



## Teaching Today, a podcast from The Education Council

### Episode 3: Modern Learning Environments

**Presenter:** Francesca Hilbron

**Panelists:**

**Lesley Murrphy**

**Mark Wilson**

**Mark Osborne**

**Bobbie Hunter**

**Francesca Hilbron:** Hi everybody. Welcome to the Education Council's podcast, Teaching Today. This is your host, Francesca Hilbron. Each month we'll speak to experts from the education sector for insight and discussion on issues and ideas. It's a podcast about teachers with teachers and for teachers.

Cost-cutting dressed up as innovation, battery farming classrooms or open flexible environments that reflect the future of education; welcome to the Education Council's podcast on Modern Learning Environments – MLEs, also known as Innovative or Flexible Learning Environments. Today, I'm joined by a four-person panel, bring you a wealth of knowledge and perspectives on MLEs, and what they mean for the future of education in Aotearoa, and in fact what they mean for us today. I'd like to welcome our panellists and ask you Lesley to start the introductions and tell us what MLEs mean to you.

**Lesley Murrphy:** Kia ora koutou. Ko Lesley Murrphy toku ingoa. Ko ahau te tumuaki te kura o Amesbury. I'm Lesley. I'm from Amesbury School. MLEs mean meeting the needs of every single student.

**Mark Osborne:** Kia ora. I'm Mark Osborne. I'm a teacher by background. I work as a consultant across the country. MLEs/ILEs for me simply means spaces that are fit for purpose.

**Bobbie Hunter:** Kia orana. I'm Bobbie Hunter and I am an ex-teacher but work at Massey University now. MLEs mean something that is challenging and complex, and can be very exciting.

**Mark Wilson:** Kia ora. I'm Mark Wilson, I'm the principal of Cashmere High School in Christchurch. It's a large secondary school. MLEs for me, really I sort of see it as a bit of a spectrum word in the sense that there's some quite differing views and perspectives, in terms of what it can actually mean. It's often quite a loaded word as well, because it's got particularly associations with particular pedagogies and approaches.



**Facilitator:** Excellent. Thank you very much, and welcome again. I think it's important we set the scene, because we'll have a variety of listeners out there who have different ideas of what MLEs are, and knowledge. So, Mark Osborne, can you describe briefly for our listeners; in New Zealand what do we mean when we're talking about MLES?

**Mark Osborne:** Well, we mean lots of different things, don't we? Just the whole acronym salad of MLE / ILE / FLE – sometimes called CLE – Collaborative Learning Environments. In my mind, MLEs – I actually prefer Innovative Learning Environment – modern just means new and so you can build a brand-new version of something that's very old or traditional or a brand-new version of something that's different, so actually modern is not that useful.

The reason that I prefer Innovative Learning Environments is that innovative- the way that it's defined internationally – simply means that the physical environment can adjust and change as our needs change; the needs of teachers, the needs of students. I personally think that any building that's fixed in a single way of doing things, either permanently open or permanently closed, or only able to offer large spaces or small spaces – I actually think is quite unhelpful for teachers. We know that we need a range of different modes of teaching and different ways to operate. So, when we're talking about, in Aotearoa of MLEs or ILEs, what I hope we're doing is talking about the physical spaces and the flexibility that they offer both teachers and students to engage in the sort of learning that we value.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, that's certainly the point of the Ministry and we know that they call them ILEs, and for this podcast we will stick to MLEs, but Mark Wilson, from your professional reflections and research, can you tell us what prompted this shift to MLEs, or in fact back to the idea of MLEs, I think back in 2010 by the Ministry?

