. The research clearly reveals how important the principal as a leader and learner is when catering and meeting the needs of priority students within these spaces. Professional learning is required to create effective communities of learning within schools with innovative learning spaces, in order for the benefits of these environments for priority learners, all learners in the 21st century to be embraced.

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