You have to start somewhere: Designing, tailoring and tinkering. A reflection on leading a change process

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Abstract

This story of leading change is written by the Principal and Deputy Principal of Thorrington School in Christchurch where the leadership focus has been to shift curriculum design and teaching practices to be more responsive to the needs of learners. The article considers the shift in the practices of twenty teachers over a three-year time frame. The school does not have purpose built Modern Learning Spaces / Environments (referred to as flexible learning spaces in this article) so considerations for moving towards flexible learning had to start with changing mindsets and pedagogy. Initially there was a group of early up takers from amongst the staff who adapted their classrooms, furniture and processes to implement a change in practice. Although other teachers in the school recognised the success of this team the impetus to change practice across the whole school was largely rhetoric. Over time school wide resultant change was an amalgam of purpose, support, and development of new skills and strategies. Various drivers for change were recognised as being helpful for some teachers but not for others. Changes in teachers' mindsets happened independently of each other and at different times for different people but together they eventually combined to change the attitudes and behaviours of teachers towards flexible learning practices. Although student achievement data is improving in all areas across the school this article does not track the trajectory of student data for consideration nor does this article address the community consultation process that occurred alongside this journey.

Keywords: *Leading change; flexible learning; change drivers; teaching practices; physical spaces; pedagogy; future focus; mind sets*

Context for change

Since 2007 the New Zealand government vision for education has been to "prepare learners for the knowledge age where people will become 'confident connected actively involved lifelong learners'" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). As part of this vision the New Zealand government recognised the need to provide flexible and modern learning spaces. In Canterbury where many of the school buildings suffered seismic issues from the significant earthquakes in 2010-2011, the process of rebuilding schools to underpin more flexible learning practices began to happen at a rapid rate with more and more schools emerging from their rebuild with large attractive interior and exterior spaces. The size of these new flexible spaces could easily accommodate 50 to 70 children and two to three teachers and there were many breakout spaces where teachers could work with smaller groups of students. Size wasn't the only consideration in these rebuilds; lighting, heating, ventilation, facilities, storage, technology and access were also part of the attractive package that the New Zealand government was making available to these school communities. Over the last four years visiting these new schools became a popular way for school leaders to support teachers in their understanding of what flexible learning spaces looked like and more importantly what teachers and students were doing in them. Learning from other teachers and school wide practices marked a significant change in the way that school leaders sought out relevant professional development for their teachers.

Many schools, like ours are still waiting for their rebuild. Our estimated time of completion is set at the end of 2019. As school leaders we understood that new buildings are only one aspect of flexible learning

practices; it is the convergence of space, technology and pedagogy that will eventually bring about change for students and their learning (Radcliffe, 2009). Our strategic plan was to support teachers to develop a more responsive curriculum and to enable them to think differently about ways to engage children in the learning contexts.

Personalised and flexible learning

A school wide focus on personalised learning, student engagement and access to digital technologies over a five-year period had established the norm of powerful and effective teaching across school wide practice. At the heart of the argument for flexibility is personalised learning which is regarded as a highly structured approach that will best equip 21st century learners (Parnell & Procter, 2011). As teachers began to inquire into aspects of personalised learning and flexible pedagogies they rediscovered the intent of the New Zealand Curriculum in a deeper and more meaningful way. For some teachers it was an epiphany around what students at the centre of all learning could actually look like in a flexible learning practice.

As leaders we were aware the importance of coherence and ownership in bringing about such a major change and considerations of visioning, scoping, planning and implementation were discussed with teachers, parents and students at various stages along the three year timeframe. It seemed to be a case of two steps forward and one step back, as although some members of the school recognised and understood the educative purpose of flexible learning practices, when it came to implementing the process teachers grappled with the practical aspects of collaboration and the soft processes that needed to be explicitly taught to students (Marzano & Kendall, 2006). Leading change is one of the key leadership roles of the Principal (Ministry of Education, 2008). However, to do this, the Principal and those in senior leadership roles must understand the culture of their school and know what the underlying assumptions and beliefs are in order to support teachers to move forward. Radcliffe (2009) argues that people need to understand the reason for the change at the conception and design of the change process.

