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## The evolution of policy: A critical examination of school property under the National-led Government

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### Abstract

*New Zealand's National-led Government, elected in 2008, has pursued a deliberate policy to design and construct modern school facilities around the country. This article argues that this policy is not simply focused on providing cutting-edge school buildings. A more complex agenda is to fundamentally alter teacher practice and, as the Christchurch experience has suggested, to consolidate schooling provision. The article provides background to understanding the role of building design and why it has developed as a significant educational issue, particularly for this government. Policy is considered from the perspective of the Ministry of Education in relation to building design. An indicator of government commitment is its budgetary resourcing of its property objectives, thus evidence from Vote Education budget data is considered. Specific reference is made to the property policy enacted in the wake of the natural disaster of the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes. Finally, a selection of Ministerial press releases is considered, shedding further light on state education policy in relation to school property.*

### Keywords

Innovative learning environments; ILE; modern learning environments; flexible learning spaces

### Introduction

The National Party has led the New Zealand government since its 2008 victory. Now in its third term of office, it goes into an election scheduled for September 2017 having achieved a decisive policy commitment to erecting modern schools around the country—a policy, it seems, whose enactment is approaching a crescendo in this current term. Yet this policy comes at a cost. Purpose-built flexible learning spaces place teachers into teaching situations they may never have imagined, let alone prepared for. These spaces bring together multiple teachers and potentially 120 students, requiring students to master new learning habits and routines. Parents too have their preconceptions of the schooling experience fundamentally altered. For many, their most recent school memory may have been of sitting in rows or possibly in grouped desks, in so-called 'single cell' classrooms with one teacher and no more than 30 or 35 students.



In this article I avoid reference to the influence of the changes to learning environment design on teachers and students (see Benade, 2017). Instead, I review the background to understanding the role of building design and why it has developed as a significant educational issue, particularly for this government. Current state objectives are the main concern of this article, which considers policy from the perspective of the Ministry of Education in relation to building design, and then the budgetary resourcing of these objectives as an indicator of government commitment. At several points the natural disaster of the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes is referred to. Specific reference is made to the policy enacted in the wake of this disaster. Finally, a selection of Ministerial press releases is considered, shedding further light on state education policy in relation to school property.

### Modern school building design in perspective

The appearance of dramatic buildings that challenge the conventional understanding many educators and parents have of schools belies a deeper-seated reality. Just as conventional single cell classrooms within traditional school buildings communicate hidden messages about schooling and education, so innovatively designed buildings imply particular perspectives. Nevertheless, these alternative messages may be lost simply by virtue of the spectacle of the new and the innovative; the high-vaulted ceilings, sweeping open spaces, and wide concourses; the eco-friendly features; the quality of light and ventilation; and the muffled acoustics. Some time ago, Blackmore Bateman, Loughlin, O'Mara, and Aranda (2011) cautioned that learning environment research focused too narrowly on building and technical specifications and performance, without paying attention to the activities within and around buildings. Taken-for-granted perspectives on learning space failed to recognise the role of power and agency in space (McGregor, 2004), and so also failed to recognise the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Space does not exist as an empty container to be filled—its production is authenticated by the lived experience of those who occupy, dwell in and utilise space, and who represent it in various ways (Lefebvre, 1991).

The hegemonic influence of capitalism should not be excluded from considerations of space either (Lefebvre, 1991). Indeed, the development of flexible learning environments and learning spaces by the Ministry of Education (2007) supports its vision of “young people [who are] creative, energetic, and enterprising [and] who will seize the opportunities offered by new knowledge and technologies to secure a sustainable social, cultural, economic, and environmental future for our country” (p. 8). Thus the development of modern school building technology has to be seen in a wider context.

The Ministry of Education takes its lead from international research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In relation to the design and provision of flexible learning spaces, the Ministry of Education Innovative Learning Environments website (nd. b) specifically cites and links to the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) research on innovative learning environments (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). This report is but one of several, related pieces of OECD research into the general area of environments that support learning (see, for example, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2008; Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2010; Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006).

Pasi Sahlberg, a long-time critic of what he has dubbed the ‘global education reform movement (GERM)’, defined several distinct features of this movement (Sahlberg 2011). Among these is the importation to education of ‘innovations’ from the corporate world and the shift of emphasis in education from teaching to learning. He specifically implicated the OECD and the World Bank in leading these global reform moves. The OECD (and CERI) has been able to leverage its global governance position to sway member states’ education policies with such research. As the CERI researchers noted, it was their intention “to positively influence the contemporary education reform agenda with forward-looking insights about learning and innovation” (2013, p. 3). The earlier CERI research defined learning (Dumont et al., 2010), to be followed up with a study of contextual examples

of innovative learning environments in practice. The purpose of this study was to develop principles of learning that could be associated with innovative learning environments (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). Lessons learned could then be applied to local contexts across the world.

