

Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs) that facilitate inclusion: An ecological framework for inclusive design

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Recent years have seen a shift away from traditional single-cell classrooms to Innovative Learning Environments (ILEs). Walls are taken away, furniture is flexible, and technology is readily available. Multiple classes may exist within these spaces, and pedagogy has changed from single teaching styles to methods of co-operative and team teaching. Equity of education is an underlying principle of these new school designs. ILEs are purported to facilitate inclusion and promote access for all. Yet a conceptual approach to these new designs which applies standards that universalise conceptions of the ‘typical student’ is ableist and does not necessarily meet the educational needs of all students. To date, little scholarly work has explored how the needs of students with disabilities are, and can better be, addressed in ILEs.

A qualitative study interrogating how ILE school designs support (or not) students with disabilities, was conducted in primary and secondary schools across four geographic locations in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. More than 60 teachers were interviewed, and several students with disabilities participated in focus group or individual interviews. Findings showed both positive and negative aspects of ILE design for these students and their teachers. On the positive side, students talked about having greater control over their learning, and being able to engage and develop in areas of interest. Access to a variety of spaces, often without having to seek permission, was also talked about positively. Teachers noted improvement in student engagement and behaviour, and improved academic and social outcomes. However significant issues were also identified. Overwhelming noise and movement, a lack of privacy, insufficient storage, inflexibility of spaces, hyper-visibility, and insufficient professional learning were described as problems by teachers and students.

Innovative learning environments (ILEs) afford an opportunity for new conversations about the education of students with disabilities. Although inclusive design that supports everyone is generally seen as an important aspect of ILEs, there is a missed opportunity to fully appreciate and address the needs of students with disabilities within these new build or refurbished schools. The Ecology of Inclusive Education in Innovative Learning Environments framework focuses attention on the impact of elements of school design on leader and teacher practice, and curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Ultimately, this model centres its attention on how these elements can work to maximise positive outcomes for *all* students, in inclusive ILEs.