

## Modern Learning Environment

Modern Learning Environment (MLE) is a term that has come into its own recently. New schools throughout New Zealand are being built with open and/or flexible spaces, break-out rooms, small spaces (often referred to as caves), technology-rich areas, and modern learning furniture. Existing schools are removing walls to create the same feel and look.

Of course, does modern equate to good? As we all know, good (and poor) *teaching and learning* can take place anywhere, and within any physical environment. MLE in isolation will not make the learning better and student achievement higher. But hopefully, it will encourage a more open and flexible approach – the things we now refer to as effective pedagogy, or in the Preparatory School, hallmarks of quality learning.

Going hand in hand with MLEs are learning technologies – computers, wireless devices, and interactive boards. However, unless significant and effective professional learning is undertaken with teachers throughout the country, this combination may give the impression of being modern and effective, but in reality little may change. Learning technologies will not add to children's learning (achieve better outcomes), if their use is limited to word processing and Google search.

One thing that is still lacking in most New Zealand schools is the belief that children are capable of leading their own learning. This is a crucial and fundamental shift in thinking that, if not addressed, will continue to hold back effective learning for today's children.

The New Zealand Curriculum is world-class. The challenge that the New Zealand education system faces is how to implement the curriculum as intended across all schools. Lifting the standard of the weakest teachers is the most obvious solution, but contractually and politically, the hardest to achieve.

Instead, the government opted for the introduction of National Standards, with the hope that this would raise the level of teacher quality, resulting in higher achievement, particularly for the children below or well below national benchmarks.

Of course, having a standard for anything does not mean it will or can be achieved. The worrying thought is that National Standards will actually drag the learning back to a heavily instructed model (as teachers strive to meet the standards), which is completely counter to the New Zealand Curriculum.

Interestingly, the government has now put its hopes in the hands of architect and internationally recognised consultant (in the areas of innovative schools and educational technology), Prakash Nair. Government funding for new schools or the refurbishment or repair of schools has to be MLE aligned. Perhaps the government is hoping the new design will achieve more effective learning, although, this appears to leave National Standards as the elephant in the room? Of course, the big bonus for government is that large, open plan areas that accommodate 60-90 children significantly lower development costs (reduced sq metre area, and the ability to share technologies, furniture and resources).

In saying this, I agree entirely with Prakash's thinking: that the single cell classroom is a relic from the Industrial Revolution, which at the time required a large workforce with basic skills. Prakash says, "Classroom confined education lags far behind when measured against its ability to deliver

the creative and agile workforce the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands. As the primary place for student learning, the classroom (in the traditional sense) does not withstand the scrutiny of scientific research.”

The research Prakash alludes to are the dozens of studies that show a close correlation between human productivity and space design that demonstrate that students and teachers do better when they have variety, flexibility, and comfort in their environment. This environment also allows the development of children’s emotional intelligence which is now recognised as a crucial 21<sup>st</sup> century requirement.

*Modern learning environments are not just about the physical space, but rather, they are about REAL learning: Real world–Engaged–Authentic–Learning*

**In the Preparatory School we are fortunate to have:**

- The ability to implement the national curriculum as intended
- Clarity within the school around effective pedagogy, i.e. hallmarks of quality learning (and supportive resources and documentation)
- Strong curriculum leadership
- Competent teachers
- Enrichment experiences taken by specialist staff
- Rigorous teacher performance review
- A modern learning environment for years 4-8 (and specialist learning areas for all year levels)
- Flexibility: Availability of large open areas as well as smaller (class) rooms. Either (or both) can be used, depending on the learning environment required at the time.
- Still, one teacher with 16-25 children. This ensures that the crucial connections made between the teacher and child (and family) can be maintained, and there is no loss of learning flow. *(Full open plan learning, with 60-90 children and two or three teachers, will make maintaining these connections challenging).*
- Indoor/outdoor flow and connectivity
- Availability of a range of learning technologies
- Forward looking and timely future planning
- Plans for a modern learning environment for years 1-3

**Moving forward**

- Staff PL groups across year levels to recommend how best to use the school’s physical and technological environment to enhance outcomes within the key areas of learning: – literacy, mathematics and inquiry.
- A connected and relational Pre School to Year 8 learning community

Jonathan Bierwirth  
**Principal**