‘Finished beginnings’: Finding space for time in collaborative teacher practice

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The design of Modern Learning Environments (MLEs) in New Zealand primary schools follows a global shift in thinking about the relationships between pedagogy and space. MLEs that deliberately group larger cohorts of teachers and students signal a spatial intentionality for teacher collaboration. This study focuses on the nature of that collaboration and the impact on the professional work of teachers, both at the interface with students and behind the scenes.

The study is being completed in three phases. The first phase consists of interviews with selected educational leaders across New Zealand to identify key themes as well as potential research sites. This builds on the notion of Reputational Site Selection (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), as well as the practice of identifying and examining practice in exemplar learning environments (Blackmore et al., 2010; OECD, 2013). Subsequently a set of snapshot case studies will be conducted in six primary schools, with data collected through observations, semi-structured interviews with principals, and focus groups of teachers and students. Three schools will then be selected for in-depth case studies (Stake, 1995), with data collected through field journal observations, interviews and documentation.

Initial analysis taken from the first phase of the study indicates that as schools move to occupy new spaces and inhabit them on an ongoing basis, emergent issues for teachers and leaders are concerned less with the spatial and instead with the relational, temporal, and organisational dimensions. Effective teacher collaboration in MLEs takes time, negotiation and ongoing systemic support, and is shaped and reshaped over time. While geographical proximity may present opportunities for teachers, it also presents complex challenges at a professional, social, cultural and cognitive level. This paper illuminates some of this emerging complexity and supports the notion that although MLEs potentially provide a catalyst for change, the newly built environment presents schools and teachers with a ‘finished beginning’: a starting point from which adaptations to support successful teaching and learning can occur.

Footnote: The terminology of Modern Learning Environment (MLE) is utilised here, reflecting current usage in New Zealand. It is acknowledged that the language is in the process of shifting towards ‘Innovative Learning Environments’ and ‘Innovative Learning Spaces’.

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Chris Bradbeer is an Associate Principal at Stonefields School in Auckland, opened in 2011. Being involved in developing a vision for teaching and learning, building teacher capacity in order to raise student achievement, and having the opportunity to consider ‘what might be possible’ has provided much of the impetus behind a research interest in learning environments. Chris’ interest is particularly focused on the opportunities engendered by the provision of new learning spaces, in particular the nature of collaborative teacher practice.
The shift away from traditional ‘single-cell’, primary school classrooms, towards more adaptable, flexible and future-focused ‘Modern Learning Environments’ (MLEs), represents a major change in New Zealand’s educational property direction, and the terrain of learning space design. It reflects a global shift in thinking about the relationship between pedagogy and space, and calls for teachers to have a greater understanding of the role that built school environments play in creating contexts for contemporary learning and teaching activities (Fisher, 2004). Critically though, MLEs that deliberately group larger cohorts of teachers and students together signal a spatial intentionality for teacher collaboration.

In accompanying the reconceptualisation of spatial settings, this adjunct shift to multiple teachers operating within them proffers a stark contrast to the spatially isolated historical precedent model of individual teachers operating in isolation within traditional classrooms. Such MLE spaces are designed purposely for groups of two, three, four or more teachers to work together with a larger cohort of students. Inherently with such an up-scaling of space new environments may give rise to a shift in the nature of the relationships between teachers, and between teachers and their students, as well as the activities that take place within them. For some teachers new spatial settings may also precipitate a considerable change in the way they work, particularly in what they do with their colleagues. For others they may provide a catalyst for schools to consider the nature of teaching and learning and the way that it is organised and structured (Alterator & Deed, 2013; Campbell, Saltmarsh, Chapman, & Drew, 2013; Deed, Lesko, & Lovejoy, 2014; Saltmarsh, Chapman, Campbell, & Drew, 2014).

As MLE spaces undoubtedly bring teachers into closer geographical proximity, arguably many of the opportunities and challenges that occur do so at a professional, pedagogical and cognitive level. In describing teacher and student occupation of a new school building Barrett & Zhang (2009) frame it as a ‘Finished beginning’, as merely a point from which to start. It is particularly apt when used to describe the emergence of models of teacher collaboration and reflects underpinning complexities and localised contextualities.