**Mark Wilson:** Yeah, my understanding from my research is the concept of an MLE is quite an un-New Zealand word. I'm not familiar of it being used internationally. Often, they talk about 21st Century learning, and back in 2010 the Ministry of Education's property people were looking at new designs in quality standards. So, they came up with specifications, including Modern Learning Environments. As we're aware, schools are grappling with leaky buildings, and in Christchurch where I'm from, obviously the re-build of schools there. So, they were also looking at design in quality standards for buildings. Nobody's going to be disputing that improvements in the quality of physical spaces clearly improves educational outcomes. So, if you can improve the sound, the teacher, the lighting – those sorts of things – the quality of the environment; that enhances the learning for the students and obviously the workplace for staff as well.

Associated with MLE is the whole pedagogical aspect as well, which has been building up internationally in terms of philosophies and views about how schools can better prepare children for the future. So, there is sort of quite a revolutionary movement associated with that. Like all revolutions, I think there's some really valid ideas that actually underpin it. The idea of better transparency, collaboration, blending in digital technologies, having student voice or student agency, flexible spaces – those sorts of things as well. I think everyone would endorse those. Where we probably start to shift along the spectrum is around implementation, and how is that actually put into practice. Just as we have a wide variety of school types in New Zealand, I think we've got a wide range of applications in terms of how people have put that into place. That reflects basic values and assumptions that people have behind their educational philosophies as well.



**Francesca Hilbron:** So, if we look at that idea of those values, Bobbie I've read before that you've said, 'MLEs are a fad – we tried it in the 1970s – it didn't work then – why would it work now? What do you think the role is in terms of research and evidence in the current thinking about MLEs? How important is it? Have we done enough?

**Bobbie Hunter:** I don't think we actually have done enough. I think that we put these buildings in place, just as Mark said, but we didn't put professional development in place behind it. So, we didn't actually give teachers the chance to even develop the skills that are needed for the 21st Century. So, consequently we have a lot of MLEs still being used like single cell classrooms, because the teachers don't actually really understand what this all means or how to use it. In fact, I've seen some classrooms go backwards and become even more rigid because they're in the bigger space, and so on.

**Francesca Hilbron:** I imagine Lesley, you've probably got something to say around that, because everyone around this table I'm sure agrees that it's the quality of teaching that has the biggest impact on learners, and Lesley you've been a leader in a purpose-built MLE school for the last six years. From what I see, you're a great advocate of focussing on teacher development that you talk about, Bobbie and you're quoted as saying that 'students needs are always changing, and the architecture enables us to be responsive to their needs.' What do you need by architecture being an enabler for that?

**Lesley Murrhly:** I actually don't talk a lot about architecture generally, so I take a slightly different approach to Mark in that I talk about the purpose of education and then how the architecture supports the purpose of education. So, the purpose of education – the pedagogy that's going to enable that purpose to come into being, and then the architecture, that may support it, but actually I think MLEs can be anywhere. For me, MLE is actually about a state of mind and a way of thinking about education, rather than about a physically environment.

If I go back to before I was a foundation principal of a purpose-built MLE - before that in a decile 1 school we created an MLE before the name was even coined really, to meet the needs of kids. What we developed then was a way of working where we just kept on saying, what's not working for which children? So, it became very evidence-based. It was about what's not working – who is this not working for – who's being advantaged by it – who's being disadvantaged by it, and what can we do about that? So, the architecture which is more flexible can enable us to create a wider range of programs, and changing array of programs to meet the individual needs.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, Mark do you see a difference in terms of pedagogy in the traditional learning environment – in single cell learning environment and then what we might expect in an MLE?

**Mark Wilson:** Yes, because your environment does dictate and influence how you're going to be able to work and operate. My concern sometimes is an open plan environment can actually be less flexible potentially, because it actually forces teachers into a particular type of pedagogy. So, they have to work collaboratively, because they've got to share a large space together. It also means the type of pedagogy that they're able to use is fairly limited as well, and it tends to see them using teaching inquiry a lot, and project-based learning. So, they can default to that. Equally, you could sort of say in a cellular classroom, you can have more teacher directed instruction, and those sorts of pedagogical practices – more traditional things occurring as well. I think we've also got to be careful that we don't talk about an either/or.