The New Zealand Ministry of Education has shifted its own position on innovative learning environments towards taking up the OECD position. For example, its early label was ‘Modern Learning Environments’, a term quickly taken up as ‘MLE’. Its earlier definition was “the complete physical, social and pedagogical context in which learning is intended to occur”, a definition that was subsequently removed but is still sometimes quoted in the education sector. By 2016 the use of ‘innovative learning environment’ (in popular usage, ‘ILE’) was actively promoted by the Ministry of Education, a use one of its websites justifies by reference to the OECD usage, though earlier versions of its website did not provide this reason (or any reason, for that matter). Now the Ministry of Education (“Talking terminology”, nd. b) specifies ‘Flexible Learning Spaces’ to denote the physical school buildings, while ‘Innovative Learning Environment’ refers to the entire ‘ecosystem’, a term used by the OECD research (2013) to suggest a holistic understanding of learning, teaching, content and resources. The critical point the Ministry of Education seeks to make, and one that challenges superficial responses to the ILE programme, is that “ILE is about much more than just property” (“Talking terminology”, nd. b). How ILE might be implemented in practice requires a consideration of the policy of the Ministry of Education and the current government.

## The Ministry of Education

The statement by the Ministry of Education above, suggesting that physical infrastructure is but one aspect of creating innovative learning environments, is perhaps disingenuous. In its role as a state apparatus, the Ministry of Education implements government policy which, it will be suggested, is shaped around a deterministic and linear plan. The ultimate aim of education preferred by the current government is to produce “young people ... who will seize the opportunities offered by new knowledge and technologies to secure a sustainable social, cultural, economic, and environmental future for our country” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). This statement appears in the current New Zealand Curriculum, a document developed under the previous Labour-led Government, which promoted an interest in schools developing skills for the new century. The present National-led Government has actively promoted the notion of ‘21st century learning’, making it an underlying tenet of its education policies for schools. These place the ‘learner’ at the centre of a personalised programme of student-driven learning exhibiting a range of cognitive and digital competencies and soft skills such as teamwork (Dumont & Istance, 2010), and leadership, initiative and honesty (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). This required significant changes to, and advancements in, teacher pedagogy (Benade 2017; Benade, Gardner, Teschers, & Gibbons, 2014).

The linearity this suggests is evident in the presumption that the construction of flexible learning spaces will significantly support the required changes to learning and teaching required to meet the demands of the 21st century. Whilst the notion and promotion of 21st century learning is more widely held internationally (aided in no small part by such world bodies as the OECD), the nation-wide adoption of a ‘modern’ building standard for schools is arguably unparalleled in the world, propelled by New Zealand’s low population, small number of schools (just over 2000) and the fact that the Ministry of Education is the primary policy driver over those schools.

Any consideration of the education policy of the National-led Government since 2008 must therefore take adequate account of the link between flexible buildings, pedagogy and learning for the 21st century. This relationship is evident in the stated strategic intention that school buildings “*empower students to learn and teachers to teach* [emphasis added]” (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 4). The plan commits to a

Modern Learning Environment (MLE) standard that schools will adopt as they become due for their next round of property funding. Achieving this outcome is critical to modern education delivery and will ensure that *the performance of the physical environment is linked to educational outcomes* [emphasis added]. (2011, p. 13)

As the key stakeholder in all New Zealand state schools (over 2000 in total), the Ministry of Education Schools Property Infrastructure Service currently allocates approximately \$500m annually to maintain and upgrade school property (Ministry of Education, 2017f), and to achieve its strategic vision of providing safe and inspiring learning environments (Ministry of Education, 2011). Its ten-year property strategic plan has 2021 as the time by which all schools will have modernised teaching spaces. This commitment will be, and is already becoming, pedagogically and relationally significant in the daily lives of teachers and students. Indeed, the strategic plan specifically notes the intention to end the tradition of a “teacher-centred system that revolve[s] around structured classroom lessons” (Ministry of Education, 2011, p. 13). The linear and deterministic relation the Ministry of Education (1991) planners perceive between the built environment and pedagogy is plainly evident. This is a relation Lefebvre calls ‘representations of space’: “the space of ... technocratic subdividers ... [who] ... identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived” (1991, p. 38).

