

# Teacher leadership report: How student-led pedagogy in modern learning environments (MLEs) can improve literacy learning

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## Abstract

*Our teacher leadership story comes from two schools collaborating on a New Zealand Teacher Led Innovation Fund (TLIF) project exploring the effect of student-led learning practices on literacy achievement within modern learning environments (MLEs). Our rationale is that learning which is individualised for all learners leads to more equitable outcomes for all. It also enables student ownership of learning, which in turn increases success for all learners, measured through improved student engagement, positive shifts in attitude, and improved progress and achievement.*

*We undertook two cycles of participatory action-based inquiry to find out how successful collaboration and student ownership within the MLEs could impact on literacy engagement and achievement. We noted considerable progress in the development of key competencies, influenced by the transfer of ownership from teacher to student through choice, sharing of the curriculum, and engagement with the wider range of resources readily available in an MLE. Giving students a say in their topic and context increased their engagement and led to improved outcomes in literacy achievement. The support provided by our school management for teacher-leadership of the innovations has enabled research-informed student-led pedagogy to be developed at both schools.*

**Keywords:** *Teacher leadership; Modern Learning Environment (MLE); student ownership; key competencies; teacher collaboration; literacy*

## Introduction

As members of the TLIF project team at Hampden Street School, Nelson, and at Wakefield School, we are currently teaching in modern learning environments (MLEs), and have been experimenting with innovative practices in our respective literacy programmes for about two years. We have looked at ways to increase student voice as we have moved towards children personalising their learning. We can see considerable initial development in the levels of student ownership from many of the changes that we have made to our literacy programmes. We wanted to take these changes further, to increase the engagement of an even greater number of our students and as a consequence of this, their levels of achievement in literacy. The project was carried out collaboratively by teachers across three classrooms: Year 3/4 and Year 5/6 at Hampden Street, and Year 3/4 at Wakefield. Hampden Street has established modern learning environments through much of the school, whereas at Wakefield, the configuration of classrooms means that Year 3/4 can undertake innovative work in their joint class group to a greater extent than is practised elsewhere in the school.

Through our collective experience, we believed that without further development of learner behaviours through the key competencies (thinking, relating to others, using language, symbols and texts, managing self, and participating and contributing) (Ministry of Education, n.d. a), we were unlikely to see an improvement in literacy. We wanted to consider what further changes we could make to our literacy programmes, building upon our current practice, as a fundamental part of the literacy programme in our MLEs. Part of the innovative pedagogy and one of the first indicators of achievement would be the development of the key competencies in the students, resulting in the increased ability of students to collaborate and lead their own learning.

As we work towards building supportive and inclusive learning communities, we wanted our investigation to explore further the benefits for students when interaction between teachers, learners and the MLE occurs. Including the MLE as an agent is crucial, as the environment influences students' decision-making in terms of who they work with, where they work and what resources they use, such as the internet, other teachers and peers. We consider that these interactions, enabled by the MLE, are important in the students' development as learners.

The TLIF project therefore investigates how we, as a group of teachers working in MLEs in two schools, attempt to develop modern learning practices that realise the potential of our new physical environments to deliver improved learning for our students and ourselves. Through our investigation we seek to take a "disciplined approach to collaborative inquiry" (Timperley et al., 2014, p. 22) in order to transform practice. We recognise the importance of teachers as change agents and knowledge builders, through their capacity to lead meaningful change initiatives, in partnership with principals and advisors (OECD, 2013b; Hipkins, Bolstad, Boyd, & McDowall, 2014).

