

Position statement on Innovative Learning Environments

In August, “7 Sharp” featured a discussion of the merits and disadvantages of Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs). ILEs are also known as Modern Learning Environments, and in their original form, were known as Open Plan Units. On the programme, there were strong advocates for ILEs and some who had significant doubts or criticisms about them. While ILEs are ostensibly about providing environments that meet the needs of 21st century learners, the question arises as to whether they are delivering educational benefits, particularly for intellectually gifted and academically talented students.

Last year I undertook some research with the top Year 9 class in a high-achieving state boys’ secondary school, with students completing questionnaires and participating in focus-group interviews. One question I asked was, “Are there any ways schools or teachers have hindered you in your achievement?” I was surprised when ILEs were identified as a hindrance. Nine of the 11 students who had experienced an ILE identified it as a hindrance to their learning. Their criticisms related to the lack of competition within them, difficulty with concentrating, less restrictions than in a traditional classroom, an environment that was too relaxed with bean bags and couches, increased opportunities to play games on digital devices instead of working, more distractions, and insufficient tables to work at, so having to work elsewhere when a table would have been preferred. The one student who enjoyed an ILE described himself as “very social” and said the ILE had “good learning vibes” and “different routines.” The eleventh student said the ILE could be good or bad depending on the day. In his view, a bad day was when the teacher was manipulated into allowing students to play on their digital devices for the day rather than engaging in any academic work (Miller, 2017).

None of the criticisms above mean that the concept of ILEs is inherently flawed, but certainly the implementation for these boys leaves much to be desired. I first taught in an Open Plan Unit in 1982 as leader of a team of teachers, and then on a number of other occasions thereafter, as well as teaching in ILEs in both primary and secondary sectors as a relief teacher in recent years. I have found a wide range in the quality of student learning that occurs within them. Knight (n.d.) explains both the positive and negative sides of ILEs:

If the teachers in an open shared space are highly competent and if their students are by nature self-disciplined, we see creative teaching and strong learning outcomes. But if the teachers are not from the top echelons of the profession or if the students need more deliberate management, these new learning environments are unsuccessful. (p.3)

It is my belief that ILEs are neither inherently good nor bad. However, it is wrong to believe that they will work for all students and to believe that they will make a decisive difference to student learning. What will make a decisive difference for students is the quality of teaching regardless of whether it is in an ILE or a traditional classroom. Who the teacher is, what the teacher communicates and what the teacher does will make more of a difference for students than modern buildings and furniture, and the latest digital technology.

References

Knight, K. (n. d.). The never-ending noise in New Zealand's open plan classrooms. Retrieved from <https://www.quietrev.com/never-ending-noise-in-new-zealands-open-plan-classrooms/>

Miller, G. (2017). Elements that help or hinder the achievement of academically gifted and talented secondary school boys. Retrieved from http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/f97b22_6307ee9adc1f4a0f966ece01c4d8a1.pdf

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