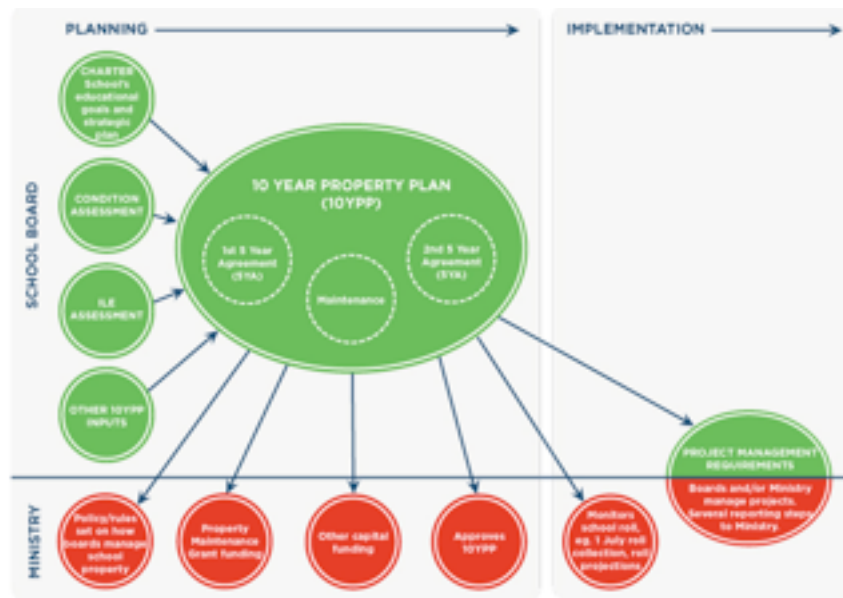
In its own defence, the Ministry of Education would reiterate it is not in the business of telling schools how to operate nor will it direct Boards of Trustees and the Principal to use their learning spaces in particular ways. Rather, the Ministry of Education (2011) sees itself “supporting teaching and learning [by] ensuring schools have the range and quality of teaching spaces needed to support education” (p. 15). What, however, the Ministry of Education *is* dictating is that teaching and learning cease to take place in single cell classrooms of up to 30 students with one teacher at the front. To achieve that aim (and the goal of flexible spaces in all New Zealand schools by 2021), the Ministry of Education (2016a) enables schools through its “10 Year Property Plan (10YPP)”. The 10YPP enables schools to plan for critical health and safety and essential infrastructural works, regular maintenance and roll growth. Once, however, these priorities are met, schools can plan to modernise their learning spaces. Arguably (and as the press releases reviewed later attest) planning for roll growth and modernising learning spaces can happily coincide.

This means that any new building work in a Ministry of Education state school is going to feature flexible spaces. Meanwhile, state integrated schools (such as special character schools with religious affiliation) which receive limited state support to upgrade existing buildings may, from a dedicated property fund (‘Policy One funding’), choose to use available funds to construct flexible areas (Ministry of Education, 2017d). Private or ‘independent’ schools, which do not receive state support for property, are under no obligation to build flexible spaces (Ministry of Education, 2017e).

Within the 10YPP is the “5 Year Agreement (5YA)” (Ministry of Education, 2017a). Developed by the Ministry of Education in response to school sector dissatisfaction with opaque funding allocations for school property and to use property policy implementation to empower schools, the 5YA was introduced in 2000 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006). Arguably providing greater flexibility and the opportunity to complete smaller capital projects without having to wait 10 years, the 5YA enables schools to prioritise and manage their own projects. Provided health and safety and infrastructural work have been prioritised, schools are able to modernise existing facilities or, in exceptional cases, completely replace existing, but defunct, facilities by building flexible learning spaces. These changes may not exceed the current footprint, or may do so only by special ministerial permission (Ministry of Education, 2017a). Thus, the mechanism of the 5YA enables the Ministry of Education, it may be suggested, to achieve its 2021 strategic intent.

Figure 1 clarifies the relationship between the 5YA and the 10YPP and also reflects the significant governance role played by Boards of Trustees in New Zealand schools. The graphic refers to the ‘ILE Assessment’, which boards are required now to complete every five years. This downloadable assessment tool (available at Ministry of Education, 2017b) consists of questions against which a

school board is able to assess whether its facilities meet required 'FLS standards' or criteria. Its 17 criteria range from flexibility of general learning spaces, the scope for present buildings to encourage the development of communities of learners, digital technology provision, furniture, and reference to the requirements of various learning areas, to teacher spaces and the general internal environment (referring to technical issues such as lighting and acoustics).



**Figure 1.** Graphic depicting overview of the relationship of school Boards of Trustees and the Ministry of Education in regard to property planning over a 10-year cycle. Retrieved from <http://www.education.govt.nz/school/property/state-schools/property-planning/10ypp/your-10ypp/>

The assessment tool specifies guidance, provides a rationale for that guidance and cites references supporting this guidance. The spreadsheet has three tabs: 'ILE Assessment', 'School Info' and 'Instructions' (2017c). Under 'Instructions' it is indicated to boards that they must complete the questions contained in the 'ILE Assessment' every five years as part of their ongoing review of their 10YPP. "The focus of the ILE assessment tool is on improving the quality of learning spaces across a school and in particular the general classroom blocks" ("Innovative Learning Environment Assessment Tool", Instructions # 5, 2017c). The key rationale for undertaking this task is as follows:

The majority of school buildings were built during the 1950–1970s. They were designed on what is often described as the 'industrial style model' of teaching with students being the passive receivers of information transmitted by the teacher. Teaching practice, student learning needs and technology has changed significantly since these buildings were built and there is a need to provide more flexible learning environments that reflect this change. ("Innovative Learning Environment Assessment Tool", Instructions # 7, 2017c)

Therefore it is evident that the Ministry of Education provides no alternative to schools, but to adhere to the requirements of designing ergonomically furnished flexible learning spaces. These spaces must support multifarious teaching approaches and encourage collaborative learning and teaching in technology-rich settings.

