



PPTA TE WEHENGARUA ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2017

FLEXIBLE LEARNING SPACES

AN EXPERIMENT ON OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM?



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This paper outlines some of the issues with the current move to build and rebuild schools as flexible learning spaces. The lack of evidence from research in the New Zealand secondary context is concerning, and this paper seeks a mandate to challenge the Ministry of Education on this. There is not a level playing field between new builds and rebuilds, and this paper proposes additional funding to support professional learning and development (PLD) for teachers in rebuilt flexible learning schools. This would go some way to addressing the inequity that currently exists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the report be received.
2. That PPTA reaffirms that we welcome thoughtful and coherent change in secondary schools.
3. That PPTA continues to challenge the Ministry of Education on the need to research the effectiveness of flexible learning spaces in terms of their impact on student achievement, student wellbeing, teaching and learning, and teacher satisfaction in the New Zealand context.
4. That PPTA advocate for the government to dedicate additional funding for PLD for teachers in rebuilt flexible learning space schools as a proportion of the total projected cost of the physical build.
5. That PPTA branches make renewed efforts to persuade their boards of trustees to sign up to an education change management policy for the school, based on the processes outlined in PPTA's *Education Change Management Toolkit*.

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In 2012, annual conference received a paper titled *Managing the paradigm shift: Secondary schooling and change*, which canvassed a range of major changes facing New Zealand schools, including changes in learning environments, increased expectations of personalised and self-directed learning, technology changes, and pastoral care changes with form teachers having a much larger role including for academic guidance.
- 1.2 That paper began with the words “Change is endemic in education, and teachers do not expect it to be otherwise. But the two tests for change always need to be whether it is justified by the evidence and implemented properly. In many cases, these two tests are not met.”¹
- 1.3 The reception of the 2012 conference paper launched the first edition of PPTA’s *Education Change Management Toolkit*², which is one of the most frequently referenced and accessed toolkits on PPTA’s website. The toolkit provides schools with a well-researched template for the process of making effective change.
- 1.4 However, in the five years since that paper and the launch of the toolkit, change has, if anything, accelerated, and despite the availability of an excellent resource, the two tests for change are still not being met in many cases.
- 1.5 The 2012 paper covered issues around changing learning environments only briefly. However, since that time, PPTA has been following the developments in this area with considerable interest. This paper focuses on these issues in more detail.
- 1.6 Increasingly, we are seeing whole schools being built or rebuilt as flexible learning spaces, or the inclusion of flexible learning spaces in parts of existing schools. The Ministry of Education now requires that any new school buildings meet some basic tests for flexibility, such as that the internal walls are not load-bearing so that they can be easily shifted as needs change over time.
- 1.7 There is literature around physical characteristics of classrooms (temperature, light, acoustics, etc.). However, there is very little evidence based research literature into the effectiveness of flexible learning spaces, in terms of their impact on student achievement, student wellbeing, teaching and learning, and teacher satisfaction in the New Zealand context.
- 1.8 This paper does not attempt to cover the huge topic of innovative learning pedagogies, but instead discusses some of the issues observed as secondary schools are being built and rebuilt in New Zealand.
- 1.9 The paper then goes on to consider issues around the proper management of change in education, and reiterates the 2012 paper’s call for PPTA to seek to negotiate change

¹ [Managing the paradigm shift: Secondary schooling and change](#)

² <http://ppta.org.nz/publication-library/education-change-management-toolkit/>

management policies at the local level, between PPTA branches and their boards of trustees.

2. TERMINOLOGY

2.1 There are a variety of terms used in an interchangeable way. Modern learning environments (MLEs), 21st century learning environments, innovative learning environments (ILEs) and flexible learning spaces (FLSs) are all terms used in different contexts, often with an intention of meaning the same thing. For the purposes of this paper the terms used are defined in the following ways.

2.1.1 FLEXIBLE LEARNING SPACES (FLS)

These are the physical spaces in which the learning takes place in a school. The Ministry of Education describes these spaces as being “made up of many different sized spaces so they can support different ways of teaching and learning and be used for different types of activities. They tend to be more open than traditional classrooms and have spaces that accommodate more than one class and several teachers. Many spaces have glazing between them to create open and light spaces that can be indirectly supervised.”³ They may include breakout spaces, in a variety of sizes, and access to outdoor learning areas.