### Supporting literature

In recent times, schools and educators are increasingly being challenged to adapt their environments, culture and pedagogy to meet the challenges of today's - and tomorrow's - world (Gilbert, 2006). In order to make a transformative shift in schooling, much attention is given to considering the kinds of learning environments that enable change, and to the potential of teachers as leaders (Frost, 2012) and as change agents (Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2010; Hopkins, Harris, Stoll, & McKay, 2011; OECD, 2013a). Research on school effectiveness and improvement identifies the actions of teachers as having the greatest impact of all school-related factors upon student engagement, progress and achievement (Hattie, 2009; Scheerens, 2004). Accordingly, there is increasing focus on teachers as innovators in creating successful pedagogies for 21st century learning (Timperley, Kaser, & Halbert, 2014; OECD, 2013a). At a school level however, much of the evidence of change has been in creating innovative or modern learning environments (MLEs): exciting environments with glass walls, colourful furniture and multiple learning spaces. What is less evident to the teachers working in these spaces is how to make the pedagogical shift to match the realities of their new learning environments.

This project explores the value of teacher collaboration to improve learning for students (Martin & Bradbeer, 2016; Bias & Kolk, n.d.; Villa, n.d.). Collaborative learning is further explored with students, recognising that student-student interactions can be developed in ways that enhance learning outcomes (Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Hipkins et al., 2014), and that genuine collaboration is more than simply group work, taking turns or sharing individual ideas or work with others.

Important pedagogical shifts explored in this project are around student-led or co-constructed learning. Developing the key competencies from the New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, n.d. a) is explored through student-led learning opportunities in the context of literacy learning. Learning activities try to create the conditions for powerful learning identified by Hipkins et al., (2014, pp. 101, 109, 119). They require students to:

- work on problems that are real to a group, class, community or the world
- use established knowledge in new ways and for new purposes
- work with diverse others, ideas and values
- engage in collective knowledge building and collective action
- revisit ideas and actions over time
- create links between opportunities to learn in different contexts.

Students are encouraged to be "active in their own knowledge construction" (Cook-Sather, 2002, p. 5), in the expectation that co-constructed learning fosters deeper engagement and understanding (Boyd & Hipkins, 2013; Brough, 2008).

In exploring innovative literacy practices, we focus on developing children’s critical understanding of texts as social constructions, enabling them to understand that they can make connections between texts and their lives (Sandretto, Tilson, Hill, Upton, Howland, & Parker, 2006). Literacy and language are recognised as shaping and expressing moral values that guide our actions in life (Johnston, 2012; Freire, 1990) and children are encouraged to be “learners in action” rather than “learners in preparation”, with teachers as “vital guides” who provide scaffolding to take the child to the next step (Boyd & Hipkins, 2012, p. 22).

### **The project**

The TLIF funding enabled the project team to undertake action research to investigate the processes and outcomes of our innovations over an 18-month period across three classrooms in two schools. We used a participatory action-based research model (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998) to undertake two cycles of inquiry, using data from students, parents and standardised testing as a baseline to inform our actions and to plan successive cycles of investigation. We wanted to find out:

- what happens for learners when they assume a greater degree of ownership and decision-making around literacy learning;
- how we can help students develop the necessary learner skills to participate in student-led learning;
- whether students collaborating with teachers in a modern learning environment creates more supportive learning communities that encourage the development of key competencies;
- whether select interventions would bring about improved achievement as well as improvements in engagement, attitude and learner competencies.

Over the timeframe of the interventions, we hoped to see:

- successful collaboration between teachers, students, resources and the environment within a MLE;
- improved student access and understanding of the curriculum to enable focused student-led learning;
- greater empowerment of students as the drivers of their own learning through development of the key competencies;
- improved data - academic, engagement and learner behaviours.

Specific questions were formulated to enable the investigations. These included:

- What could happen to learner engagement if we allowed students to choose their own reading texts? (Class 3/4 Wakefield School)
- What would happen if I introduced the Writing Learning Progressions to help drive the choices students make in their writing? (Class 3/4 Hampden Street School)
- Would asking the students to set a key competency goal as well as a literacy goal improve achievement? (Class 5/6, Hampden Street School).

At a finer level of detail, we planned and carried out innovative strategies. For example, we provided the opportunity for children to choose their own reading books, respond to their reading in varied and creative ways, and give oral or written feedback to their peers about what they had read. Strategies for writing included enabling students to understand the writing elements of the Literacy Learning Progressions (Ministry of Education, n.d. b) and to choose the goals they need to work on to improve their writing, and allowing for choice of personal interest topic as a basis for improving writing. A further set of strategies included integrating literacy wherever possible, so it is not considered in isolation and is purposeful, and allowing construction and discovery of knowledge by the students, rather than teachers using front-loading techniques which set out the purpose and pathway for discovery on behalf of the learner.