This guidance and rationale (that teaching and learning have changed; therefore the spaces of learning must change) are supported by reference, for example, to Fisher (2005) and Nair, Fielding, and Lackney (2013). All are architects, Fisher being located in the University of Melbourne and associated with the Learning Environments Applied Research Network LEaRN (see



<https://msd.unimelb.edu.au/learning-environments-applied-research-network-learn>) with which the Ministry of Education has a strategic partnership to evaluate ILEs. Nair (of Fielding Nair International—see <http://www.fieldingnair.com>) has previously been hosted by the Ministry of Education. The ‘Instructions’ section of the assessment tool goes on to provide advice to those completing the questionnaire section of the assessment.

Before moving away from this assessment tool, it is important to note that the items are presented in such a way as to manufacture consent to the FLS standard or criteria. The items are ranked as ‘Core’, ‘Moderate’ or ‘Advanced’, with the latter two representing the desirable situation, as evident in new builds in New Zealand and in examples internationally. For instance:

- “Does the classroom design allow teachers to work co-operatively with teachers from other classrooms or specialist disciplines e.g. are there moveable walls between spaces or access to a shared space” and,
- “Is there visual transparency, e.g. glass windows/walls, between learning spaces and other areas, such as corridors, breakout spaces, staff work rooms” (“Innovative Learning Environment Assessment Tool”, ILE Assessment # 1.4 and 1.5, 2017c).

These two items are considered ‘Moderate’, and reveal, therefore, an idea of what the Ministry of Education now seeks in school learning and teaching spaces.

Also deemed ‘Moderate’ is the following requirement: “Are the [teacher] work spaces transparent to students who can see teachers working or have access to them” (“Innovative Learning Environment Assessment Tool”, ILE Assessment # 10.5, 2017c). Thus, in these three items alone, school boards, principals and teachers are required to ‘buy into’ working in teams in shared, visually transparent spaces with significant numbers of students, and to have work areas that are open and available to student use.

The Ministry of Education has therefore predicated a building standard based on the belief that this will mould teacher practice in ways that will achieve the aims of ‘21<sup>st</sup> century learning’—whether teachers are ready for such pedagogical shifts or not.

## Vote education

The Ministry of Education requires adequate financial resourcing to execute the government’s policies. What counts as ‘adequate’ is to some extent an open question, though international indicators, such as those provided by the OECD, are one measure. New Zealand’s politicians and policy-makers frequently use such measures to justify or provide explanation of policies. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2014) reported that “OECD countries spend USD9487 per student per year from primary through tertiary education: USD8296 per primary student, USD9280 per secondary student, and USD13958 per tertiary student” (p. 204). In 2011 New Zealand spending per student in primary and secondary education was at the average for OECD member states but, notably, well below the average on tertiary education, spending just over \$US10000, compared with the average of nearly \$US14000).

Although this OECD report is cautious of conclusions that can be drawn from considering the relationship between Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and expenditure per student, the New Zealand Ministry of Education website, *Education Counts*, notes that in the 2015/2016 financial year, the government spent 5.2 percent of GDP on education, slightly higher than the years from 1999, in which time the figure has been stable at 5 percent. In 2015/2016, government spending on education equates to 17.8 percent of total government spending (2017b). *Education Counts* uses these figures to demonstrate that New Zealand spending on education in 2013 was above the OECD average, outstripping Australia and the United States of America (2017b). What this demonstrates is that

statistics can be sliced and diced several ways, potentially arriving at conflicting conclusions to the same issue.

**Table 3. Property Related Appropriations in Vote Education Budgets, 2006–2016** (source: Treasury, 2016b).

	Total Budget \$000	School Property Portfolio Management \$000	As a % of total budget	Capital Expenditure \$000	As a % of total budget
2006	8,969,079	1,068,120	11.9		0
2007	9,524,576	1,160,233	12.18		0
2008	10,775,482	1,141,943	10.59	483,428	4.48
2009	11,508,511	1,244,497	10.81	637,683	5.54
2010	11,969,483	1,364,193	11.39	712,592	5.95
2011 <sup>6</sup>	9,379,858 <sup>7</sup>	1,353,815	14.43	547,271	5.83
2012	9,605,254	1,346,341	14.01	630,986	6.59
2013	9,733,730	1,423,602	14.62	600,798	6.17
2014	10,117,677	1,441,060	14.24	662,962	6.55
2015	10,769,520	1,537,786	14.27	941,627	8.74
2016	11,040,598	1,653,462	14.97	859,933 <sup>8</sup>	7.78

The Treasury, which provides advice and guidance to New Zealand governments on economic and fiscal policy, maintains historical records of the Vote Education budget on its website (2016b). These records provide a more direct way of considering public expenditure on education and, for present purposes, I have taken into account the education budgets of the last three years of the earlier Labour-led Government (2006–2008) and the period of office of the National-led Government since 2008.