In seeking to understand the nature of teacher collaboration within MLE spatial settings this project follows a growing trend in research aiming to understand the relationship between new generation teaching and learning spaces, teacher occupation of new spaces, as well as a need to better understand collaborative structures (Alterator & Deed, 2013; Blackmore, Bateman, Loughlin, O’Mara, & Aranda, 2011; Cleveland, 2011, 2013).

Teacher collaboration

If teacher collaboration has long been viewed as a powerful component of effective school and educational outcome change, then the development of effective teams of teachers working together within schools is increasingly seen as part of a solution to educational problems regarding quality of teaching, school improvement and outcomes of student learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; European Commission, 2013; Hattie, 2012). Furthermore, in a networked world, collaboration is seen globally as a growing imperative, and a valued knowledge and disposition set for students to learn at school. To do this effectively it is noted that as teachers we need to “practice what we preach” (Coke, 2005), and for it to be modelled within school settings.

However teacher collaboration suffers from being a slightly amorphous concept, at times the subject of ambiguous interpretation and vague terminology (Kelchtermans, 2006; Vangrieken, Dochy, Ræs, & Kyndt, 2015). In a school context for example collaboration can relate to departmental teams, year level syndicates, Professional Learning Communities, communities of practice, mentoring, peer coaching, collaborative action research, and data teams. Furthermore, constructs of team-teaching, as spatially specific and located forms of collaboration, have been variously termed co-teaching, coteaching, collaborative teaching and cooperative teaching. Consequently an investigation of teacher collaboration presents us with an example of what Meyer (2003) notes as “troublesome language” to navigate through.
Defining collaboration

In defining collaboration (Gray, 1989) describes it as, “a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible” (p. 5). This essential action forms around the belief that two or more entities come together in order to achieve something that they could not accomplish on their own. Intentionality and purposefulness are critical themes (Gajda & Koliba, 2007).

This forms a key distinction - collaboration is a step beyond cooperation, where participants dissect a task and combine their work into the final outcomes (Little, 1990; Peterson, 1991). It is also a step beyond coordination where independent participants align activities for mutual benefit. (Gajda, 2004; Peterson, 1991). This is an important distinction to make, a useful lens through which to investigate collaborative teacher contexts, and one through the literature that raises three critical points when considering MLE. To what extent is practice actually collaborative? When does it occur? Where does it occur?

Collaboration?

One of the tensions around teacher collaboration is centred on the authenticity and effectiveness of the collaborative process. An exploration of the literature highlights that much of what has been taken as collaboration has been formed around the notion of collegiality instead, with collegiality focused on the nature of relationships between teachers, rather than the activities they are engaged in (Barth, 1990; Datnow, 2011; Hargreaves, 1994; Kelchtermans, 2006). Although these are clearly not mutually exclusive, it prompts consideration of the formation of collaborative teacher groupings and aligned expectations. Some teachers may see a shift into collaborative settings as a positive one, whereas for some the move will be the result of a series of push-factors (Vangrieken et al., 2015). It is not necessarily voluntary.

In Hargreaves’ (1994) view collaboration should be, “spontaneous, voluntary, development-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and unpredictable” (p. 193) He reflects that more administratively regulated collaboration can lead to what he terms ‘contrived collegiality’. However as Datnow (2011) notes although such arrangements may provide a necessary starting point, with continual checking on collaborative processes, more contrived situations may in turn shift towards more genuine collaborative activities. Which raises the question when investigating teacher collaboration in MLEs: to what extent are indicators of collaboration actually present?

Time to collaborate

Secondly, if collaboration is viewed as collectively achieving something not possible alone, then negotiation and dialogue underpin the co-construction of meaning that allows people to journey beyond an individual and therefore more limited view of what is possible (Game & Metcalfe, 2009; Gray, 1989; Roth, Roth, & Zimmermann, 2002). Building on Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory Roschelle (1992) notes that this convergence is achieved through “cycles of displaying, confirming and repairing shared meanings” (p. 237) and forms the ‘crux’ of collaboration. These shared meaning are in turn subject to review and revision, emphasising that collaboration is as much a journey as a destination (Gajda, 2004). This itself will take time.

In the long term there is a need to engage as a team and come to shared meanings, agreements and understandings about goals, processes and structures. Also to develop ongoing temporal practices that allow for time to meet, to problem-solve, to plan and to reflect (Campbell et al., 2013). It requires an ongoing review process, in order to negotiate a way through previously contested spaces (Cherry, 2005). Consequently finding the time has commonly been highlighted as a barrier to effective collaboration in team situations (Kelchtermans, 2006). Not that purely having time to meet is sufficient. As Gajda and Koliba (2007) note teachers need to learn how best to use the time that they have. Consequently schools and teacher teams may develop their own systems, structures and efficiencies relevant to their own context. Which raises the question: what are the systems and structures that underpin pedagogical collaboration, and how do teams of teachers develop them?

