A New Zealand case study: What is happening to lead changes to effective co-teaching in flexible learning spaces?

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Abstract
De-privatising teaching and working collaboratively with fellow teachers in purposively designed school buildings requires effective leadership. The principal is situated amongst those closely affiliated to their school such as teachers, parents and students, and yet they need to work alongside the wider school community, the school’s governing Board of Trustee members and national educational policy-makers and administrators. This article uses a single case study of a school leadership team who changed the school culture from traditional one teacher per classroom settings to four to five teachers with approximately 105 students in flexible learning spaces. The principal and three members of the governing Board of Trustees of the school were interviewed. The study found that the leadership team had invested considerable time into sustained professional development in ways to effectively develop collaborative teaching communities within flexible learning spaces. The professional development, led by the principal, was underpinned by the principal spending time seeking a clear understanding of research-based practices that supported the change. This explicit knowledge of the principal allowed teachers, Board of Trustee members and parents to have confidence in the changes to teaching strategies in flexible learning spaces.

Keywords: Community of learning; co-teaching; innovative learning environment; case study; primary education; principal leadership; school change

Introduction
Principals are pivotal to the development of systemic changes to developing innovative teaching and learning practices. Reassuring teachers, students and their parents that the school is a supportive learning environment where all students are respected and valued is critical (Shields & Sayani, 2005). Successful principals understand the multifaceted situation within the wider school environment and build relationships and practices where collaborative leadership is distributed amongst their staff (see, for example, Day, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2005). A comprehensive approach to managing and leading change involves school principals working alongside middle management staff and Board of Trustee members to ensure improvement strategies are grounded on a sound knowledge base. Developing professional learning communities within Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) requires principals to build the capacity in whole school improvement so that teachers can collaboratively work together. Within these professional learning communities, there is a de-privatisation of practice, where teachers can observe each other teaching, collaboratively plan and teach together, and engage in reflective dialogue about specific pedagogical approaches to enhance student learning and achievement (Lomos, Roelande, & Bosker, 2011; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). This allows the capacity to involve teachers and senior staff to collectively promote effective and sustained student learning (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005). In the review of research on the impact of professional learning communities, Vescio et al. (2008) concluded when teachers participated in effective professional learning communities, the focus on learning had direct benefits to students’ achievement. Furthermore, the teaching culture was enhanced, which had a positive impact on students. The extent to which the professional learning community is effective or ineffective can vary, with factors such as tensions between being autonomous in decision-making or collegial, which may influence levels of collaboration.
When, how and to what extent professional learning communities are enacted in schooling are variable.

The New Zealand context
Within recent years in New Zealand and in parts of Australia, differences in the way schooling and teaching are implemented have been radically reconceptualised, with changes to school building design and structures (O’Reilly, 2016). Many schools in New Zealand are being remodelled or rebuilt in accordance with New Zealand Ministry of Education Innovative Learning Environment (ILE) guidelines (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2016). Learning spaces that accommodate several teachers and a high number of students in one large space, frequently with some form of break-out areas, are becoming an innovative concept in teaching spaces. School leaders and their management teams in State schools in New Zealand are required to design any new buildings using the “Innovative Learning Environment assessment tool” to create flexible learning spaces (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2016). These technologically enabled spaces, with two or more teachers, are designed to be flexibly reconfigured into teaching and learning spaces, with breakout areas for individual teaching, and small and/or large groups, (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2016; Shank, 2005). This provides collaborative workplaces where teachers can work, debate, plan and problem-solve together, whilst observing colleagues’ lessons and sharing successes, as well as challenges (Sergiovanni, 1992). The conversations and decisions made within these professional learning communities can be implemented in real time with support from colleagues through collegial feedback and critique. This adds a significant layer of complexity to whole school leadership and adapting teaching processes, because teachers need to spend time together to plan, evaluate, share information, review logistics, discuss teaching strategies and seek agreement (Johnson, 2003; University of Kansas, 2014). The educational vision of principals as they lead these changes not only underpins the transformation of the provisions of new school building design, but also this vision must have clear priorities for learning, student achievement and wellbeing (OECD, 2013; Tse, Learoyd-Smith, Stables, & Daniels, 2015).