Our school has just entered in a phase of re-building as part of our Christchurch schools re-build program with the Ministry of Education, and I'd like to say we're taking what I would call more of a middle road, because it's the best of both. I think we can be progressive and innovative which is what New Zealand education is known



for, but my worry is in many of the MLE environments that I've seen, is that they've abandoned what is actually really strong evidence-based, evidence-proven teaching practice. I've been into MLE schools where they've said that they will not have direct instruction, and these types of things.

As John Hattie's research clearly shows, the most effective teaching is an activator – not a facilitator. I think a lot of those good teaching practices are getting lost. Just to finish off on that little rant; CS Lewis has got a famous quote about chronological snobbery, and I think we can see it playing out in terms of what's happening. What that refers to is that in a modern age people can think only modern ideas are valid or important, and then you can easily dismiss old ideas and old practices out of date. I've really seen that happening in education, and that alarms me.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, stretching that a little bit further, Bobbie from your work, many people would say in New Zealand now, we continue to fail certain groups of learners year on year. What we're doing now isn't working; what are your views on that, in terms of your Pacifica and Maori students and how the MLE environment – the physical environment might distract or support progress for them?

**Bobbie Hunter:** I think that we've always got to consider glue ear, for one – hearing – and so noise level for a lot of those students. That's one consideration schools would have to give. So, you would hope that they have something like sound fields or microphones. There are ways to overcome that. That should not be a problem. Other than that, Maori and Pacifica students are actually a collaborative, collective group, so an MLE should suit them, because they're able to work with family – within a family environment. The big problem again, and I'll go back to this over and over is teacher professional development. It takes a long time to get teachers to see from the perspective of those students what their learning needs are. They try very hard.

Teachers have all the best will in the world to do that, but they aren't them and they have to really take another view of them to be able to understand them. So, consequently they can inadvertently lose out, because these are the children who don't speak up – who won't actually push themselves forward. They'll only do it as a collective. So, there are two sides to it. If a school is running really well, and they are really building on the collective, then you've got a really good environment. If a school has a group of teachers who haven't actually had the professional support to learn how to do that and you can't just leave that within the school, either; Ministry has to come forward and do some really good work on developing teachers in terms of this.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, what are you hearing, Mark when you're out there as a consultant, working in the implementation and design of MLE? Are you hearing similar things? You visit schools, don't you and talk to them about what MLEs mean and look like?

**Mark Osborne:** Absolutely. That's certainly what I'm hearing, and it's also supported by the research. There's pretty clear evidence that in order to support a community through a transition from the building that might have been around for some time to something that's different and new – professional development – professional learning – teacher professional learning has to be at the heart of it. What we're asking people to do is shift practice – maybe embark on strategies or implement strategies that haven't necessarily been available to them in the past, because of the design of a physical environment. They need support to be able to do that, so I'd absolutely endorse what Bobbie's saying. The other things that are important are the importance of helping the community to understand what's going on. Not the shifts in buildings, but the shifts in education - teaching and learning.

Our vision for teaching and learning – the research that we have about pedagogy and curriculum - what works and what doesn't work – to help them understand the changes that are taking place, and that's done – it's done well in some contexts, but I've also seen it done really poorly where we're not bringing the community with us



and they don't understand, and walk into an environment that they don't – it's not familiar to them, they don't recognise and they find it difficult to be able to make sense of what's going on. The other thing is the importance of insuring that the actual physical design adheres to the principles that we know are effective in environment.

There's a broad spectrum of designs in place across the country, some of which work very well, and some of which are actually very poorly designed, possibly because of a lack of understanding of the principles of effective design, but possibly also because of some of the limitations on trying to take some buildings that are 50-100 years old and try to make the most of them to try to line up with those principles. So, those three areas; research-led design – inclusive user-centred design – community participation and engagement and absolutely teacher profession learning should be at the heart of any sort of process that people go through.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, Lesley how are you doing this stuff that Mark's talking about? From what I have read, it sounds like you are doing things quite successfully at your school, in terms of the MLE design, professional support for teachers, and engagement with communities.