A third tension relates to the ‘where’ of teacher collaboration, and draws attention to the relative spatial disconnect between activity and space.
Teacher collaboration and space

In locating teacher collaboration it is frequently noted as an activity that has happened ‘elsewhere’. Both temporally as well as geographically the work that teachers have done together has often been dislocated from the primary interface of teaching and learning. To a large extent therefore it has constituted a ‘visited’ activity, something that teachers have left their classrooms to do. Forte and Flores (2013) for example, in an examination of collaboration in the context of professional development, found that teachers talked of working collaboratively but generally did so in out of classroom settings, where conversation related to extra-curricular themes rather than focusing on in-classroom pedagogy. Spatially this is common. The faculty office, the staffroom, and the team meeting have often formed the preferred sites for collaborative activities (McGregor, 2003), with much of the work that teachers do remaining on their own.

In contrast MLE spaces frequently signal a spatial intentionality for teacher collaboration, and within them a design preference for teacher teams working together (Gislason, 2009). Although enjoying something of a renaissance, as a pedagogical approach teaching together is nothing new. However references to such approaches have seen limited exposure in schools since open-plan schools lost their appeal in the early 1980s (Cleveland & Woodman, 2009). Much of the team teaching literature instead is situated within the context of Special Education. Accordingly though it only infrequently acknowledges the spatial settings of such arrangements.

As a corollary to this Clandinin and Connelly (1996) observed, teacher professional knowledge landscapes, formed at the junction between practice and theory, have often delineated between classroom as safe, private spaces, “where teachers are free to live stories of practice” (p. 25), and outside the classroom spaces as being professional, communal and at times policy spaces. The danger here is that such ‘secret’ classroom practice is viewed as perennially negative and slightly subversive. Yet there is nothing to say that highly innovative, but contemporaneously isolated practice could not be taking place within. If collaboration is a desired outcome, then what place still the individual?

Towards ‘closeness’

The shift to MLEs has brought with it a counter-narrative to classroom spaces that, as Campbell (2013) notes, have historically privileged levels of (in)visibility, privatisation, autonomy and territorialisation over teacher collaboration. Instead the collective and deprivatised are presently being prioritised, creating new conceptualisations of teacher assemblages (Dovey, 2010) within new and existing schools.

Bringing teachers together may in turn lead to consideration of alternate proximities (Knoben & Oerlemans, 2006), as teachers learn to work alongside each other. With that in mind, Barrett & Zhang’s (2009) description of teacher and student occupation of a new school building as a ‘Finished beginning’ is particularly apt. It reflects the possible emergence of models of teacher collaboration as well as evolving complexities and contextualities. The extent to which the potential of teacher collaboration, coupled with the affordances of the space, can be realised becomes reliant on how well teachers navigate not only the new space but also critically negotiate the relationships within it.

Collaboration is by definition an aspatial concept, bounded less by space, and more by time and relationships. But in the context of many Modern Learning Environments in primary schools, spatially it is a critically connected one. It lies at the heart of a significant shift from the privacy and autonomy afforded by a traditional classroom towards teachers working together in-situ. The extent to which the potential of the collaboration, coupled with the affordances of the space, can be realised becomes reliant on how well teachers navigate not only the new space but also critically negotiate the relationships within it (Alterator & Deed, 2013; Campbell et al., 2013). How therefore might you look at teacher ‘closeness’ in collaborative MLE spaces?

Proximity as theoretical framework

In understanding teacher collaboration in MLEs the concept of proximity may provide a useful focusing lens through which to investigate emerging issues. Although ‘proximity’ is more ordinarily used to denote geographical locality and closeness, it has also been used to describe non-spatial constructs in the context of inter-organisational collaboration (Knoben & Oerlemans, 2006). By taking a multi-dimensional view of proximity to describe, ‘being close to something
measured on a certain dimension’, (p. 71) Knoben and Oerlemans expand beyond the spatial and distinguish between alternate notions of proximity: cultural, organisational, social, and technological, to explore the relative distance between organisations working together. This could usefully be applied on smaller scale to groups of teachers working together in a MLE.