There were some assumptions, beliefs and psychological barriers within the mind sets of teachers at our school and these were connected to two things (Dweck, 2017). The first was that some teachers still viewed the traditional learning spaces throughout the school as "their" classroom. The second was the belief that what was happening in those classrooms was quality teaching and learning, as our data indicated this traditional practice was producing high rates of student achievement. In other words: why they change something that is working so well? Teachers will not change their instructional models "simply by being told to do so" (Cohen & Ball, 1999, p. 3). Furthermore some teachers at our school were looking for "proof" to see that changing pedagogy, practices and systems would lead to improvements in student achievement.

It was important for us to lead a narrative that focused on more than just academic data, instead focusing on what "success" and "achievement" looked like in a future focused learning context. We knew that some of our teachers were nervous about a change of focus from siloed classroom practices towards more collaborative and flexible approaches but we also believed that these changes were necessary to better equip our students to learn in ways that were more suited to a 21 century context. The commitment to continue to move forward in a strategic direction around these issues meant that leaders had to purposefully and intentionally involve teachers in ongoing professional dialogue at team level and across the whole school. These conversations were challenging for leaders and teachers and it became clear that everyone was at a "different state of readiness" (Bisset, 2014, p. 31). This is the story of four different drivers of change within one school context, and the sequential leadership journey that went alongside this change process.

Driver #1 - Team initiated change

Teachers in our new entrant (N.E.) Year One classes were excited about the possibilities that flexible learning spaces could provide for their students and they were keen to start adapting their current classroom silos into

spaces for learning. Supporting our early adopters to set up their "prototype" of a flexible learning environment was an important first step in alleviating the anxieties about how it would look and how would it work that seemed to feature in the thinking of some teachers.

The success of this first prototype did not just occur because of the enthusiasm and positive mindset of our New Entrant and Year One teachers - it was due to the many hours spent together researching, talking, planning, evaluating and adjusting until they were sure that every detail around pedagogy, processes and practice had been clarified. Osborne (2013) states that the starting point in the establishment of a Modern Learning Environment (MLE) is the vision. An MLE is a flexible and often purpose built space where teachers and students work collaboratively together as opposed to a single cell classroom with one teacher. The teachers in this team did not have a purpose-built space and they worked firstly to create their own team vision, with considerations around adapting their existing spaces emerging later from their commitment to honour their original vision.

> *I have never been a teacher or a leader who jumps at the latest new thing. I had to be convinced that collaborative practice was better than how I had taught for 20 years. I'm proof that you can teach an old dog new tricks! I believe the move to flexible learning was successful in my team because we spent a year talking, thinking and researching before we went near implementation. We based our research on how collaborating fitted into the New Zealand Curriculum.* (Team Leader)

The success of this prototype did encourage other teams to re-evaluate their spaces and processes to see how far down the collaborative track they could go. We wanted to allow teaching teams to work towards collaborative and flexible teaching in their own timeframes in order to avoid what Kotter (1986) refers to as "pain … whenever human communities are forced to adjust to shifting conditions" (p. 4).

Our hope as leaders was that other teachers would encompass flexible learning practices after they had observed the success of the New Entrant and Year One spaces. We assumed that these new flexible teaching practices could be mapped onto other teams. This was a flawed assumption on our part, as teams were not going to copy and paste practice and systems for collaboration (DuFour & Marzano, 2015). At this point, there was not a strong enough collaborative school-wide culture that allowed for the success of a few to encourage and move the practice of others. What was needed was an allowance of time for teams to trial different systems and processes that suited them. We deemed 2014 a "sandpit" year (Wenmoth, 2014) and teachers were encouraged to trial, experiment and prototype practices and furniture with the freedom to make mistakes (and learn from them).

We were also hopeful that the more reticent teachers "[would] alter their mind-sets if they see the point of the change – at least enough to give it a try" (Lawson & Price, 2003, p. 31). We were confident that the first prototype would address some of these concerns in a practical and positive way and might begin to breakdown psychological breakthroughs to transform attitudes across the whole school. The next step was to break down some physical barriers.

Driver #2 - Removing physical walls
At the beginning of the next year, two teachers in the senior school who were in adjacent rooms and who already had a good professional working relationship, agreed to open up their rooms by removing the walls leading through to a shared cloak bay. These teachers were confident in their own practices to learn new strategies from and be observed by each other. This transparency of practice (Fullan, 2010) is one of the tenets of flexible learning that we recognised as advantageous and we were hopeful that the absence of walls between the two teaching spaces would lead to de-privatisation of practice (Campbell, Saltmarsh, Chapman, & Drew, 2013).