2.1.2 INNOVATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS (ILE)

The Ministry of Education defines an innovative learning environment as “an environment where the national curriculum is being expressed in the way it is intended. It is capable of evolving and adapting as educational practices evolve and change - thus remaining future focused... Innovative learning environments are learner-focussed and emphasise valued learner outcomes. They encourage collaboration and inquiry, both for learners and teachers, and allow teachers to teach in the style that best suits the needs of diverse learners.”⁴

It is important to make a distinction between the two. It is possible to build a school with flexible learning spaces, and then try to use these spaces in a more traditional way. This has occurred in some schools, where teachers have claimed spaces as their classroom, and continued to teach the way they have always done. Equally, it is possible in a traditionally built school, with single cell classrooms, to still be an innovative learning environment.

³ <https://education.govt.nz/school/property/state-schools/design-standards/flexible-learning-spaces/>

⁴ <http://ile.education.govt.nz/>

3. LACK OF EVIDENCE

- 3.1 In 2016 the Ministry of Education published a review titled *The impact of physical design on student outcomes*. This publication was accompanied by a companion piece called *Māui whakakau, kura whakakau: The impact of physical design on Māori and Pasifika student outcomes*. Both are available on the ministry's website⁵. These are intended to be read together, and they should "act as a guide for those involved in visioning and design of schools and other learning spaces". However, these are not evaluations and there is no practical information on how to create innovative learning environments in a secondary context. They do not pose a question and seek to answer it, but rather review information that is already available. Much of the research reviewed in the first publication is international, rather than in the New Zealand context, and much of it is situated in the primary setting. While the second publication reviews New Zealand publications, these are not specifically about flexible learning spaces, instead focussing on culturally responsive pedagogies.
- 3.2 It is worth noting that the ministry's publication *The impact of physical design on student outcomes* does describe a methodology. Secondary data (the literature) was found by searching educational databases. This was then triangulated by primary data. This data was gathered from "semi-structured interviews and focus groups with subject matter experts" (p.13). This does not sound like the independent, evaluative research that the sector is wanting. In fact this simply feeds into the feeling that buildings are driving the education agenda, and that it is the building structures that are determining the direction of pedagogy, rather than the other way around.
- 3.3 Questions are often asked about how these changes to flexible learning spaces impact our Māori learners, our Pasifika learners, our learners with diverse learning needs, those who are noise sensitive or hearing impaired, easily distracted or simply introverted. The answer is that we do not really know. This level of uncertainty leads to fear and mistrust among teachers, and understandably so. The ministry has now established a section on the TKI Inclusive Education website titled 'Planning an innovative learning environment'⁶ which certainly encourages schools to consider the impacts of flexible learning spaces on students with diverse learning needs, but there is no evidence of research about the impacts on particular groups of students.
- 3.4 It is acknowledged that research sometimes lags behind change in practice, but some schools have had these kinds of spaces for nearly two decades and the opportunities for research in these schools should have been taken by now.
- 3.5 One possible avenue for research would be for the ministry to use the Integrated Data Infrastructure⁷ to do a matched cohort analysis of the outcomes of students in flexible learning space schools compared to traditional schools.

⁵ <https://education.govt.nz/school/property/state-schools/design-standards/flexible-learning-spaces/design-student-outcomes/>

⁶ <http://inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/ile/>

⁷ http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/snapshots-of-nz/integrated-data-infrastructure.aspx

- 3.6 It is somewhat encouraging to know that the ministry is now involved in a four year investigation of the impact of flexible learning spaces on student achievement in partnership with Melbourne University. The first publication from this investigation is due in late 2017, and PPTA will be interested to see whether this project meets the requirements of independent evaluative research.

4. SECONDARY TEACHERS' COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT (STCA)

- 4.1 It is sometimes argued that schools operating outside a traditional timetable model face challenges ensuring that the requirements under the STCA⁸ are met, especially in relation to maximum contact time and maximum average class size.
- 4.2 In a traditional 25 hour timetable, it is relatively easy to afford teachers a maximum of 20 contact hours (or fewer, depending on their entitlements). However, in a more innovative learning environment, possibly with greater than 25 hours of student learning time and less demarcation of time and subjects, more creative thinking is required.
- 4.3 Additionally, in a flexible learning space with a teacher work area existing in the middle of a large student space and surrounded by glass, it is important to ensure that teachers are able to have genuine non-contact time. Timetabling specific non-contact time for each teacher is a critical start, but this must be accompanied by measures to ensure teachers can be undisturbed in that time, particularly when work spaces are located within teaching spaces. At one school with flexible learning spaces, signs on the teachers' work areas read "We are on release. You will have to find another teacher."
- 4.4 Equally, maximum average class size calculations become more of an issue in many innovative learning environments. Teachers may be working with varying numbers of students during their contact hours because they are working in a space shared by multiple teachers. There must be genuine endeavour made to ensure that teachers have maximum average class sizes of 26 students or fewer.
- 4.5 The workload associated with assessment, particularly when programmes are being tailored to individual student needs, multi-level and cross-disciplinary, should also not be underestimated.