**Lesley Murrhly:** Can I just go back to the comment around direct teacher instruction that Mark made? There is a view out there that MLEs don't do direct teacher instruction, and I want to say that's simply not true – that maybe some do and some don't. I think we need to be clear about that, because that's been assumed. We've been accused of that and it absolutely isn't true. Direct teacher instruction is at the heart of what we do, but what we realised very early on was that the curriculum has kind of the traditional approach to education at the back end, and the front end is a progressivist approach. We need both of those, and we don't need both of those in a middling sort of way; we actually need to be doing both of those incredibly well.

For me, that's the big challenge, but it's not just a challenge for Modern Learning Environments; it's actually a challenge for education – that we need those traditional skills like direct instruction done incredibly well, but it needs to be done efficiently so that there's time to get into the deep thinking and deep discussion around critical thinking and post-formal thinking going even deeper. So, I don't think that they're just – they're not just challenges for MLEs. They become really obvious in an MLE. They're actually challenges for education, because we know culturally responsive teaching has been something that's been talked around for a long time. Where are we doing it?

**Francesca Hilbron:** Are you providing your teachers with any different kind of support that you did in a traditional setting?

**Lesley Murrhly:** I think we're trying to cover a lot of things. We're doing a lot of work around just having really high levels of curriculum knowledge because we think that in the way that we work we need to have high levels of curriculum knowledge. Kids are entitled to be taught the whole curriculum. It's not okay for teachers to teach what they know and not teach what they don't know. Now, that's what anybody could be saying in education. So, we do a lot of work around that.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, taking that point, Mark – your school down in Christchurch; you have negotiated some aspects of MLEs and some aspects you haven't. I understand the part that you haven't is around that collaborative teaching, that your school made a decision that you wouldn't go down that track?



**Mark Wilson:** We have a highly collaborative staff, but not necessarily in the way of an MLE mode of thinking. Collaboration in a typical MLE environment, or the stereotypical should I say, is that teachers are going to be working in groups together. That often then forces them to be working in a cross-curriculum involvement and with large numbers of students. We don't believe that is an effective - and it's certainly not an evidenced-based way of teaching, in a secondary context when you need a lot of specialised curriculum skills and knowledge as well.

Our collaboration occurs in particular within curriculum learning areas. We're a large school. We have over 150 staff. They work exceptionally well together within their curriculum areas, in terms of their planning, their marking, their moderation – those sorts of things, in terms of their lesson observations, appraisal systems and professional development. So, there's a huge amount of collaboration that is actually going on which is really effective, and is improving the teaching within that sort of situation. So, again it's how you action or you implement those concepts or designs.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, you've got a Modern Learning Environment in terms of infrastructure, or you're heading that way?

**Mark Wilson:** Yeah. We are continuing to have cellular classrooms, but then the transparency's important so you put glass into those as well. You have sliding doors so they can move into some break-out spaces. So, rather than having narrow little corridors, you have wider spaces for break-out areas, and those sorts of things as well. So, you try and get the best of everything in terms of areas that can be closed up, used in different ways, opened up – those sorts of things as well.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, from your report that you did in 2015 – you took a sabbatical and did quite intensive work around this, and then I think your new buildings...

**Mark Wilson:** We're half way through the project at the moment, yeah.

**Facilitator:** So, you had some open in January this year?

**Mark Wilson:** Correct – first stage, yes.

**Facilitator:** Any change in your thinking since you've –

**Mark Wilson:** No, it's probably been reinforced. I also had the privilege of having a Woolf Fisher this year and I've been and visited a lot of schools internationally as well. One of the things I would like to also point out is one of the concerns they have around the big push about MLE is as if there's some sort of crisis in our schools, and we're not catering for our students. I actually think that's a real tragedy and it doesn't actually help our profession, our teacher supply, and what our schools are actually trying to do.