These aims, questions and strategies were designed to maximise the agency of students in the ways they chose to learn, share their reading and writing, and demonstrate their competency. Two important elements were that students would enjoy the topics that they chose to engage in and would be able to map their own progress.

### **Project outcomes**

Within the MLEs in both schools, students are explicitly part of the planning and design of their own learning outcomes. They track their own progress and are increasingly willing to learn through failure, reflecting and discussing next steps before being encouraged to try again. They have the opportunity to work alongside other students who are not necessarily working on the same topic, which creates cross-curricular discussions. They share and present their own learning and provide peer-to-peer feedback. They use flexible learning spaces with enabling technology and access to the expertise of more than one teacher.

### ***Impact on teaching practice***

Overall, across the three classrooms in the two schools, the innovations have had positive effect. There has been substantial impact on our teaching practice, as MLE spaces allow teacher roaming and collegial input and support, with teachers taking collective responsibility for all students, not just their own class. This teacher collaboration enables us to have the energy and confidence to be innovative, and constant professional development occurs through seeing other teachers in action. Important learning-points are that teaching within a MLE requires explicit teaching of the key competencies to enable student led learning, and that we needed to drip feed freedom and choice rather than introduce it all at once. Modern learning practice enables the transfer of ownership and accountability from the teacher to the student, changing the role of the teacher from guru to facilitator, and changing the focus from teaching to what has actually been learned.

*We are seeing our roles as teachers change. We were the “organisers”, now we encourage the students to do the organising. We were the “correctors”, now we encourage children to correct their own and others’ mistakes. The focus on students driving their own learning and making their own choices has developed learner skills and habits that students take with them into their next classes and, more importantly, into their lives.*

*My teaching methods have changed to now putting students at the centre of all that we do with a focus on creating a “love of” learning. I now believe that a focus on short-term academic gains to try to boost target student data can be in conflict with the skills we are trying to grow in our students. Students all grow and learn at different speeds, and this should be catered for and celebrated through individualised learning pathways.*

*I think the importance of giving greater choice and ownership to students is the big take away I have got from this project. That coupled with the realisation that the key competencies are so necessary to be a good learner. The students who have made the greatest progress have done so, not because I, the teacher, effected change in them, but because they were internally and intrinsically driven to change themselves.*

### ***Impact on students and their learning***

#### ***Engagement and attitude***

Our students report that they enjoy school more, and welcome a greater choice of books and writing topics. They see the learning process differently and can explain “why are we doing this?” with a personal response. They like to share their learning with others through blogging and a variety of presentations. Students have a greater sense of ownership in their learning and are keen to continue their learning outside the classroom. When asked “Who is in charge of your learning?” they now point to themselves, whereas previously they pointed to the teacher.

*We get to make up our own stories and not get told what to do. That's made it more fun to me.*

*I think I've got better because I'm making good decisions about where I sit. If I don't sit with my friends we make more progress.*

*I think "strive for success" means always try your hardest and focus on your work, and give your best time and effort.*

#### *Learner competencies*

We have found that a focus on the schools' learner pathways has enabled students to develop the skills to track their own progress in learner behaviours. Our students see themselves as learners independent of the teacher and make positive decisions about their learning outcomes. The expectation that everyone will share or present their learning is making students accountable, and our students are now able to provide useful peer-to-peer feedback.

