EDITORIAL

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Guest Editors

In the mi[d]st of policy enactment: Leading innovative learning environments (ILEs) in New Zealand schools

Fundamental innovation in education systems is problematic, disruptive and challenging. It requires those who are steeped in existing systems and ways of being to rethink and reimagine their professional understanding and practice. The intended outcome of a changed system is presumably more effective learning opportunities and better outcomes for students. However, the very nature of systemic change creates uncertainty in that there is not yet evidence that the 'new system' will necessarily be 'better' than the original. These and other challenges are reflected in a number of the articles in this special issue. To paraphrase the sentiments in some of the articles, the current model of schooling is no longer fit for purpose. It is predicated on neoliberal thinking, accepts the utility of a transmission model, and is arguably aimed at preparing young individuals for the marketplace. Despite the rapid changes occurring in this post-school marketplace, many western education systems are not keeping pace with, or necessarily acknowledging, the nature of these changes.

Conceptualising school-based education differently requires new ways of understanding, the propensity to develop and encourage new discourse, and the courage to contest the status quo. Handy (2015) suggests that

> we need to challenge orthodoxy, dream a little, think unreasonably and dare the impossible if we are going to have any chance of making the future work for all of us, not just the favoured few. That was the origin of the thinking behind the principle of the second curve. (p. 7)

His 'Sigmoid' or second curve model of change offers innovative educators a means of approaching systemic change, one that will likely require us to move in quite fundamental ways away from a system that has, until recently, served large sectors of the western world. Digitisation and rapid technological advance, combined with significant shifts in the self-directed and social nature of learning, and accelerated changes in the 'world of work' mean that the emerging needs of today's learners are substantially different from past generations. As a consequence, educators are charged with envisioning, designing and developing an education system that not only fosters learner "flexibility, agency, ubiquity, and connectedness" but remains "capable of evolving and adapting as educational practices evolve and change – thus remaining future focused" (Ministry of Education, n.d).

Mirroring the shift from industrial to knowledge economies (Gilbert, 2005), schools are increasingly moving from traditional factory model classrooms towards educative spaces known as innovative learning environments (ILEs). While the New Zealand government fervently advocates the OECD's (2013) notion of ILEs as "an organic holistic concept – an ecosystem" (p. 11) that includes at its pedagogical core the four key elements of learners, educators, content and resources, a single, unitary description of an ILE remains elusive.

It is important to note that there are multiple discourses evident in the professional dialogue and extant academic literature on innovative learning environments. Abbiss (2015), for example, identifies "economic, technological, and social justice or equity concerns, amongst others" (p. 2). On the one hand, it could be argued that ILEs entrench the neoliberal focus on the individual at the expense of society, and perpetuate the discourses of market relations and global competitiveness (Charteris, Smardon, & Nelson,

2016; O'Neill, 2015). Furthermore, externally imposed performativity measures in many western education systems mean that a leader's ability to transform traditional classrooms into liberating learning environments represents little more than "fantasies of empowerment" (Wright, 2011, p. 280). In the New Zealand context, the coupling of the Ministry of Education's (2011) revised property strategy with the introduction of ILEs not only aroused suspicion amongst school leaders that fiscal imperatives were the main driving force but also engendered an initially narrow focus on physical space.

On the other hand, it could be argued that ILEs represent a substantial philosophical shift away from a system that prioritises the preparation of individuals for the marketplace towards a more inclusive notion of preparation for life. If educators were to actively mediate current policy, such that the latter prevails, ILEs constitute a disruptive technology of considerable magnitude. They potentially constitute the largest change in education since the establishment of the so-called factory model in the early 19th century.

Regardless of the dominant or preferred discourse, ILEs have major implications for students, professional educators, school parent communities, providers of initial teacher education, and educational leaders charged with their implementation. Systemic change is further influenced by an ethical dimension: How can one know if the 'new' system will be more effective than the original, and what constitutes 'effective'? This is a real issue that needs to be addressed in a considered and comprehensive manner. Anecdotally, it would appear that the unknown, with its attendant risks, prevents some school leaders embarking on change. Many leaders, academics and community members remain concerned at the potential outcome of a 'trial' that abandons 'traditional' teaching approaches, alters teacher/student ratios, and the like. These concerns are real, and not to be dismissed lightly, but often stem from a commitment to the current system of teacher-directed learning, the possible adverse impact of the new system on examination results, and changes to the basis of some schools' reputations for excellence.

Equally unethical is the preservation of a status quo that marginalises and disadvantages students through its inability to keep pace with social and technological change. There is a profound tension in this dilemma: on the one hand, a fear of abandoning a system that has functioned for well over a century and, on the other, a desire to introduce one more likely to meet the needs of today's students. This conundrum is further bedevilled by entrenched impediments to change that emerge from tradition and government policy. School-based learning in the final years of secondary education, for example, is often dominated by the need to prepare for a series of examinations that have little value except to differentiate between those who gain automatic entry to university or another tertiary institution and those who do not.