Knoben and Oerlemans’ view that proximity is often seen as an important pre-condition for successful collaboration implies that different types of proximity support and facilitate the performance of organisations in different ways. In the case of teachers working together in MLEs therefore, the non-spatial aspects of proximity become of interest. Teachers in such environments are already cohabiting a physical space, and are by default geographically proximal. Yet this spatial locality may in turn lead to the identification of issues and challenges that in turn correspond to adjacent proximities. So to better understand some of the principles underlying effective collaboration for teachers in MLEs, consideration of alternate proximities may provide some interesting reflections, and questions for further investigation.

Adapting the framework developed by Knoben and Oerlemans, in order to investigate the dimensions of proximity at a MLE teacher team level there are a number of relevant dimensions that can be extrapolated (See Figure 1):

Geographical Proximity: is identified as spatial ‘closeness’, with the importance here of investigating how locality, and relative distance intersects with space, deprivitisation, as well as interactions - both planned and serendipitous.

Organisational Proximity: is interpreted here to describe the systems and structures that underpin teacher collaboration - characteristics of rules, routines and behaviours.

Relational Proximity: is used to describe the relative level of social interactions across the network of relationships. It refers to the structural equivalence of actors across the team organisation, and provides room to explore issues of power, participation, mutuality, and belonging.

Cognitive Proximity: is based on understanding shared routines, cultures, values and ways of working. This can be used to investigate norms and teacher mindset around teacher collaboration, rationales behind ‘why we do what we do’, how this is thought about, and communicated.

Technological Proximity: is interpreted here as describing mediating technologies used in the creation of new knowledge, and can be used to frame understandings of what and how teachers learn from each other.

In constructing a model that separates proximities into the spatial and the non-spatial I am cognisant of the potential of creating a socio-spatial divide. Instead acknowledging the inextricable connections between the relational and space, as opposed to the space providing simply a container for interactions (Massey, 2005).

Methodology

The study is being completed in three phases. The first phase consists of interviews with selected educational leaders across New Zealand to identify key themes as well as potential research sites. This builds on the notion of Reputational Site Selection (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), as well as the practice of identifying and examining practice in exemplar learning environments (Blackmore et al., 2010; OECD, 2013). Subsequently a set of snapshot case studies will be conducted in six primary schools, with data collected through observations, semi-structured interviews with principals, and focus groups of teachers and students. Three of these schools will then be selected for in-depth case studies (Stake, 1995), with data collected through field journal observations, interviews and documentation, and analysed using thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008).
The Phase One research discussed here consisted of semi-structured interviews with a number of key participants. The study began with six participants, selected from the researcher’s personal professional network. As part of the interview they were asked to recommend other participants in a ‘snowball’ sample (Bryman, 2012). In addition participants were asked to recommend relevant research sites. These needed to be MLE sites as well as schools where collaborative practice was viewed as successful. This process was continued, until theoretical saturation (Bryman, 2012) was reached in terms of issues raised, as well as sufficient sites had been recommended and repeated.

The use of semi-structured interviews meant that although as a researcher, I had approached participants with a number of key themes and apriori concepts that I wanted to address there was space within the interview for participants to pay particular attention to issues that were important to them.

Emerging themes

Although early on in the data collection and analysis stage of the research, initial indications suggest a number of emerging trends and themes. While these do not represent concrete findings they do assist in directing the project and in iterating into the next phase.

Data analysis was undertaken using narrative analysis methods (Riessman, 2008). Accordingly I have avoided taking ‘soundbites’ from multiple data sources and recombining them. Instead choosing here to work from a single source. Examples are selected from one interviewee, Principal of Riverside Primary, a relatively new school Year 1-8 school with open and collaborative MLEs.

The data reflects that while there are some differences in personal rationale behind a collaborative teaching approach within new spatial settings, there is clarity in the value seen in the collaboration. Teacher collaboration is seen as a good thing in theory, although not necessarily an easy thing to enact. Instead it is viewed as something that will present new and evolving challenges for teachers, leaders and schools, along with the potential for sustained professional change. What does it look like? How do you manage and coordinate time? What works? What happens when it doesn’t?