This trend to large spaces (OECD, 2015) with multi-teacher, multi-class teaching may raise further concerns about the impact on student attainment (Tse et al., 2015). Another challenge is the ability or willingness of teachers to adapt and work collaboratively in a de-privatised environment. For example, a 2015 survey in New Zealand, with 165 responses from principals and teachers, about the implications of Innovative Learning Environments in their school context, indicated a lack of clarity about co-teaching in an Innovative Learning Environment, with some responses indicating they already have innovative teaching without Innovative Learning Environments. Also, a number of responses expressed concerns around the high noise level in Innovative Learning Environments being unlikely to suit some children (Smardon, Charteris, & Nelson, 2015).

School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on student learning, and it is leaders who build organisational learning (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). However, little is known about how principals can best lead the transition to developing effective professional learning communities in flexible learning spaces with the goal of enhancing well-being and learning outcomes for all learners in the 21st century. This article seeks to develop knowledge and capability to inform the paradigm shift to effective collaborative teaching and learning in student-centred flexible learning spaces. Within this paradigm, there is a strong nexus between professional learning communities “committed to working together to learn about their practice for the purpose of improving student learning” (Timperley, 2011, p. 116), and careful monitoring of the learning outcomes and well-being of all students.

Literature
Teachers working collaboratively in a flexible learning space are involved in a “hands-on” professional learning community. On a minute-by-minute daily-basis, teachers in flexible learning spaces are situated in a de-privatised
teaching setting, with the opportunity to observe other teachers’ pedagogical practices, and reflect together on individual student issues, such as enhancing academic achievement and / or managing behavioural problems. Timperley, Kaser and Halbert (2014), in their research on transforming learning in schools, stressed “new approaches to learning are necessary, and new designs for learning are required” (p. 4). They maintained that for an individual principal or teacher it is too difficult to undertake this alone, and a team approach is needed to make transformational changes. In a classroom where a teacher works alone, there is a lack of opportunity for teachers to participate in ongoing professional learning about teaching and student learning in the context (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2007; Sergiovanni, 1992). Although teachers in traditional “one teacher per classroom” settings may appear to be collaborative, often the work undertaken when collaborating is contrived, as teachers remain isolated while managing student learning in their own class (Du Four, 2011; Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Hattie, 2015). It is challenging to develop a collaborative culture when teachers are able to retreat to their own private classroom, rather than work in a collaborative environment (Du Four, 2011). This also limits schooling improvement by eliminating teacher opportunity to learn reciprocally on a continuous basis within their own classrooms (Elmore, 2004; Levin & Fullan, 2009). Additionally, when teachers engage in a higher level of collaborative processes, it is more likely that there are positive opportunities for student learning (Wylie, 2011).

A team of teachers co-teaching together become a professional learning community within their own shared teaching space. Additionally, they may be part of a wider professional learning community with all of the teachers in the school. Co-teaching strategies require teachers to understand and agree to mutually developed goals, hold shared beliefs in co-teaching and have an understanding of the importance to engage in the roles of teacher and learner (Friend & Cook, 2010; Villa, Thousand, & Nevin, 2008). These approaches provide opportunity for teachers to plan their co-teaching strategically to meet explicit student learning needs.

Teachers have identified benefits when co-teaching in a professional learning community, including an increased sense of agency, efficacy and well-being, enhanced skills in teaching effectively, problem solving ability, and a reduction in feelings of isolation (Schwab Learning, 2003; Villa et al., 2013). There is also an increased likelihood of using research informed practice (Hourcade & Bauwens, 2002; Skrtic, 1997). Co-teaching in student-centred flexible learning spaces can be a significant paradigm shift for staff, children and parents. There is considerable risk if teachers are not supported to understand the “building blocks” required to create an effective teaching and learning environment in these new teaching spaces. To transform practice, there is a need to understand what it is that successful school leaders do to implement school-wide changes in developing effective co-teaching within flexible learning spaces, and how school leaders in the process of investigating the use of co-teaching strategies in their existing traditional classrooms can develop shared and contextually appropriate professional learning communities.