The philosophical underpinning of ILEs requires educators to question in quite fundamental ways the value of a coercive transmission and examination driven system, and to consider a systemic shift to student-centred and directed (heutagogical) approaches that foster learning competencies in meaningful and authentic ways, as a more egalitarian alternative. In the opening article of this special edition, Kedian and West-Burnham assert that innovative learning environments represent a substantial conceptual change, if not total paradigm shift, and call for greater theoretical engagement prior to system implementation. Speculative in nature, the article proposes the development of six 'architectures' that together build a more nuanced understanding of the nature of learning in schools: learning, social, thinking, futures, organisation, and physical. As a prelude to emergent models of ILEs, the authors posit that careful consideration of these architectures supports conceptual development and helps frame practical implementation.

Like the factory model of the early to mid-19th century, the ILE as a system could take a decade or more to evolve. The absence of an official conceptual framework, together with the government's 2011 mandate that New Zealand schools become ILEs by 2021, has afforded school leaders considerable latitude and a degree of urgency in designing new schools and renovating existing ones. Their experiences offer rich practitioner accounts of the trials, tensions and triumphs in traversing largely uncharted territory and a counterpoint to

the glowing cameos peppering government websites. Accordingly, this special issue features the situated perspectives of principals, senior leaders and teachers responsible for building ILEs.

While Barbara Fogarty-Perry's narrative of leading a new school predates the Ministry of Education's 2011 announcement, readers will recognise several antecedents of ILEs in the construction of flexible learning spaces, variable and fluid student groupings, curriculum integration and student-directed learning. Fogarty-Perry highlights the social architecture and the potential of ILEs to foster a socially just education system in which the chorus of student, parent, community, and other voices enables locally constructed, integrated curriculum to nurture the development of diverse and agentic learners. She recognises that real as opposed to nominal democracy in curriculum design is essential to preserving creativity and autonomy in the learning process.

Ann Briggs, Bek Gabites, Scott Mackenzie, Julie McIntosh, Josh Shelley and Peter Verstappen similarly perceive the potential for ILEs to generate more equitable outcomes for all. Two cycles of participatory action-based inquiry in ILEs within two South Island schools have confirmed for these teacher leaders the centrality of key competencies in enhancing and accelerating students' literacy engagement and achievement. They highlight the importance of students "unlearn[ing] the self-helplessness accidentally developed through a traditional scaffolded environment" and the need to ensure that standardised national assessment not only matches learning pedagogy but includes broader and less tangible outcomes such as progress in learner behaviours.

Assessment also forms the context for Linda Harvie, Steve Harper-Travers and Amanda Jaeger's leadership story. In their North Island intermediate school, teacher enthusiasm for building learner agency in large, multiple teacher spaces was tempered with concerns over how in-depth knowledge of student achievement would be acquired and communicated. The authors document the experiences of two senior leaders charged with guiding what was to become a three year collaborative inquiry into innovative learning assessment. These leaders soon discovered that sustaining a culture of collaboration is a challenging and time-consuming endeavour, particularly when proposed changes confront existing beliefs and practices.

Like many of their colleagues in post-earthquake Canterbury, Christine Harris and Chris Panther await the rebuild of their school. In some respects the delay has been fortuitous in allowing them to observe what students and teachers are actually 'doing' in newly created flexible learning spaces and to focus on the "convergence of space, technology and pedagogy that will eventually bring about change for students and their learning." Acknowledging the "two steps forward and one step back" nature of change, their leadership narrative documents four crucial drivers that galvanised school-wide inquiry into personalised learning and flexible pedagogies: team-initiated change, removing classroom walls, leading from the front, and professional peer pressure.

Cardno, Tolmie and Howse remind readers of the difficulties of implementing change in educational systems and institutions. They highlight a number of the challenges for leaders, including confusion over the nature and substance of desired change (in this case, personalised learning in ILEs) and the skills needed to bring this change to fruition. Empirical research conducted in three Auckland primary schools revealed disparate understandings of personalised learning, within and between participating schools, that shaped challenges specifically associated with the adoption of new pedagogy in large physical spaces, and with change processes in general.

On a larger scale, Mackey, O'Reilly, Jansen and Fletcher surveyed 17 diverse primary and intermediate schools (including two in Australia) in which co-teaching in flexible learning spaces has been the norm for two years or more. Findings confirm the importance of leaders building strong conceptual foundations operationalised through mutually agreed team expectations (MATEs), aligning systems and structures to support collective responsibility for large groups of children, and providing professional learning that builds teaching expertise. The authors voice concern that most teachers in their study lacked informed understanding

of specific co-teaching strategies and conclude that "there is significant risk for students, staff and whanau when buildings or technology drives change processes."

At a systemic level, it is apparent that Ministries and Departments of Education in some western nations are slow to offer schools robust theoretical and practical support during the transition from traditional classrooms to ILEs. Innovative learning environments remain under-researched at this stage of their development and there is a tendency, particularly in devolved education jurisdictions, to allow schools to explore, create and experiment. While conducive to a democratic ethos, the research-practice vacuum presents a source of frustration for school leaders in the mi[d]st of policy enactment. Mindful of the young learners in their care, many school leaders seek some surety that ILEs will enhance the nature and quality of student learning, and are naturally anxious that the 'newness' of ILEs mitigates against a 'tried and true' research base.