If you look at the research, the teaching and learning international study ranked New Zealand fourth in terms of our teacher professionalism. Recently, the World Economic Forum ranked New Zealand seventh in terms of the quality of our education, and first in terms of how well our teachers are using the internet and digital technology within learning. So, we're doing amazing things, and even when I visit schools overseas I'm actually often underwhelmed and really impressed with what we're actually doing here – the innovation. So, there's a lot of good stuff that's actually happening in our schools, and we don't need to throw the baby out with the bath water.



**Francesca Hilbron:** Touching on Bobbie's point around professional development; are you either of you, as current practicing principals – leaders – do you see a need for a different kind of professional development? Do we need more professional development for the new environment?

**Lesley Murreihy:** We certainly have realised increasingly that we have to do a much bigger induction. We have to release teachers for that to happen. So, we've got quite a strong induction program for new teachers. Alongside that we have coaching partnerships – coaching going on with every teacher in multiple different ways actually. For some it's coaching leadership – for others it's coaching them but their practice. So, we've got very differentiated personalised learning to meet the needs of the different teachers, depending on where they're at in their kind of journey of becoming inducted into, or part of an MLE.

**Francesca Hilbron:** That sounds like a very pragmatic thing you'd want to do regardless; just having that – being able to privilege that time with your teachers.

**Lesley Murreihy:** I think it's something that we've always done, but I think we're doing it more. We're doing it in a more personalised way. We're looking at the whole team and saying, who needs to work with them around this – who needs to work with them around that? So, that is the advantage of the team approach; we can utilise strengths.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, Mark what advice would you give to principals, leaders, teachers when you go out into the community about making a transition from a traditional classroom to a Modern Learning Environment to make it a seamless transition and make sure that teachers are comfortable with that?

**Mark Osborne:** In terms of the professional development component, I don't think we need to go too far from the best evidence synthesis on teacher professional learning. That had a whole range of different recommendations for how to get the most out of professional learning. It's things like ensuring that it's really closely linked to practice – it's not something that happens elsewhere – it's embedded into the context. So, it's situated – it's imbedded, ensuring that it's sustained over time – ensuring that it's collaborative. That collaboration involves challenging and exploring assumptions about learning and that's something that you don't necessarily have when you're teaching on your own permanently; you just don't know what you don't know, and you're blind to your own assumptions.

The professional dialogue that goes around – those assumptions, when you're able to collaborate in a collaborative manner with people seeing you in the flow, doing the teaching, often gives rise to really good understandings of practice and why you implement it. Those are all advantages of working in a collaborative manner, particularly alongside people – not so that there's just an observation that occurs once a term - somebody will come in and have a look at what's going on – but that real trust that's built from working closely alongside people that can give rise to the kind of support that is needed when you're going to take a risk in your practice and try something new, potentially that's much more effective, but still contains some sort of nervousness for you as a practitioner. There's a whole range of other things aside from the professional learning that communities can do to support the process of transitioning or changing their environments.

The starting point should always be the human beings that are going to use that space; what are their needs? You being an inclusive design process to say, who are they – what are their strengths – what are their talents – what do they want to achieve? We put that within the context of the curriculum documents that we have in this country; what are those people trying to achieve? Then, we use those understandings to design a whole environment whether it's physical, cultural, social, emotional – in order to meet those needs. Lots of preparation



needs to happen, so that people understand why the change is taking place. The change in building should never be undertaken because somebody down the road has done it or there's been a newspaper article published about it, or it's the flavour of the month; it should only ever be a response to the needs of the community and the New Zealand Curriculum.

**Francesca Hilbron:** I saw you nodding your head quite a lot there before, Bobbie; how does that resonate with what you see in the communities that you work with?