Schools are located in wider cultural and social contexts. School principals are positioned alongside teachers, parents and students, and yet they work in conjunction with the school governing board members, the wider school community, and national educational policy-makers and administrators (Henze & Arriaza, 2006). The decision-making and implementation of policy and practice that is undertaken by principals within their school environment are shaped by the political realities of wider society (Strike, 1999). However, Fullan (2011) argued that drivers for systemic change should foster intrinsic motivation of teachers and students, focus on improving teaching and learning, involve collective team work, and affect the whole school population. Working within these parameters, Fullan (2008) advocated establishing a democratic culture where principals promote the open boundaries that allow for the de-privatization of teaching practices. The key conclusions of the Best Evidence Synthesis of research in New Zealand on school leadership and student outcomes were that “pedagogically focused leadership has a substantial impact on student outcomes. The more leaders focus their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their influence on student outcomes” (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009, p. 40). This Best Evidence
Synthesis identified a significant gap in the literature, suggesting that research on educational leadership needs to focus more on the connections between leadership theories and practice and evidence of effective teaching and learning.

Theoretical perspective
Theoretical perspectives offer a starting point for better understanding key links amongst leadership, student learning and school improvement (Le Compte & Preissle, 1993). From a constructivist perspective, Heck and Hallinger (1999) and Shapiro (2008) promoted school leadership as a collective, constructed phenomenon. A constructivist principal leads the school by recognising varying personality styles of teachers and students, works collaboratively with staff to develop effective and motivating learning environments where there is group learning, and appreciates that learning and knowledge from that learning are “made”, rather than acquired (Shapiro, 2008). When a principal works alongside teachers, they can collaboratively plan how to develop professional learning communities within their schools where students are engaged and focused in their goals for future learning.

In particular, constructivist theory provides the opportunity to explore how school leadership, positively or otherwise, may affect the interrelationships amongst staff which enhance evidence-based practices. Such participatory democratic practices allow teachers, parents and students to work together as a learning community (Haas & Poynor, 2005; Lambert et al., 1995). Each school is set contextually within their wider community, which may have complex, individual issues that influence and shape decision-making. Numerous studies on educational leadership (see, for example, Day, 2005; Foster, 2004; Fullan, 2005; San Antonio, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2005) have found that effective principals comprehend the complexity of situations within a school and the wider community, and collaboratively work with their staff using democratic leadership, where staff are valued and trusted during this development.

Although there is extensive research on school leadership, there is a “black spot” in research which specifically addresses effective school leadership in supporting professional learning communities in flexible learning spaces. This article seeks to identify and make explicit the leadership expertise within one school where professional learning communities in flexible learning spaces have been put in place to transform practices that will benefit all students’ learning and well-being.

Methodology
Case study investigation was selected to explore the perceptions and lived realities of a principal and Board of Trustee members at a state school. In New Zealand, a state school has a governing body known as the Board of Trustees. The members include the principal, a teacher representative and parents from the school community who are elected on a triennial basis. The Board of Trustees are the employer of all staff and have responsibility for developing the strategic direction of the school in consultation with parents, staff and students. They have a key role in ensuring there is quality education for all of the students (Education Counts, 2016).

The school
Somerset East School (pseudonym) is a contributing state school with a roll of approximately 630 students. A contributing school caters for children from Years 1 to 6. The school had six newly built flexible learning spaces that each integrated two year-level groups, Years 1 and 2; Years 3 and 4; and Years 5 and 6. There were two flexible learning spaces for each of these two year-level groups. Each flexible learning space had approximately 105 students, with the two Years 1 and 2 spaces having five teachers per flexible learning space and the other year levels having four teachers per flexible learning space. The ethnic mix comprised 80 percent New Zealand European, 14 percent Māori, three percent Pasifika (a term used in New Zealand to identify people deriving from Pacific Island countries, such as Samoa, Tonga and Fiji) and three percent Asian. The school is situated in
a middle to high socioeconomic urban area of a large city. The school was purposively selected as it has a profile within New Zealand as being effective in leading the change to flexible learning spaces. This was confirmed by the 2016 Education Review Office (Inspectorate) Report which indicated that high quality teaching was evident, with the teaching teams in the flexible learning spaces working positively together. There was shared responsibility for teaching and meeting the learning needs of all children. Research was used to inform decisions and practice. There were high expectations in teaching and learning by the school leadership team.

Prior to the interviews, the principal of the school showed the lead researcher around the school, visiting many flexible learning spaces whilst the children were involved in learning.

**The participants**

The principal is a New Zealand European male who has been in the role of a principal for over 10 years. He has a master’s qualification in education. The three Board of Trustee members are parents of children at Somerset East School. One is female, originating from Europe with two children at the school; another is male, originating from the UK with two children at the school; and the third is a New Zealand European male, with two children at the school and another older child who had attended Somerset East School.