Even though the children saw the newly opened space as an opportunity to meet together and work together, removing the walls was not enough in itself to enable a move to collaborative practice and these two

teachers ran parallel programmes with some interchange but it definitely wasn't flexible learning practice. True to our commitment to let teachers to prototype / sandpit at their own speed, we were aware that we needed to create conditions for continuous improvements (Hopkins & Reynolds, 2001) and support these teachers by looking at aspects of their individual practices that could be made more collaborative: for example, maths workshops across both groups of children. These teachers started with small practice and process changes and had many incremental adaptations, reflections and changes in direction. Throughout this time, the teachers remained positive, responsive to feedback (from leaders) demonstrating high levels of motivation and resiliency when things didn't work as planned (Stoll, 2015).

As leaders we hoped that removing the walls would enable teachers' practice to be more exposed and visible, sharing ideas, skills and working with each other more closely (Campbell et al., 2013), and this would enable them to further their own journey towards full collaboration. We discovered this was another flawed assumption; despite the fact these teachers were strong pedagogical practitioners and they were starting a new year in a newly opened space their processes and practices remained separate. The adaptation of the physical learning spaces (Ministry of Education, 2016) was not enough of a catalyst to match the intention that we had as leaders within that first year. We realised changes made to the physical environment may not necessarily lead to changes in teaching practices or student learning (Woolner, McCarter, Wall, & Higgins, 2012) and as a result we focused our thinking and learning around the practices and processes that supported flexible learning. Most of these processes were mainly around what students were doing: for example, what were students doing when they were not with a teacher? How did teachers signal changes to student activities? In what ways were students able to have choice in the programme of learning? How did teachers cater for differentiation across larger groups of students?

Driver #3 - Leading from the front

In the middle school (Year Three and Four) there was a large team of six teachers and the approach to move towards more flexible learning was similar to a big scale change process (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2014) led by a very focused and experienced pedagogical leader through a "pressure cooker" approach. This leader had a defined outcome that the team was working towards with some teacher input throughout the process. This outcome although clearly explained, was not understood or owned by the team of teachers who had no previous experience in flexible learning practice. Although the leader of this team hoped that eventually these teachers would adopt new practices, this targeted and rapid process did not match the professional needs of all the teachers in the team who had different perceptions about the nature of flexible learning (Stoll, Harris, & Handscomb, 2012). The enthusiasm and energy of the leader was not enough alone to bring about collective mind-shifts that unified the team. This approach also isolated the team from school-wide dialogue and professional development because it tended to focus the teacher learning at a team level rather than leveraging the varied experiences and timely learning around collaboration across the school.

After many in-depth discussions, readings around collaborative practice and visits to other schools, this team made the decision to trial what they believed would lead to flexible learning programmes across the team. The first step towards change was more akin to interchange with groups of students moving to different spaces to be taught by different teachers for different aspects of the learning area. In this example, the physical spaces had not been adapted in any way and spaces were not adjoining, which made student movement problematic. It is accepted that a change in pedagogy is possible in the "silo" of a traditional classroom, but the change process employed in this example created an administrative and organisational overhead that consumed meeting time and teacher energy, with minimal movement towards flexible learning (Bisset, 2014). The speed and direction that this team took was out of step with the rest of the whole school professional development, but we granted autonomy to this team in an effort to support their work.

We hoped that an energetic leader focussed on observing teacher practice, providing feedback and team based professional development was enough to change the "hearts and minds of teachers" (Mulford & Silins, 2003, p. 319). This was not the case; however what it did do, was enable the teachers to be exposed to and have appreciation of all student learning across the whole team, which was a positive outcome and also part of the incremental change process for this group of teachers. Teachers in this team needed to continue to trial more options that allowed them to work together in a way that was situated in a flexible teaching and learning context. In this way they were able to adapt their practices in their own timeframes, which aligned with their own confidence. Taking the focus off change and returning to a focus on what was good for students and their learning enabled this syndicate of teachers to regroup and move forward. The collaboration itself become a by-product of effectively meeting student needs and ultimately this became the basis for change.