*They gave us the curriculum so we can work on what we think we need to work on, rather than the whole class working on one thing and half the class already knowing about it.*

*We get to choose our own topics rather than the teacher telling us and we get to choose how we respond.*

*I really need to work on challenging myself in every task because it's not all about lowering the hurdle, it's about always giving everything a go, even if it's challenging.*

#### *Learning opportunities*

MLEs provide an opportunity for students to work alongside a wider range of other students who are not necessarily working on the same topic. This creates cross-curricular discussions and helps foster all of the key competencies. Access to the expertise of various teachers and students can be utilised by the whole syndicate, not just one class. More than one teacher equals choice for the children and when a child has chosen something their buy-in is greater. Students have more opportunities to share their learning with each other, their teachers and whānau through blogs and Google Drives, providing opportunity for real-time feedback. Allowing students to lead their own learning means that they are explicitly part of the planning and design of their learning outcomes. Combining the flexibility of open learning spaces with enabling technology such as Google Drive creates learner independence and removes the teacher dependency that can breed self-helplessness.

*When I share my learning I really want to make other people interested in my topic and make them want to read my book.*

*I show empathy when working with someone in class and I sometimes include people when they have no one to work with.*

#### *Achievements in literacy*

Across both schools, our students have made considerable progress in all areas of the key competencies, as observed through parent and student comments, teacher appraisals and professional teacher judgements. Students have also shown expected or accelerated learning in reading. Target students in Year 3 and 4 at Hampden Street School have increased their reading age by 1.7 years, on average, with a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 3 years. Target students in Year 3 and 4 at Wakefield School have increased their reading age by 1.5 years, on average, with a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 3 years. Target students at Wakefield School have

consistently made an improvement in their level of comprehension and decoding. Students in the senior cohort (Year 5 and 6) at Hampden Street School have made an improvement in writing, with a 20% gain in students being above the National Standard compared to March 2016.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

We have found that the MLEs in our schools provide a positive environment for building communities of learning, and that a successful MLE has less to do with the physical environment than with the pedagogical shift of the teacher (Gilbert, 2006). Within the MLEs we have seen successful collaboration between teachers and teachers (Martin & Bradbeer, 2016), teachers and students, students and students (Hipkins et al., 2014), and the resources they have within the MLE. This can be seen in the way we collaboratively plan, the ownership of learning that students now take and the sharing of resources between all those within the MLE.

We have found that sharing the curriculum as learning progressions gives students a greater understanding of their next steps and this helps to individualise learning. This enables them to learn independently within the MLE, active in their own knowledge construction (Cook-Sather, 2002). This has been more successful at a Year 5 and 6 level than at Year 3 and 4, showing that age may be a factor, or that these progressions need to be unpacked in greater detail for younger children. It is also a challenge for students to unlearn some of the self-helplessness accidentally developed through a traditional scaffolded environment. We found benefit in having a composite class, where older children model the desired learner behaviours to those new to the MLE environment.

We have noticed connections between the degree to which students have the key competencies embedded and their ability to accelerate their learning. Those students who lack the skills embedded in the key competencies struggle to engage in their learning for sustained periods of time and struggle to take responsibility for their learning. We think this may be true regardless of the learning environment, but feel that an MLE can support them in developing these skills.

We have found that current assessment methods do not match our learning pedagogy, and that progress in learning behaviours can be difficult to measure. However, within our classes all students have made expected or greater progress in their reading. It is hard to say whether this would have been different in a traditional environment, but student voice indicates that student engagement is enhanced within the co-constructed learning environment (Boyd & Hipkins, 2012; Brough, 2008) of a MLE. We also believe that learner behaviours developed within an MLE will lead to improved academic potential if tracked over a number of years.

Professional development in facilitating learning rather than “teaching” is essential; change is difficult for teachers (just like the students) and requires support from all stakeholders. In order to find a successful way forward with MLEs in education, failure by practitioners needs to be understood, and even encouraged, within the sector. The full potential of teachers as leaders (Frost, 2012), innovators (Timperley et al., 2014), and change agents (Hopkins et al., 2011; OECD, 2013a) can then be achieved.

There is little shared national experience in MLE working, and the sector needs to encourage and share risk-taking practice if schools are to learn enough to enable MLEs to reach their potential. To judge MLE innovations fairly, we would wish to see national assessment practice align with modern learning practice. Education is not just about being successful in school, but about being successful in life, and an MLE makes a positive contribution to this.

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