**The interviews**

The research team developed semi-structured interview schedules which were informed by the literature. The interview schedule included questions such as: What leadership steps did the principal and the Board of Trustees take to support this change in teaching style and school building structure to gain whole staff “buy in”? Why did you decide on these particular strategies at your school? Do you have any reservations about the changes to co-teaching in flexible learning spaces?

The participants were given the interview schedules at least two days prior to the interview so they could have time to consider the questions. The interviews were 60 to 80 minutes in length and undertaken by the lead researcher. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. After they were transcribed, they were returned to the participants to ensure that they reflected accurately what they sought to convey during the interview. None of the participants asked for any changes to their transcripts.

**Data analysis**

The analysis of the interview data involved three stages: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Charmaz, 2003). First, using open coding the early themes from reading the transcripts and referring to the literature were identified. These early themes were filtered, as precisely as possible, developing into initial coding categories (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006). Next, axial coding was used. After rereading the transcripts, unlike the prior stage of open coding which breaks the data open, axial coding seeks to link themes to one another. For example, the searching for connections between categories and sub categories, identified that positive and knowledgeable leaders linked with leaders with strong research based evidence to inform changes to co-teaching in flexible learning spaces.

Once this had been completed, selective coding was used to scan the data and re-examine earlier codes that recurred. The higher order main concepts that had reappeared throughout the research analysis were identified (Charmaz, 2003; Neuman, 2000). These categories included positive leaders with research based knowledge about flexible learning spaces; the management of the change process for teachers and parents to co-teaching in flexible learning spaces; provision of conducive learning environments; and support for low progress learners.

**Findings and discussion**

The four themes that arose from the analysis of the interviews of the case study school’s principal and three Board of Trustee members provide strong indicators that the leadership of a school principal is associated to
effectively implementing change to co-teaching in flexible learning spaces. The principal was cognisant of
the school context and acted in ways to best meet the needs of the students, parents and teachers within the
school’s culture. These themes provide clear guidelines for other school principals seeking to implement
effective change to co-teaching in flexible learning spaces.

**Positive leaders with research based knowledge**

Leadership in schooling and change to existing practices requires having a positive attitude, effective
interpersonal relationships with others and being knowledgeable about effective research-based strategies
in learning and teaching (Shapiro, 2008). One Board of Trustee member explained the attributes of the
principal.

> The principal is very good at actually doing the research and gathering the information. He
> walks the talk. He doesn’t just hear about it and presume that it is going to just gel. . . . He is
> extremely positive the way he relates the information to the children, as well as the teachers,
> and he sells it. (Board of Trustee member 1)

Another Board of Trustee member described how his elder child was at another school where the principal
had taken a negative stance to the possibility of mandatory change to flexible learning spaces, in comparison
to the principal at Somerset East School.

> The intermediate [school] she [my oldest child] went to, their principal was very, very
> negative to the new way of doing things [changing to flexible learning spaces] and being
> forced into it. The way that the principal and teachers at that school spoke, to the way that
> the principal and the teachers spoke here [at Somerset East School], were two very, very
different things. To me, I think it showed that leadership was very influential on how the
learning environments were moved into schools. . . . I think the right thing is to put your
preconceived ideas aside and look at both options. . . . Look at whatever research that is out
there, look at whether it has happened, what has worked and what doesn’t work, pros and
cons. (Board of Trustee member 2)

The differences between principals’ attitudes towards change to co-teaching in flexible learning spaces is
influential not only towards the type of change, but also in the messages that are given to the wider school
community.

At Somerset East School, the principal had been engaged in researching co-teaching in flexible
learning spaces, so was able to speak with knowledge, providing explicit examples of what works well and
what the barriers might be encountered. For example, a Board of Trustee member explained:

> I know sitting in on the Board of Trustee meetings now and the principal sharing some of his
> research . . . and then we went away and did some looking up ourselves. I think for me, coming
> from that kind of background myself, research is essentially information that helps you make a
decision on something. I saw plenty of due diligence being done, plenty of information being
used, plenty of research being quoted that we could go away and look up that essentially backed
up the claims that were being given. (Board of Trustee member 2)

As Day (2005) and Foster (2004) suggest, effective principals are knowledgeable and comprehend the
complexity within a school context. When a principal is knowledgeable about what is happening at the
leading edge of education and uses due diligence to ensure that the processes and information are shared, this
enhances the “buy in” of parents and teachers to proposed change, which in turn helps to create practices that
are democratic and collaborative (Day, 2005; San Antonio, 2008).
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The change process and professional learning development
In this case study school, the approach of the principal to implementing the change process and ongoing professional development in co-teaching in flexible learning spaces aligned with the claim by Henze and Arriaza (2006) that school leaders who progress and negotiate reforms use opportunities for discourse that positively influence the ethos of the educational environment. At Somerset East School, the principal described the gradual process towards the change to co-teaching in flexible learning spaces.