**Bobbie Hunter:** I actually agree with what you say, except I was thinking, we've got a teacher shortage and it's hitting really badly in the low decile schools; when you've got constant change of teacher – we talk about transient children - we also need to talk about transient teachers. How do these lower income schools cope with the constant turnover of staff and inducting them into the space? So, that's one thing that I think is a challenge out there, and we really do need to consider how or what we're going to do about that. The other one, though comes back to what you're talking about and that's de-privatisation of practice. That's absolutely confronting for lots of teachers; to be put in a space where everybody else can see what they can do.

**Francesca Hilbron:** Is it a good thing, do you think?

**Bobbie Hunter:** It's a really good thing; it makes them think and reflect on their practice, but it is also – and that's why I think you maybe get teacher turnover sometimes – because teachers don't want to have their practices exposed to others.

**Francesca Hilbron:** So, presumably this whole push within the profession to lift the status – move us into that realm of people seeing us as real professionals – this is something that professionals must do, right on a daily basis?

**Bobbie Hunter:** Absolutely.

**Francesca Hilbron:** Has that happened for you at your school? Are people comfortable with that kind of engagement?

**Mark Wilson:** Yeah, I would agree. I think what we're talking about here about teacher professional development is best practice, as Mark Osborne was saying. That I don't think is especially unique to an MLE environment or a more traditional one, although traditionally teachers did tend to be very standalone and you were sent to your classroom to do your thing. I think across all schools now there's the recognition of how through collaboration, the professional development and appraisals, and professional growth is greatly enhanced. All schools do that, but again in slightly different ways, depending on the size of the school and the structure of the school, and those sorts of things as well, but lesson observation and reflecting on those as part of the teaching, as an inquiry cycle is pretty common practice in terms of within schools in New Zealand, I would like to think.

**Francesca Hilbron:** You've made some earlier comments, Mark around schools having some ownership of what their buildings look like and also the direction of their pedagogy. You've gone through this process. You're in this process at the moment; for people out there that might be concerned in communities about the requirements to move to a modern environment by 2030 I think it is – what advice would you give to schools and communities – how they might navigate that?



**Mark Wilson:** New Zealand's in a really unique situation in the sense that under our legislation - tomorrow's schools - we are very autonomous Crown-owned entities as schools. Schools can ensure that they stand up and determine what is the pedagogy that is going to be within their environment, because as what's been alluded here by the various speakers, if you simply just impose a big open plan carpeted barn or whatever you'd like to call it, in a school environment - unless that's accompanied by good professional development and clear educational aims and intentions, it can be a disaster, because again the environment influences the practices that are going to go within those particular places. So, schools need - they're working in those places - they're working and living in those communities, and they need to step up and make sure that they are actively involved in determining what their buildings are going to actually be like.

There is a perception it's getting forced out and rolled out onto people and onto communities. For those who do want to make radical shifts and changes, I think to be honest they've got to get better at that narrative that they're going to be putting together to sell that and to communicate that to our communities. By nature, parents are very conservative. It's their only children and they don't want them experimented on, and they want to know that what is actually going to be happening to their kids is going to be safe, professional and robust. You can't just say, we're professionals- trust us. You've got to actually make sure the narrative is actually done well. Again, I think that's been variable across schools in terms of how that's been done, and that's contributed to I think some of the confusion and the anxiety around MLEs as well.

**Francesca Hilbron:** That point you make about parents, and there's been some media coverage around parents actively looking for schools that don't have an MLE environment; I want to take my child out. I assume that some of that is around special education. Lesley, I wanted to ask you; around the environment of MLEs there is some concern that for children with particular needs the environment can be very overwhelming - very frightening. How do your teachers manage those learners?

**Lesley Murrhly:** Probably very well. I think that with more flexibility you've got multiple ways to sort things out for those particular children. We have things like pop-up tents in our spaces, so that kids who have high sensory sensitivity can go into the tent, and then they're not distracted by what they can see. You've got noise happening - headphones. There's all sorts of ways. Kids are allowed to move furniture around, so they create little spaces for themselves; they create caves, and ways to work, that work for them.