Importantly, there is at this stage little research evidence that ILEs are substantially more effective than traditional models of school-based learning. There is however, anecdotal evidence that ILEs and the associated student empowerment and democratisation have changed attitudes towards learning. There is a move away from transmission-oriented teaching and the emergence of a different teacher-student relationship that might better be described as a teacher/learner-student/learner model. Consequently, more successful elements of the traditional model could be retained in the future, as a system emerges that better meets the needs of modern learners. For example, teachers will still be a core element of school-based learning although their traditional role as repositories of knowledge may be less important with the advent of ubiquitous online search engines. Their role is already shifting towards facilitators of critical, analytical thinking, and beginning to focus on supporting students to develop highly effective learning strategies. It should be noted that many schools in national education systems are already changing and implementing approaches that are considered part of the ILE description. They may not label themselves as ILEs but their professional practice reflects many of the core elements of the emerging system.

In their article, Bradbeer and colleagues examine the 'state of play' concerning New Zealand's transition to innovative learning environments. Exposing the Ministry narrative that ILEs and flexible learning spaces more readily accommodate the needs of 21st century learners as "largely conjecture," they share preliminary findings from the Innovative Learning Environments and Teacher Change (ILETC) project instigated in late 2016. These reveal that the majority of instruction in the 337 participating NZ schools, for the majority of time, remains teacher-centric and occurs within traditional classroom settings. Further, while NZ data suggests that 21st century learning habits can be developed within didactic teaching spaces, the full Australasian data set distinguishes a significant correlation between teacher mind frames, student deep learning, and classroom type.

As the process continues, it would be helpful for school-based professionals to participate in a broader discourse from which further ideas might emerge. In this way, educational leaders and other teachers could be involved in a generative process of charting the discourse and contributing to the continued emergence of a newer, more appropriate system for 21st century learners. This would ensure system development by professional educators, rather than policy analysts and those who have motivations other than the learning of students.

In *Disrupting the 'paradigm of one'*, Wright adopts a Bourdieusian lens to show how courageous senior leaders, prior to the opening of a new secondary school, critically examined and reimagined 'structuring structures' that have, until recently, perpetuated "single-teacher, single-classroom, single-teacher, single-class, single-subject, and single assessment arrangements" in most New Zealand secondary schools. She outlines how a constructivist approach focusing on values and key competencies resulted in a new logic of practice that views timetable as fluid rather than fixed, curriculum as integrated rather than compartmentalised, student choice as determined by passion rather than precedent, and the lexicon of learning as singular rather than plural.

The development and adoption of a different learning approach in schools is also a focus for the local communities in which schools are located. The implementation of a new system will need to be approved by various governing bodies in countries where the education system has been wholly or partially devolved. In countries where educational governance remains centralised, parent groups will still have a particularly strong interest in the nature of their children's schooling. Consequently, communities need to be involved in the change process in order to be better informed and to assist in the implementation and refinement of the system.

Suggesting that specific examples of effective leadership in the ILE context constitute a 'black spot' in the plethora of leadership research, Fletcher, Mackey and Fickel home in on the steps taken by the principal and Board of Trustees of a large contributing primary school to introduce and support co-teaching in flexible learning spaces. They conclude that successful implementation depends first and foremost upon optimistic knowledgeable leaders (principals and boards) able to articulate a compelling vision of ILEs, well-versed in the research on co-teaching and change processes, and willing to invest in human capital formation over the short and long term.

Human capital formation includes future generations of teachers. It is of concern that our conversations with tertiary colleagues in initial teacher education (ITE) suggest that many preservice programmes currently pay scant attention to ILEs in their curricula. One could infer from this anecdotal evidence that current thinking is entrenched within the status quo, that programmatic change is buried in bureaucracy, or that providers are adopting a wait-and-see attitude. One thing is for sure: initial teacher education plays a central role in supporting newly qualified teachers to function and flourish in open, collaborative learning environments. We venture to suggest that this is a research topic of considerable and pressing importance.

Whyte's contribution to this special issue begins the conversation. In conjunction with experienced primary and intermediate teachers working in ILEs, she identifies additional capabilities required of beginning teachers: flexibility, adaptability, and 'relationality'. Whyte also highlights the need for ITE programmes to provide the theoretical and practical engagement necessary for student teachers to develop relevant pedagogical knowledge and rituals of practice. In the interim, this requires concerted effort in ensuring that learning activities and school placements are not confined to cellular classrooms, team-teaching is modelled and practised, and sustained attention paid to developing intra- and interpersonal capabilities.

In bringing together the voices of school leaders and researchers, this special issue of JELPP offers a snapshot of current thinking and progress in implementing ILEs in New Zealand schools. We hope that it informs and provokes dialogue between members of the profession, teacher educators and policy makers. Let us not lose sight of the fact that leadership is essential to envisioning, conceptualising, constructing, and sustaining learning environments that meet student needs. We look forward to further portraits in time as 2021 draws nearer and the implementation mist begins to clear.

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