We specifically focused in on providing professional support and time for staff to learn how to collaborate - different strategies they might use. So we took them to visit schools in New Zealand and Australia. We brought in experts to help with developing teacher skills of collaboration. We specifically explored the strategies they would need to work together differently than what they were, when they were working on their own. And we provided additional resourcing and then we allowed them to “dip their toes in”, in the first year. . . . So there was an expectation that they would implement some of their professional learning and what they had seen. But not that they would suddenly become a fully collaborative environment. So it was a gentle process with significant support with additional release time, ongoing reflection time, and structures and strategies to support them to make the transition. (Principal)

In the New Zealand context, where the governing body of the school is the Board of Trustees who have a key role in working alongside the principal to manage staff and curriculum, collaborative planning strategies to implement change are critical. This concurs with the leadership research of Shapiro (2008) and Heck and Hallinger (1999), who advocate that leadership is a collective, constructed phenomenon. The Board of Trustee members were very aware of the strategies collectively made to implement change.

We had a number of visits to other schools within New Zealand and Australia that also included members of staff. That was part of the early stages with bringing the staff along with the co-teaching change. Realistically, changing the way that everybody works is a significant change project in itself and I think allowing the staff members to be part of the evidence gathering and guided decision-making helped them adopt the idea of co-teaching and team teaching much sooner than otherwise. (Board of Trustee member 3)

One of the Board of Trustee members, when discussing the change from traditional one teacher per classroom settings to co-teaching in flexible learning spaces acknowledged that acceptance by the parents varied.

No, there wasn’t purely blanket acceptance. We recognised that maybe we [Board of Trustee members] were the icebreaker, the lead into the message to the community. Obviously, we then had to let the community know that there was a significant change coming and what it was going to mean and how it was going to work and the Board of Trustees quickly recognised that we needed to make sure the communication was strong and that we understood what was going on. Because if we couldn’t explain it and we weren’t able to make it clear the benefits and how it was going to work, we were going to struggle to get the message out to the community. (Board of Trustee member 3)

During the change process, there was a realisation that not all teachers might adapt. One Board of Trustee member explained:

A flexible learning environment with collaborative teaching . . . might not be suited to every teacher’s teaching style, especially some that have been “single cell” teachers for the past 25 years. Possibly, some of those people have to either “shape up or ship out”, really. Absolutely,
or they have to find the right environment for them and it might not be a collaborative teaching environment. (Board of Trustee member 1)

Change in education is normal and a teacher’s resilience in adapting to this was key at Somerset East School. Another Board of Trustee member, aware of the imperative for new school buildings to be designed according to ILE guidelines, showed empathy towards controlling the speed and amount of change as a way of mitigating stress.

*I think it was more than a bit of arm twisting by the Ministry, into this is what the facility is going to look like and this is how classrooms are going to be. . . . I think there is something to be said for having a line in the sand though. Being able to slow down the process. Yes, there has been a lot of change for the staff, but I think knowing there was a finishing line was a way of tempering that stress and discomfort. It is one of those human nature things. You can put up with quite a bit of discomfort if you know when it is going to end. If you are not sure when it is going to end then a lower level of discomfort can be more unsettling than high change get to the end. You had to get on with it and go with it and it was sort of mandatory by the Government to build flexible learning spaces. (Board of Trustee member 3)*

Board of Trustee member one had a more hard line approach to teachers who did not adapt to the change to flexible learning spaces indicating that they would need to find alternative employment at another school, whilst Board of Trustee member three showed some empathy to the plight of teachers when change to the ways of teaching was mandatory. The principal along with the members of the Board of Trustees had spent time together as a management team considering how the change to co-teaching might impact on their teachers, with each looking through differing lenses on ways forward.