> We started off with scheduled meetings which focused on collaboration which gave us a lot of time to suss the nuts and bolts . . . we actually needed to tweak a lot of systems to see how they would work for us. The first few weeks last term we were always meeting . . . almost every day just to reflect on the [maths workshops] sessions. It was busy but it really paid off. (Teacher)

Driver #4 Professional peer pressure

Towards the end of 2015 we had a commitment to school wide collaboration in a variety of approaches throughout the school. We were well beyond a tipping point as described by Burke (2013). There was however, still one team who were reticent about taking the final step. They had access to all of the school wide professional development, access to observations and were feeling some "professional pressure" (Armenakis & Bedeian, 1999) towards moving into flexible learning practices. As leaders we realised that this team needed even more time and support and as we sensed their reticence to let go of their current practice and processes we ensured that they had more time in the sandpit. Through discussions with this team of teachers it was discovered they were struggling to find a process that they believed was better than what they were already doing for students and for teachers. Their "tipping point" (Burke, 2013), was brought about by two completely unrelated factors.

One factor was related to some teacher professional learning around "The Daily Five" (Boushey & Moser, 2014) and this was driven by one teacher who was keen to implement this model of student choice as a literacy approach across the team. As leaders we supported this opportunity to leverage teacher practice towards flexible learning (Fullan, 2007). As Daily Five was implemented, student led learning, student voice and teachers teaching all students across the team became inherent in daily practice. For all intents and purposes these teachers were actually working in collaborative and flexible ways across the team and yet they still had reservations about fully committing to all aspects of a flexible learning context and "letting go" of their class.

There was only one hurdle left according to this team and that was assessment and tracking the progress of students across the learning team in a way that was relevant, timely and accessible to all. The second factor that contributed to the team mind shift was the appointment of a new staff member to the team, who had a systems approach to her thinking. This allowed teachers to create an efficient process to effectively track student progress across the team. These careful and cautious late adopters had discovered and further developed a system that met their professional collaborative needs as well as their own individual preferences. For members of this team the journey to fully embrace flexible learning practices was slow but sure and required a well considered and sequenced mind shift. One of the team members shared her mind shift and newly found satisfaction and passion for flexible learning and what was happening for learners in her care.

> I couldn't see how it would work but then we began sharing our planning on googledocs, which meant that it was possible to track specific children for specific things. It was a huge weight off

my shoulders because [before creating the tracking and assessment system] I was really scared
that children were going to fall through the cracks. (Teacher)

Conclusion

While we aligned our school wide notion of powerful and effective teaching and learning alongside the motivation for change to more flexible learning practices, not all teachers made the connection or understood the ramifications of the vision at the same time. For the previous three years the Board of Trustees (the governing body of the school made up of parent representatives) had been involved in the strategic planning of change around teaching and learning and supported us to adapt all of the spaces in our school to provide equity of opportunity for flexible learning. However as discussed these physical changes were not enough to cause or maintain a change in pedagogy. What made the most difference was allowing teachers to construct their own understandings collaboratively, which ultimately led to a positive change in teachers' mindsets. In line with constructivist pedagogy (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2007) the dialogue and rich conversations about learning enabled each team to challenge and then create their own reality for what flexible learning looks like in their collaborative teams.

Recommendations for leading change

Have a clear vision around student learning and articulate it often.

Allow time and be aware that different people will need different amounts of time based on their "readiness for change".

Don't have a broad brush top down model approach.

Value people's personal processes and tailor the professional learning to suit.

Build a context for change, but trust the teachers to make it work for them.

Create and maintain opportunity for dialogue and robust discussion.

Final leadership comment

It was a perfect storm; a new leadership team, teacher frustration with the inequity of modern learning spaces both within the school and in the wider Canterbury area and an expectation that teachers change their practices to encompass more flexible learning practices. This change process lost a few teachers along the way, and it knocked some egos (including those within the leadership team). It was a process with some highs and lows and a great deal of angst at times. However we believe that every member of the staff (including the support staff) has developed a deeper appreciation of the nature of student centred learning and of the capability of the human spirit to take a risk and embrace change. The teachers who have adapted long-standing practices and approaches to bring about the best for children's learning are to be commended. The real stars of this story though are the children who continue to respond to teachers, taking on more responsibility for their learning and never failing to amaze us with their capability for change.

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