

What's the Plan: Open or Flexible?

The Minister's recent announcement that the current government will no longer build 'open plan' classrooms created quite a stir, but let's look past the headlines and add a little substance to the debate.

What do you mean by 'Open Plan'?

The phrase 'open plan' is heavily politicised and often used by politicians as an electioneering slogan. To clarify terms (and bring the debate back towards research) I'd like to introduce Dovey & Fisher's (2014) typology of learning environments which ranges from Type A (single cell) to Type E (open plan):



Key things to note here are the extremes: single cell is the classic 1950s 'classrooms off a corridor' with fixed internal walls, while 'open plan' is characterised by an almost complete absence of internal walls. Types B, C and D offer teachers increasing levels of flexibility.

So which works best?

Well, it's tricky because if you teach from the front most of the time, Type A will probably work best. But if you engage in a wide range of teacher-led and student-led activities over the course of a day, a week or a term, it's likely that Type D will work best.

Who says?

The University of Melbourne's ILETC project looked at data from 822 schools across Australia and New Zealand and found that Type D had the greatest impact on the quality of teaching, and on student deep learning. Why? Because at times spaces need to support teacher-led learning, and at other times they need to support a range of different modes of student-led learning. Type D does this best.

So what's an 'Innovative Learning Environment'?

Types C and D are 'Innovative Learning Environments' because they are able to adapt and change (innovate) as the needs of teachers and students change. Types A, B and E are not considered Innovative Learning Environments because they lack flexibility and are best suited to a single type of learning: primarily teacher-led or primarily student-led. The good news is that over the last 10-15 years, the Ministry of Education has built very few Type A, B or E learning environments in New Zealand.

But didn't the Minister say no more ILEs will be built in New Zealand?

Well, no. At least when she says "*your children will be learning in single-cell classrooms that are modular so there will be open-and-close sliding doors,*" it sounds like she's referring to Type C spaces which fit into the category of Innovative Learning Environments. However...If the Ministry wants to continue to be research-led and evidence-based, they'll continue to build primarily Type D spaces. It's also important to note that if taxpayers are to receive a good return on this investment, the learning environments currently being built should be flexible enough to accommodate developments in teaching and learning across their entire 50-year lifespan.

But aren't Innovative Learning Environments noisy?

Type C or D ILEs typically have better acoustic performance than Type A and Type E because they allow the creation of different *acoustic zones* to allow students to engage in quiet, conversational and noisy learning at the same time without disrupting (or being disrupted by) others. Let's be clear here: students making noise is not the issue. Learning that generates excited, engaged noise *is entirely appropriate*, however the learning environment should be flexible enough to accommodate it through sliding glass doors and the provision of acoustic zones. One thing the Minister gets 100% right is the fact that 'open plan' classrooms (Type E) are almost always noisier than Innovative Learning Environments (Types C and D).

But don't single cell classrooms work best for most learners?

Well, that's not what the research suggests, and there's a list of research as long as your arm that shows that employing primarily whole-class, teacher-led, teach-from-the-front approaches is most damaging for our most vulnerable learners. Flexibility, differentiation and inclusion help us cater to the edges and ensure all learners—whether they learn best through direct instruction or not—make as much progress as they possibly can. The learning environment should adapt to them; we shouldn't expect them to adapt to *their* learning environment.

References:

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Imms, W., Mahat, M., Byers, T. & Murphy, D. (2017). *Type and Use of Innovative Learning Environments in Australasian Schools ILETC Survey No. 1*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne, LEaRN, Retrieved from: <http://www.iletc.com.au/publications/reports>

Bio:

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