The key focus of the following analysis is to consider the gross amount budgeted for each year and to examine the budgets for lines referring to maintenance or capital investment in school property. The overall estimate of expenditure under Vote Education for the years 2006 to 2016, and the budgeted spending on school property is recorded in Table 1. The appropriation entitled, ‘School Property Portfolio Management’ (in earlier Budgets termed, ‘Provision of School Sector Property’) was described in the 2006 budget:

*Provision of School Sector Property*

In this output the Minister of Education will purchase services in relation to the provision of the property portfolio (land, buildings and other facilities, excluding school contents and teacher and caretaker housing) for the State school sector. Property is provided predominantly through management of the existing property portfolio, focusing on upgrades and improvements to sustain the current quality of the portfolio and on the purchase and construction of new property to expand the

<sup>6</sup> The Feb 2011 Christchurch earthquake preceded this Budget.

<sup>7</sup> In 2011, the ‘Estimates of Appropriations’ was divided between ‘Vote Tertiary Education’ and ‘Vote Education’ (Treasury, 2016b).

<sup>8</sup> Note only 761,857,000 was calculated to be the actual expenditure in the preceding year.



portfolios' capacity to meet the demands of schooling or demographic changes. (Treasury, 2016a, p. 411)

Despite the definition above, a significant inclusion in 2008 was the budget line entitled, 'Ministry of Education—Capital Expenditure PLA (M26)' (see the budget estimate documents at Treasury, 2016b). These estimates relate to capital expenditure on school sector property. While some of the budget documents in the period under review contain significant additional information (such as the *Provision of School Sector Property* description above), most do not; thus, it is not immediately clear why the additional budget line—now accounting for close to 10 percent of the annual education budget—was created. Clearly, its creation is not related to the 2011 Christchurch earthquake.

It pays to recognise then that the initial impetus for the conversion of traditional classroom spaces into flexible learning spaces, and the erection of new schools to be in keeping with the 'MLE standard', originated under the previous Labour-led Government (A.C. Nielsen, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2012a). Under the present National-led Government, however, the new capital expenditure line is 77.8 percent greater than when the figure appeared in the 2008 Budget, the last of the previous Labour government.

This allocation has risen from just over 4 percent of the Vote Education appropriation in 2008, to almost 8 percent in 2016. This growing allocation (and the significance of the overall expansion of this allocation over the period) must be viewed in the context of the increases to Vote Education overall (see Table 2 below). Since 2011, the year of the Christchurch earthquake, and when Vote Education was split from the tertiary education budget, Vote Education appropriations have increased by almost 18 percent. In the same period, the capital expenditure allocation has risen by 57.13 percent. When both capital expenditure and property portfolio management allocations as a share of Vote Education are taken together, the investment in property—based on the budget documents considered here—has doubled since 2006.

**Table 4. Annual Percentage in Estimated Appropriations Under Vote Education 2007–2016**

Year	% increase
2007	6.19
2008	13.35
2009	6.80
2010	4.00
2011 <sup>9</sup>	
2012	2.40
2013	1.33
2014	3.94
2015	6.44
2016	2.51

One further area of significance that has not been considered, and which is not evident in either of the two property-related budget lines, is the emergence of the concept of Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), a strategy whereby school buildings are built on behalf of the Ministry of Education by privately owned and funded consortia. This arrangement devolves the cost and responsibility of

<sup>9</sup> Vote Education and the tertiary budget were split from this year; thus, the following % increases are based on the 2011 Vote Education budget, and I have therefore provided no figure for 2011.

ongoing maintenance to the private funders, who are effectively ‘landlords’ of the building. The Ministry of Education, which owns the land on which the school stands, pays a quarterly performance-related sum to the consortium. One of the arguments put forward in its favour is that this arrangement releases the principal and Board of Trustees from the responsibility of having to manage and maintain the property, thus freeing more time to focus on educational matters (Ministry of Education, 2016b).