One strategy the management team put in place was regular communication with the parents, teachers, students and the community about the proposed changes to flexible learning spaces.

*So with the community nights the opportunity to give ideas even around layout that we would like to have at the school and . . . around what values your own community has and so that was an opportunity for us to all feed into that. For me, what I saw was the leadership was very communicative. They tried to involve people as much as possible. . . . There was a lot of opportunities to feed in and we saw that coming together.* (Board of Trustee member 2)

This provision of ongoing meetings with the school community was a critical lever in the positive change to co-teaching in the newly built flexible learning space school. Aligning with constructivist theory, the participatory democratic practices allowed the school leaders, teachers and parents to understand the complex individual issues within their own school community context (see, for example, Day, 2005; Foster, 2004; Fullan, 2005; San Antonio, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2005).

**Conducive learning environments for all children to succeed**

One of the key differences between a flexible learning space and a traditional one teacher per classroom setting is that the students have the opportunity to develop relationships with more than one teacher during the school day. At Somerset East School this was viewed as an advantage by the leadership team. One Board of Trustee member explained:

*I liked the fact that the children would have more than one teacher, that the children could build a relationship with. . . . If you have a great year with one teacher, that is wonderful. However if you are in a “single cell” class with a teacher who you might not click with, that can be a year to your detriment. So I believed that having a flexible co-teaching space meant that the children*
had more options, and there was more potential for relationship development. (Board of Trustee member 1)

Similarly, the principal explained how the children could connect with a range of teachers. He said:

*It's not about the children selecting a teacher that they want to work with, it's about the children having an opportunity to work with all the teachers in the space. So they have a homeroom teacher whose job it is to know those children first. But within that space they are our children. So the four or five teachers make a point of working with the children through the year and getting to know the children. That in itself gives the children an opportunity to connect with someone else and then they can choose to go and have a conversation with that teacher about any matter that they would want to.*

This flexibility amongst the teaching team allowed for some children to identify with a teacher who they related to on a daily basis. The principal was very aware of the need for children to work alongside multiple people in their schooling as they will need to in their later life development both in the workplace and in society.

*The reality is that teachers don't connect with all 25 learners. They would like to think they do, but you just don't. In these spaces we double, triple, quadruple or quintuple the possibility that someone will connect. We know that relationships are critically important for children's learning and development and well-being. If it is so important then we know that having more teachers there to work with children will enhance that.* (Principal)

Developing effective professional learning communities where there is a de-privatisation of practice requires teachers to work collaboratively in their planning, engage in reflective practices and express their points of view and listen to the opinions and advice of their teaching peers (Lomos et al., 2011; Vescio et al., 2008). These daily dynamics involve ongoing collaborative practices. One Board of Trustee member described how school leadership underpinned the mentoring and guidance to further enhance collegial professional learning communities.

*How the teams work and why they work and what they are doing and how they are doing it. I think there is a fair amount of process that could be taken from one school to another in terms of how you run the dynamics of a teaching team. The right mix of experience within a team . . . with regards to co-teaching. I think you could probably look at a school that is struggling and identify some of the weak spots because there is either not the top level leadership providing guidance or team leaders are not providing guidance between the team or there is too much disparity between how the teams are working.* (Board of Trustee member 3)

Another concern about the changes to flexible learning spaces has been noise levels influencing the learning environment. One of the Board of Trustee members who was aware of this concern discussed how at Somerset East School the level of disruption and off task behaviour was effectively addressed.

*I think if it is done poorly or in particular, poorly led, I think it could be quite negative for the kids. . . . If you get 100 kids in a room and there are a few really good at disrupting stuff, instead of having 25 kids disrupted, you have 100 kids 'learning disrupted . . . [At Somerset East] they have always been pretty good at dealing with disruption. Being in the classes as parent help and seeing them in the morning. In particular, it comes down to the way the teachers deal with it.* (Board of Trustee member 2)

Arguably, whether in a traditional one teacher per classroom setting or in a flexible learning space with two or more teachers, the abilities of the teachers to develop a self-regulated, independent learning environment
underpinned by the values of respect and consideration for others is key. At Somerset East School one of the central values is respect. The principal explained how respect towards other learners was implemented.