So, I think it's about saying, here's a difficulty that we're experiencing - here's a challenge - now, how do we meet that? I think that it's not right to think that in classrooms kids don't get distracted. Every time a door opens in a classroom, children look up and see who's coming in. In a Modern Learning Environment, I walk in with 20 principals who are having a look, and kids just carry on. So, I think that we have to solve those problems, whether we're traditional classrooms or MLEs. Certainly, my experience with a number of people who come in as runners in our school, no-one's run that -

**Francesca Hilbron:** Run is meaning -?

**Lesley Murrhly:** That they take off.

**Francesca Hilbron:** Literally -

**Lesley Murrhly:** Run, and they've wanted to put fences up. I think that when you've got a more open environment, and children are used to a little bit more happening around them, then they're not distracted when a child behaves in particular ways that might otherwise be incredibly distracting.



**Francesca Hilbron:** This is what we do in early childhood, right? It's similar to an MLE, or it is an MLE; would that be fair to say?

**Lesley Murrhiy:** Yeah.

**Francesca Hilbron:** Is there anything in particular, Mark that we could learn from that existing environment that they've used for many years?

**Mark Osborne:** Yeah, early childhood centres are the original MLEs, if you like. What I find fascinating is the assumption that if you're four and 11 months, a certain way of operating is okay, and as soon as you turn five, you need to have a whole different way of operating. I think the conversation between early childhoods – and understanding what they do, why they do it, the principles that are play in Te Whariki – their curriculum document – and how those can flow into the early years of a primary education are really important. So, greater conversation between the different sectors – the different groups in our education system, but again I come back to the importance of an inclusive design; people who may be over-stimulated in an environment, as Lesley said, the design should have places that are low stimulus zones where you can go and decompress.

Bobbie mentioned assisted technology like sound fields and sound loops for students who need auditory support. It has to be – if we miss the opportunity – if we're spending an awful lot of money building a building, and we're still shutting out the same people who were shut out in the traditional classroom we've squandered a fantastic opportunity. So, it has to start from the needs of those students. There are kids, as Bobbie mentioned before, who really enjoy working in whanau groups – not necessarily stratified by year level, but there are other kids for whom that doesn't work. So, what we have to do is not lock ourselves into a single mode of operation; we need the flexibility to be able to cope with or to respond to the needs of every learner.

**Francesca Hilbron:** Bobbie, you made a comment, again I think it was in the media, around some concerns of MLEs and children or young people - the potential of having to form relationships with more than one teacher, and that might be a challenge for them; expand on that.

**Bobbie Hunter:** Yeah, I think that is challenge, actually. That is one of the challenges for a lot of children in MLEs. I was probably thinking of Christchurch in particular, where we've got probably the most vulnerable children at the moment; if there are not structures in place to allow them to relate to one particular person, and build very strong relationships, they build relationships with nobody. That's got to be in place, and likewise I think all around New Zealand, actually; I think we've got always that potential.

I guess it goes back to what I was saying earlier about Maori and Pacifica, and teachers understanding not just Maori and Pacifica, but who their learner is in front of them, and what their unique needs are, and how they need to help them to participate. If they don't, then those students aren't going to be able to. So, relationships are always at risk. We might say, oh yes but they're at risk in a single cell classroom. Not as much; I think in a group of 90 children you can lose children. Now, I think there are children – unless the teacher is consciously – really, all of the teachers are consciously saying, am I touching every child today?

**Francesca Hilbron:** Do you agree with that, Lesley in your experience?

**Lesley Murrhiy:** I think we have a – for a long time we've had a 20 per cent tail in achievement. That's come out of traditional schooling, so that suggests that there are children in every school in New Zealand who's needs are not being met. Our children would say that having a team of teachers in the area within which they work, means that they can choose who they connect with. They're not stuck in a classroom with one teacher who actually



they don't really get on with. So, we have ways of checking that children are connected.