The Vote Education documents 2011–2016 (Treasury, 2016b) reflect the addition of capital and ongoing costs related to PPP:

- In the 2011 Budget, \$40m was earmarked for the first PPP project (two Auckland schools);
- almost \$9m in 2012;
- in 2014, approximately \$7m, which is an on-going cost projected forward;
- in 2015, this cost of about \$7m, plus an additional cost of \$6.7m to procure further property for the second PPP project;
- in 2016, the annual cost of around \$7m for PPP Project 1, in addition to projected expenditure beyond 2017 of around \$20m for PPP Project 2. A PPP Project 3 is also forecast, for 2018/9.

Therefore it is clear that the Ministry of Education has taken a multi-pronged approach to funding various elements of its property portfolio, which has been challenged by the Christchurch earthquake; so-called ‘leaky’ or defective buildings; roll growth; and population increases, particularly in Auckland. These factors help explain the apparent, perhaps remarkable, increases in the extent of investment in school property under the present government.

### ‘Shaping education’

The devastating earthquake that struck central Christchurch on 22 February 2011, claiming 185 lives, wrought destruction to many buildings, including schools and other educational institutions. It followed a damaging earthquake on 4 September 2010, though the human consequences of that event were not on the scale of the 2011 event.

It became apparent that damage to schools ranged in intensity from works that could be conducted promptly, with minimal disruption, through to schools so damaged that facilities at other schools had to be shared to allow schooling to continue. The policy response of the government, through the Ministry of Education, is entitled *Shaping Education—Future Direction: Te Tāreinga Mātauranga* (nd. a). The policy reflects a plan of action to deal with the reality that some schools could continue, some had to close and some had to merge. Specifically, it notes,

- 14 schools to stay open on their current sites;
- 11 schools to merge, creating five merged schools;
- 11 schools to close;
- Two schools chose to voluntarily close.

The justification for mergers and closures was the economic and geotechnical unfeasibility of simple repair. Critically, however, this seismic event created “an opportunity to provide new and improved facilities that will reshape education, improve the options and outcomes for learners, and support greater diversity and choice” (Ministry of Education, nd. a. “Renewal decisions”). Furthermore: “The recovery and rebuild of greater Christchurch offers a unique opportunity to build the most modern schooling network in the country” (nd. a. “Future direction/Innovation”). Supporting the ‘innovation’ theme is a video file explaining ‘Modern Learning Environments’ and an associated policy document, *Opportunities Plus Innovation: Education Renewal in Greater Christchurch*. This document outlined a three-pronged strategy: Restore (relatively simple repair works that could be easily and promptly completed); Consolidate (a rationalisation process for schools experiencing roll losses and more than

minor land and/or building issues, with some mergers involved); Rejuvenate (focusing on schools with the greatest damage and most significant demographic shifts, where mergers, relocation and closures were required.) This final category “provides the greatest opportunity to explore ... innovative options ... such as a single education campus” (2012b, p. 10).

The event of the two earthquakes clearly required a policy response, and the extent of damage was such that it is difficult to imagine how the drastic steps of closure, merger and relocation could have been avoided. That said, the rest of the country has watched on as the population of Christchurch has endured the ongoing trauma of property and personal losses, and the daily anxiety related to ongoing after-shocks. The announcement in September 2012 of the *Shaping Education* document and the associated changes to schools was found to be rushed and insensitive in a Canterbury Primary Principals’ Association (CPPA) report, with the affected communities having to cope with earthquake trauma as well as significant alteration to the education landscape as they knew it (Murphy, 2016).

Commentary on the merger and closure process suggested inadequate community consultation and some degree of government sleight of hand, perhaps capitalising on the ‘unique opportunity’ indicated above to ‘supersize’ schools, so as to close schools with small rolls (Delahunty, 2012). Not all schools earmarked for closure accepted their apparently predetermined fate, and Phillipstown School successfully challenged the closure decision of Education Minister Hekia Parata in the High Court. The decision was found to be unlawful on account of its financial justifications being based on inadequate and insufficient information, such that the school board could not mount an adequate critique (Dally, 2013). This finding seems to reinforce the suspicion that the government (and Ministry of Education) was cavalier in its willingness to close schools that, until the earthquake, were high functioning, achieving schools (Hu, 2015).

## Ministerial press releases

Building infrastructure and investing in high-value school buildings generates ‘good news’ for the government, and I will complete this review of recent government policy in relation to school buildings and infrastructure by referring to the press releases of the recent Minister of Education, Hekia Parata. Only releases in the latest term of office (2015–2017) are considered. These releases may be found on the Minister’s parliamentary site (<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/minister/hekia-parata>). In this period of less than three years, there are already, at the time of writing in early 2017, in excess of 50 press releases pertaining to such matters as the announcement of construction of new schools, the development of existing schools, PPP steps, Christchurch rebuild, and provision for roll growth. Analysis of these press releases, which demonstrate the successful political strategy of remaining ‘on point’ by the constant repetition of the same or similar messages, yields five key themes, as outlined below.