As the Principal describes:

For me, I think it’s a better representation of the nature of the world that our kids are going to be entering. ‘Cause we can’t define that to any degree of specificity the way, you know, generations before us could. Dare I say it, even my generation. But what we do know that it’s going to be quite a social type world they’re going to inhabit, that skills around getting on with others, being able to compromise, being able to negotiate, being able to think differently, being able to work interdependently, those sorts of things are going to be critical. You can’t do that if you’re working in isolation. You can’t do that if you’re not modelling it at an adult level.

The Principal commented on the affordance of spatial visibility having an impact on professional as well as student learning. The notion that learning was ongoing, in-situ, spontaneous and highly contextually relevant. But this was accompanied by a need for the school’s culture to recognise and be responsive to that. Establishing a norm where ‘noticing’ and feedback was normalised was recognised as a challenging one, but a critical dimension (Campbell et al., 2013). This finds real congruence in the “practice what we preach” belief underpinning one rationale behind collaborative spaces. However the Principal later raises an issue that leads to consideration of both relational and cognitive alignment between teachers.

So I’ll give you a specific example. A team leader, (Teacher B) , might walk past one of the teachers teaching Reading and click to something in their delivery of a guided reading lesson that she’s not comfortable with. And because they’re in that open collaborative space, she sees it, observes it very quickly, can choose how she wants to tackle that…’Cause it surfaces that stuff very quickly, which would never happen in a single-cell experience…How do you address issues that occur that can’t be addressed in front of kids? So, you know… you hear something communicated that’s not accurate, needs to be brought up. But you don’t do that in front of the kids. It’s not appropriate. How do you flag that discussion there and then? Or should you flag it there and then? What’s the procedure or the practice that sits around that?
Organisationally where does the line sit? What is it you do model as a teacher and what do you leave to another time? Much of this is tied to shared beliefs and practices but needs to be skilfully negotiated and navigated as a team. It questions what stays in the public domain and what shifts into the private? In doing so it illuminates one example of the need for teachers to explore the potentially contested white space’ that falls between existing practices and procedures (Cherry, 2005). A shift into the public domain not only exposes practice but also challenges the levels of autonomy teachers have enjoyed in traditional settings:

You know, if we’re honest, in a single-cell experience, if you wanted to have 5 minutes sitting down or, I don’t know, read the story for a bit longer or carry on that class discussion for a little bit longer or spend another few minutes with that guided reading group, that was a conversation you had internally and made a decision and you acted on it. Now, I’m not saying you can’t do that in a collaborative space, but it’s not necessarily your decision to make. Or does someone have that decision-making power? Or if you want to do that, how do you actually work through that process?

Here the narrative of the built environment, as collaborative space may find a discord with the narrative of the teachers that inhabit it in terms of teacher beliefs, and previously regularised, routine, or ingrained practices. The need to negotiate time and to work flexibly becomes an important factor, not only in terms of time with teachers but also time with students (Alterator & Deed, 2013).

Conclusion

The terrain of teacher collaboration within Modern Learning Environments is somewhat littered with slightly fuzzy nomenclature, broad interpretation and semantic diversions. Consequently what is taken to mean collaboration in one setting may not easily translate to another, instead reflecting collegiality and coordination, rather than true collaboration. It is reflective of the deep complexity seen at the confluence of pedagogical practice, spatial settings, and professional change.

In contrast to the energy expended in exploring new spatial settings, the issues that occupy teachers and leaders, certainly on first occupation often appear to be less concerned with some of the nuances of space, and more concerned with the negotiation and co-construction of relational, technological and organisational elements. Effective teacher collaboration in MLEs takes time, negotiation and ongoing systemic support, and is shaped and reshaped over time. While geographical proximity may present opportunities for teachers, it also presents complex challenges at a professional, social, cultural and cognitive level.

The extent to which the provision of new learning spaces and new teacher settings in turn provide a catalyst for collaborative approaches to impact on students is largely contingent on the capacity of teachers to work together. Understanding underpinning beliefs, principles and practice of collaborative teacher practice in MLEs is viewed therefore as an important step in the process. The proposed proximity framework may provide a focusing lens through which to investigate these emerging issues.


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Title:
Finished beginnings: Finding space for time in collaborative teacher practice

Date:
2015

Citation:
Bradbeer, C, Finished beginnings: Finding space for time in collaborative teacher practice, Terrains 2015: Mapping learning environment evaluation across the design and education landscape: Towards the evidence-based design of educational facilities, 2015, pp. 42 - 50

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/191813

File Description:
Published version