5. STAFFING – AN UNEVEN PLAYING FIELD

- 5.1 Another challenge is the inequities that exist in terms of support for new schools as opposed to the support for rebuilds. This is especially evident in situations where existing schools are being rebuilt as flexible learning spaces.

⁸ <http://ppta.org.nz/collective-agreements/secondary-teachers-collective-agreement-stca/> - see Section 5.2 for non-contact hours and 5.9 for class size

- 5.2 For example, Rolleston College is a new build. It opened at the beginning of 2017, with just 220 Year 9 students (the school is expected to grow to 1800 Years 9-13 students by 2023). The staffing in its first year is approximately double a normal staff allocation.⁹ Staff are working very hard to operate as an innovative learning environment, making use of a good staff to student ratio.
- 5.3 Haeata Community Campus also opened at the beginning of 2017 school year welcoming students from years 1-13. However, despite being a new school, formed by the closure of four schools, Haeata has not received the advantageous staffing that usually comes with a new school in the secondary context, but is instead being treated as a rebuild for this purpose.
- 5.4 This has been compounded by the fact that 200 extra students showed up to start school who had not previously enrolled.¹⁰ Taking a whole school of students, from years 1-13, and changing the style of education that they receive from a traditional single cell approach to that of an innovative learning environment is a huge challenge. Teachers are having to make that shift for multiple year levels of students simultaneously.
- 5.5 In the case of a rebuild, or partial rebuild, the school will usually continue to operate on the site as the build goes on around it. (There are some exceptions to this, for example in Christchurch, where schools are being relocated.) In this case a teacher may one term find themselves teaching in a single cell traditional classroom, and the following term in an open flexible learning space. The shift in pedagogy can be challenging for teachers, especially when the change process has not been managed well.
- 5.6 In an ideal situation, some of these pedagogical shifts will have been made incrementally, over a period of time, in consultation with staff and in a way that is appropriate for the learners and with plenty of lead-in time and ample PLD. However, in the worst cases, these changes are not well supported, and these are the circumstances under which some teachers struggle with the change and resist, continuing to teach in a more traditional way, despite being in flexible learning spaces.

6. THOUGHTFUL AND COHERENT CHANGE

6.1. THE RISKS

- 6.1.1 There is a risk that schools will read the literature on flexible learning spaces and innovative learning environments, see what other schools are doing, and leap into whatever seems to work for those other schools without careful evaluation of what will work for their own students and teachers, in their own context. They may fail to put in place proper processes to manage the change. While there is no doubt that the Ministry of Education does require that a new school or a rebuild meets their basic requirements in terms of flexibility of the spaces and the

⁹ [Stuff 30 Jan 2017: Two new schools open in Rolleston](#)

¹⁰ [Stuff 3 March 2017: New Christchurch super school Haeata Community Campus hits capacity](#)

quality of the acoustics, lighting, heating, technology and air quality, that does not mean that the ministry dictates the type of learning environment that is provided. Decisions such as the pedagogies to be used, the timetable, and the curriculum to be offered are for the school to make, and are not an automatic consequence of a flexible learning space.

- 6.1.2 In the absence of attention to the process of change, the chances of successful outcomes are poor. Whether it is a rebuild or a brand new school, the school leadership should work with staff to make decisions that will work for them. This is where the processes outlined in PPTA's *Education Change Management Toolkit* are invaluable.

6.2. AN EFFECTIVE CHANGE PROCESS

- 6.2.1 The *Education Change Management Toolkit* advocates a process that involves the following steps:

- Clarify the proposal: What are we hoping to achieve?
- Assess the proposal: What is the evidence behind the proposal?
- Environmental scan: What practices and procedures might be changed or replaced, what resources are available, does the proposal fit the school culture, what other initiatives are planned or under way?
- Plan the trial: Resources, PLD, timeframes and milestones, measures of success, timetabling needs, roles of those involved, process for terminating the trial, get feedback on the plan, get approval to proceed.
- Provide the plan: Timelines, milestones, expectations, decision dates.
- Provide PLD: Before, during and ongoing.
- Inquiry cycle: Monitor outcomes, interim reports.
- Evaluate outcomes: Decide whether to continue trialling, abandon, formalise change.