We do surveys and we ask them who they connect with – who they would go to – do you feel that there's people that you can go to? So, we check all those sorts of things, but children will choose someone who might not even be their teachers. Sometimes it's even the office staff is the person who's special to them, who they go and touch base with when they feel that they need to. So, I think actually that's an added advantage of MLEs; children have a variety of people that they can connect with, as long as the teachers are available to them for connection.

**Francesca Hilbron:** It sounds very much to me that in New Zealand we do have really great opportunity, because it seems to me that not one size fits all in MLEs, and we have got, as you've showed down in Christchurch, Mark that you have the opportunity to mix and match what suits you and your community - communities need to be engaged – teachers need to be engaged, and what that looks like. So, it is time for us to wrap up our discussion, and I'd like to say thanks to each of you for sharing your expertise and your insights, but particularly also your passion for this, which I think is really exciting for our teachers out there. Before we go, I would like to give the opportunity for one last thing to say. I would like to hear from you if there was one thing that you would change around the MLE discussion, or one thing you would like to keep; if I could go to my right – Mark Wilson, that would be great.

**Mark Wilson:** Perhaps just my thoughts are being triggered by what some of the others were just saying a moment ago; the original MLE would have been your early childhood centres, and I think it's been picked up obviously within primary schools. I think my concern is that the type of MLE that sort of seems to be getting promoted or pushed out is essentially a primary-based teaching pedagogy in approach, which is not well-suited in particular to senior high school where there is some specialist knowledge – specialist curriculum areas that he kids need to be introduced to and broadened out into and that therefore some of the physical designs and some of the philosophical thinking that underpins MLE is not well suited, in my opinion – in my professional opinion, to secondary school environments. That doesn't mean to say that it's an either/or debate here; there are really sound principles and ideas around 21st Century learning, and we need to incorporate some of those innovative ideas into what we know is strong, good teaching practice, that we've always had, and to be able to give the best for our students.

**Francesca Hilbron:** I've heard that it's not either/or from you earlier. So, that's a really good point. Thank you. Bobbie?

**Bobbie Hunter:** I'd like to see equity in the buildings. I'd like to see that the schools that are high poverty have access to the same funding that high deciles schools have, in terms of what they can get from their parent community. So, yeah they all start with the same ministry money, but they don't end up with the same product, because schools that can actually put in extra money, are able to do that, but these schools can't. So, they do end up with what you call barns, and they don't have all the flexibility – so they have an added challenge. Even sound fields become a challenge for them to get in. So, I'd like to see that addressed by the Government.

**Mark Osborne:** Kia ora to that. The thing I'd like to keep and the thing I'd like to discard are actually related. The thing I'd like to really keep is a focus on research into what works, so that we're not just basing our decisions on assumptions, or things that are not necessarily well-based in research. The thing I'd like to discard is the variability in how that's applied, because some people do that very well across the country, and others are not doing that well. So, in order to improve the quality of the conversation around this whole area, I think it's important that we have really good, solid reasons for making the decisions that we make.

**Lesley Murrhly:** I guess I would like to get rid of the binary nature of the conversation, because I think it masks what the real issue, which is equity. What we need to do is keep exploring how we continue or how we better



meet the needs of every student. We're not there. WE know we need to be there. We've opened a Pandora's box, and we can't go back. We can't shove all those ideas back in again and go forward blindly. We do have to move forward, and so we need to keep exploring how we do this in a way that meets the needs of every student, and ensures equity right across the country.

**Francesca Hilbron:** That wraps up this episode of Teaching Today podcast. Thanks to all our panel members for their insights and their time, and thanks to you out there listening. Please join the discussion on our social media platforms, and keep a look out for upcoming podcasts, posting on our website [educationcouncil.org.nz](http://educationcouncil.org.nz)