## Budget commitments

In the weeks prior to the annual Budget announcement (in what is termed ‘Budget week’) press releases provide maximum public relations capital in support of major announcements. During Budget week, multiple reiterations on a theme elaborate the full extent of promised appropriations, often factored out over a full period of three or four years, rather than focusing on the coming year. Thus,

next month’s Budget will provide \$244 million of funding for new schools, additional classrooms and expansions to existing schools ... [The funding] will be used to build seven new schools, expand four existing schools and add another 241 classrooms across the country. (Parata & Kaye, 2015, Apr 14)

One month later, the message was repeated to the education cross-sector forum: “Over the next four years the Government will be investing \$442.9 million of operating funding and \$243.8 million in

capital funding into Vote Education—bringing total expenditure in the coming year to \$10.8 billion” (Parata, 2015, May 21).

Media announcements also present opportunities to remind the public of the important points of difference between the government and the opposition, or earlier governments:

By mid 2017 we will have invested almost \$5 billion in school property since we came into government. This is significantly more than the previous government, and ensures we have better facilities for students and teachers ... Budget 2016 shows we’re committed to providing the best education we can in innovative, stimulating and safe school environments. (Parata & Kaye, 2016)

The following day, again to the cross-sector forum, Minister Parata noted, “Budget 2016 maintains our focus on raising achievement. It puts extra funding where it will make the greatest difference ... building ... a schooling infrastructure that supports a full range of 21st century teaching and learning practices” (2016, May 27). Thus, the budgetary commitment to new building infrastructure is linked to raising student achievement. This linkage is more clearly discerned when examining the government’s discourse relating to modern buildings.

### **Ideology of innovative/flexible/modern learning environments**

The press releases identify the shifting use of nomenclature, from ‘Modern’ to ‘Innovative’ and ‘Flexible’ over the course of 2015; they educate the public, delivering an ideological commitment and shaping a common discourse; and also demonstrate the commitment of the government to achieving the property strategic plan (Ministry of Education, 2011). Thus,

unlike traditional classrooms, where teachers address students from the front of the class, today’s teachers work more collaboratively with students, either in groups or individually according to students’ learning needs. When new schools are built or existing schools upgraded, this is an opportunity to invest in modern standards which support new teaching styles and offer flexible, comfortable environments for learning. Spaces can be changed to suit teaching programmes, and acoustics, lighting, technology, heating and air quality are of a high standard to help students concentrate on learning. (Parata & Kaye, 2015, Feb 13)

This statement, repeated in several releases reviewed here, demonstrates, in the words of the politicians ‘fronting’ the government’s policy, a deeper-level notion evident in the Ministry of Education property strategic plan. This is the linear relationship between built environments, teaching practice, learning experience and, ultimately, student achievement. Apart from such linear logic being flawed, the statements above highlight what critical scholars have found in learning environment research studies: the tendency to emphasise environmental considerations, such as light, ventilation and air quality in making the link between environment and learning (Higgins, Hall, Wall, Woolner, & McCaughey, 2005). As noted earlier, Blackmore et al. (2011) have commented on this logic: “Much of the literature focuses on the quality of conditions or perceptions and not educational practices or how space is used and to what effect” (p. 5). Put differently: a failure to understand the agential and material nature of spatiality and failure to recognise space as a social product (Lefebvre, 1991) leads to these deterministic (and frankly, ideologically tendentious) notions that putting teachers into a particular kind of space will lead to them fundamentally altering their practice.

Just how tendentious this thinking is, is revealed by this comment: “Students at Auckland’s Mt Albert Primary School are set for a lift in learning thanks to the opening of a new classroom block ... The new modern teaching spaces for staff and students at the school will support raised achievement” (Parata, 2015, June 26). The ideology is aimed not only at altering teachers’ practice, but also at consolidating the notion of the self-regulated citizen of the knowledge society: “Its [Rototuna Junior High School in Hamilton] modern facilities will encourage students to collaborate, co-operate, be

independent, take risks, be self-regulating, solve problems and have fun learning” (Parata, 2016, May 6).

### Policy coherence

The releases considered here show a ‘joined up’ policy coherence, in particular by linking the development of flexible learning spaces to enhancements of teaching, professional learning and the emerging Communities of Learning (COL). The initial uptake of the COL concept (which is voluntary) was slow, so arguably the releases, that by 2016 were reiterating the development of the Communities of Learning, were serving to vigorously promote the COL concept to schools and communities. The aims of these groupings of schools are linked in the releases to the aims of developing flexible spaces, as in this example, on the occasion of announcing the construction of two new classrooms at Fernside High in Canterbury:

We want to support students to achieve to the very best of their potential, and having the right infrastructure and learning environments is an important part of this. Fernside School is part of the Rangiora Puketeraki Community of Learning, which is the largest in Canterbury with 17 schools. Communities of Learning are about schools working together to help students achieve their full potential. (Parata, 2016, Oct 18)

Thus, while the construction of new school buildings and the formation of COLs are not related processes, in this and other releases the Minister conflates the two, in this case using the achievement of student potential as the link. As noted in the preceding section, the construction of the flexible spaces is linked in the releases to enhanced teaching practice. Taken together, all are seen to contribute to the overarching policy goal of enhanced student achievement.

### Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)

The PPP model is promoted through the medium of the press releases, with the benefits to the taxpayer featuring prominently. These benefits are noted either in the form of gross dollar savings or in percentage savings. As in the case of the preceding examples, the releases actively promote government policy in a positive light. Once more, the releases also ‘educate’ the public with helpful ‘about’ information.

### Merger of communities

As noted earlier, the closure of schools and merging of communities into consolidated schools, mainly in Christchurch (though also occurring elsewhere in New Zealand), is a further controversial sub-set of the government’s policy of investing in new and refurbished school infrastructure. Here, too, policies are seen to slide together: “Schools are joining forces and creating innovative learning environments that support the very best teaching approaches and help every child and young person to learn” (Parata, 2016, Feb 22).

Examples occasioned by the Christchurch earthquake include the merger of Central New Brighton, North New Brighton and Freeville Schools into the new Rāwhiti School in Christchurch; the merger of Burwood and Windsor schools into the new Waitākiri Primary School; and the merger of Aranui High, Aranui Primary, Avondale Primary and Wainoni School into the new Haeta Community Campus. The acknowledgement in the releases that these mergers are challenging belies the level of community tension and opposition mentioned earlier, and indeed the overall tone of these releases is congratulatory, even triumphal.

## Conclusion

This article has focused on the attempt to re-imagine the process and purpose of teaching itself, so that the work teachers undertake is more directly attuned to dual aims. On the one hand, that of developing digitally-connected lifelong learners equipped with a range of skills and dispositions considered to be vital to individual survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global knowledge society. On the other hand, to consistently and relentlessly focus on raising student achievement. In the development of cutting-edge, technology enriched and eco-friendly school buildings, the National-Led Government (and its state apparatus, the Ministry of Education) has found the ideal vehicle to encourage the required change to the process of teaching and learning.

The policies being formulated in New Zealand are arguably greatly influenced by the OECD. It might also be suggested that New Zealand governments (not just the current one) are too quick or slavish in their uptake of ideas emanating from the OECD; however, New Zealand is not alone, as some of these policies and associated practices are taking hold elsewhere, such as Australia. The uptake in this part of the world and globally is symptomatic of the influence of Sahlberg's (2011) GERM epidemic.

The developing imaginary of the teacher of the 21st century, and the creation of flexible learning spaces designed to develop and enhance changes to teaching and learning is not up for debate and discussion. This contention is verified by the property strategic plan of the Ministry of Education (2011) that has slated 2021 as the target year for every state school in New Zealand to have modern learning environments. It is further evidenced by the ILE assessment tool (2017b), which all boards are required to complete whether or not they are building a flexible learning space. The tool outlines desired schooling situations without offering alternatives and presents these outcomes as unproblematic. The language of some of the items sets up the single cell room as an object of scorn, thus, inevitably, the assessment exercise leads to consent by default.

The inclusion in the Vote Education budget of the new capital expenditure budget line since 2008 and the provision for PPP raise questions for subsequent research to understand what has been cut to create the savings to re-allocate to capital expenditure on school property, or to establish what other sources of income have been used to fund this significant building programme. This further research might delve, for example, into the Hansard records of parliamentary debate. What justification was given in 2008 by the then Labour government for the increased spending?

Whether applied to education, prisons or mental health, the PPP concept is often contested. It raises questions of the appropriateness of turning a profit from education, and whether the education profession in fact loses control by having the professional autonomy of teachers undermined—for instance, by building owners limiting what teachers can place on walls. Similarly, Boards of Trustees may find their autonomy to govern their schools could be limited by the rights of the building owners to dictate terms of use over the building, such as after-hours sub-leasing arrangements.

Consideration of the evidence from the Christchurch experience suggests that the 2011 disaster both offered the government and the Ministry of Education the opportunity to replace damaged schools with flexible spaces, and also required the consolidation and amalgamation of previously discrete communities. While this natural disaster has enabled the rapid acceleration of the government's property strategy, the negative response of some communities to the *Shaping Education* strategy has included resistance at having flexible spaces, and the underlying changes to teaching styles, foisted upon them.

This article has shown the decisive link between flexible buildings, pedagogy and learning for the 21st century that the National-led Government has encouraged. So much so, that it is now wishful thinking on the part of any teacher, school leader or parent to imagine that they may somehow avoid having to experience a flexible learning space as long as they are in, or associated with, a New Zealand state



school. The school building programme that reinforces this situation may be one of the enduring legacies of the National-led Government.

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