- 6.2.2 This process can be applied whether it is a foundation staff of a new school designing their new curriculum, or the staff of an existing school facing a rebuild and considering what changes they might make to take advantage of a more flexible learning space.

6.3. SECONDARY TEACHER WORKLOAD WORKING GROUP REPORT¹¹

- 6.3.1 One of the major themes of the Workload Working Group was 'New initiatives'. Six recommendations on this agreed by all the parties were forwarded to the minister, including the following:

- Developing resources on change management to assist schools to introduce new initiatives in effective and sustainable ways.

¹¹ [Secondary Teacher Workload Working Group Report, December 2016](#)

- Reviewing the employment framework to assess its ability to be responsive to innovation while ensuring balance and reasonable protection for employees.
 - Including a focus on change management skills in PLD programmes for current and aspiring leaders.
- 6.3.2 Encouraging schools and Communities of Learning Kahui Ako to make strategic decisions about the number and nature of initiatives undertaken at any one time.
- 6.3.3 It would be fair to say that progress on these is slow, however at least the working group secured some commitment between the major education players to better management of education change.
- 6.3.4 The focus now needs to be on securing this commitment at the level of each individual school.

7. THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1. Recommendation 2 reiterates PPTA's longstanding position of welcoming thoughtful and coherent change. Change becomes a problem for teachers only when it is not thoughtful and coherent. While this recommendation was carried by the 2012 conference, it merits repeating.
- 7.2 The Ministry of Education has taken an evidence based approach to a number of initiatives over recent times. However, when it comes to the proliferation of flexible learning spaces there is a dearth of research based in the New Zealand context. It is not unreasonable to expect that such a significant investment in our education sector would come from a strong evidence base. Recommendation 3 is about lobbying the Ministry of Education to conduct this research.
- 7.3 This paper has referred in a number of places to the current inadequacy of PLD provision for teachers that are moving from traditional classrooms into new flexible learning spaces. Recommendation 4 advocates that this additional PLD funding be proportional to the value of the spending on the rebuild, to reflect the magnitude of the change taking place. This would go some way to redressing the current inequity between rebuilds and new builds. The funding should include both the PLD itself and release time for teachers to engage with it.
- 7.4 At its annual conference 2012, PPTA launched the *Education Change Management Toolkit*. It was updated in 2016. This sets out the association's position on quality change processes, and includes a template for a change management protocol.
- 7.5 Recommendation 5 is about branches stepping up their advocacy with their school leadership and boards of trustees for adoption of PPTA's *Education Change Management Toolkit* as the basis for change management in their schools. The 2012 paper recommended that branches do this, but not enough have done so. This recommendation encourages branches to increase their efforts in this area.

- 7.6 A sample change management policy to this effect is attached to the Toolkit (p.25). Once commitment to the policy is secured, or even if the branch is unsuccessful at getting the board's agreement, the branch can use it to audit any change that is proposed or under way in the school to ensure the process complies with the policy. Teachers in schools that have signed up to this policy already report significant positive impacts on their workload and their satisfaction.

APPENDIX: USEFUL READINGS

The Ministry of Education's pages about the physical spaces

<https://education.govt.nz/school/property/state-schools/design-standards/flexible-learning-spaces/>

The Ministry of Education's pages about the innovative pedagogies

<http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Leadership/Strategic-planning/Planning-an-ILE>

<http://ile.education.govt.nz/>

Core Education White paper

[Modern Learning Environments – Mark Osborne April 2013](#)

Mark Wilson – Sabbatical report

[Investigating the effectiveness of modern learning environments on improving student learning and achievement](#)

David Randell – Sabbatical report:

[How do differing spatial settings align with quality 21st Century pedagogical activities](#)

Lindsey Stephens – Sabbatical report

[Papamoa College – where to next?](#)

Deidre Shea – Sabbatical report

[Effective Teaching and Learning Environments Report on Sabbatical 2 May – 8 July 2016](#)

OECD (2013)

[Innovative Learning Environments](#)

Leon Benade (AUT) has written about MLEs. A couple of good starters

[The Transformative Educative Prospects of Flexible Learning Environments](#)

[Intro to ACCESS special issue: modern learning environments](#)