*In simple terms it is about sitting down with the children and saying what is our treaty, what is our agreement about how we are going to learn in this space and how are we going to relate to one and other. Let’s tease that out and let’s be accountable for that and find ways to make sure that our environment is one of respect.*

Whatever the type of school learning environment, the accountability towards students’ learning achievement lies with the principal and the Board of Trustees. The Education Review Office acts as an agency for the Ministry of Education to ensure that students are receiving a sound learning and teaching environment. One of the Board of Trustee members reflected on the recent Education Review Office report.

*Academically our results are very good at the moment so I have no reservations at all in regards to where the children sit academically . . . After our ERO [Education Review Office] review came through glowing . . . I think that we were one of the only newly built schools in the country that came back with a four to five year review, rather than a three year review.* (Board of Trustee member 1)

What seemed clear was regardless of a school being a traditional one teacher per classroom setting or a flexible learning space configuration, that standard practices and expectation about tracking achievement of all learners was a given.

**Supporting low progress students**

Parents and teachers in New Zealand want to ensure that low progress learners are not overlooked within the large flexible learning spaces where there are high numbers of students. The principal at Somerset East School outlined how their four or five teacher flexible learning spaces, which at that school they referred to as studios, were closely monitored and how they provided explicit and focused teaching to identified needs. The principal explained:

*So in our studios . . . if we have 20 priority learners. So, 20 children whose progress is of a concern for us, and we have four teachers, we now have four highly skilled individuals who are highly trained and trying to find ways to engage that learner and to enhance his or her learning. . . . So, our priority learners have a group of people who care about their learning and who are trying to solve the complex problem of why isn’t this child learning, and why didn’t they learn last year, and what difference do we make.* (Principal)

Aligning with the principal, the Board of Trustee members were cognisant of the importance of developing effective teaching and learning strategies to ensure the low progress students were catered for in an ongoing and effective manner.

*Personally, I think they [low progress learners] should benefit. They have got a bigger group of people that they can move around in. If they do not get on with a teacher, they have the opportunity to talk to another teacher or be placed with a different teacher who suits their style a bit more ... I have not seen enough measurements at Board of Trustee level to see where those [low progress learners] are going. With what I have seen and observed, there is every likelihood that they should benefit.* (Board of Trustee member 2)

As Timperley (2011) advocates, effective professional learning communities are committed to collaboratively improving their teaching pedagogies and monitoring learning outcomes and well-being of all students. This
can occur in traditional one teacher per classroom settings, but even more so in flexible learning spaces when teachers’ practices are de-privatised and they are able to engage in a minute-by-minute basis on collaborative reflections of best teaching practices.

Conclusions

The findings from the interviews of the principal and the Board of Trustee members at this case study school reinforced the critical role that principals play in supporting change within their school environments (Caldwell, 2006). The changes were underpinned by the Ministry of Education initiative that all new state school building be designed and built using the Innovative Learning Environment guidelines (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2016). The principal at Somerset East School was a key driving force. He put time into researching co-teaching in flexible learning spaces which gave him credibility with the Board of Trustees and his staff. Once he had developed his own beliefs about flexible learning spaces, he spent time with the Board of Trustee members outlining research on the positives and possible barriers. This allowed the Board of Trustees to feel confident when they spoke with other parents at the school. When decisions for change in education are underpinned by research evidence, the Board of Trustees, teachers and parents are more likely to “buy in” to the proposed changes.

The change was implemented gradually with continued sustained professional development. This included visiting other schools that had implemented co-teaching in flexible learning spaces. To complement this, the professional development included exploring strategies that support collaborative practices which are a prerequisite to working collegially with fellow teachers. At the same time, there was ongoing communication with parents about the changes, with regular community meetings. For occasional teachers, the shift to co-teaching may be challenging and may require radical rethinking of their teaching practices or ultimately seeking employment elsewhere.

An advantage of working alongside colleagues was being able to know your learner in a shared context and discuss and trial reflective strategies in a transparent de-privatised setting. The school had an expectation that students would become self-regulated learners where on-task behaviour was underpinned by the value of respect. Assessing and monitoring all learners was evident and there was a planned strategy for supporting low progress learners in a strategic and collaborative manner.

As Fullan (2005) and Day (2005) stressed, effective principalship encompasses taking into account the complexity of situations in individual schools and the school community. We call for further research on leading change in co-teaching in flexible learning spaces, so the “black spot” in educational leadership in these changing times to school building structures can be underpinned by good practice strategies based on robust evidence to improve learning and teaching for all students.

References


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