TRANSITIONS19 **Paper Template**

# Opportunities for inclusive education in ILEs – encouraging possibilities for students.

Angela Page* and Jennifer Charteris
[a]*School of Education, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia;*
[b]*School of Education, University of New England, Armidale, Australia*
*corresponding author: Angela Page, School of Education, Special Education Building, University of Newcastle, Callaghan Campus, Newcastle, NSW 2308, Australia. Email: apage1@newcastle.edu.au.

Dr Angela Page has worked extensively in the educational psychology field and previously, Angela has worked as a secondary school teacher, and special education teacher in Nelson, New Zealand. She is currently employed as a Senior Lecturer in the areas of classroom behaviour management and inclusive and special education and has a particular interest in the role that ILE's play in the delivery of education for students with disabilities.

Dr Jennifer Charteris is Senior Lecturer of Pedagogy at the University of New England. She conducts research associated with the politics of teacher and student learning and identity formation. Critical and poststructural theories inform much of her work. She researches in collaboration with educational leaders, teachers and students.

**Inclusive education in ILEs – the nexus of policy and practice in Aotearoa.**

There is currently a lack of research in the field of inclusive education and innovative learning environments (ILE) and specific interest in the problematics of incorporating satellite buildings within the new builds. The article highlights the need to engage with the complexities of teaching students with high and very high educational needs in the design of ILEs. The research, located in Aotearoa /New Zealand, focused on a question around how the needs of children with disabilities could be addressed in ILEs. On the basis of our field work, we mobilise an argument that there are possibilities for teachers to embrace the ethos of the pedagogical shifts that are associated with inclusive education in ILE. We investigate the spatiality of inclusion that supports seamlessness (movement of children across spaces).

Keywords: ILE; disability; inclusive education

## Introduction

With the Canterbury Earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 and issues with leaky buildings (Osborne, 2016) there has been investment in education buildings in Aotearoa, and an associated national policy impetus for all schools to address principles of flexible design with a view to enhance educational outcomes (see Te Kete Ipurangi, n.d.). There has been debate whether the design of these schooling spaces as Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) result in pedagogic shifts and ultimately benefit student learning (Bradbeer et al., 2017). Moreover, there is a lack of research regarding how inclusive education can be addressed in ILE (Page & Davis, 2016; Walker, 2017). Inclusion in education commonly refers to a model where all students learn together in the same

educational environment, regardless of their disability (Mitchell, 2016). In 2010, the Ministry of Education (MOE) developed a policy to promote the presence of students in every mainstream school, where “an education that fits” informs current MOE views of inclusive education where “all learners are welcome” (Moran, 2014, p. ). This loose definition allows for the continued enrolment of a few students in segregated special schools. School enrolment data in 2014 showed that of the 1% of students with high needs, 33.5% were educated in special schools (cited in Mitchell, 2016).

Special schools are geographically removed from regular school settings and are unique in their capacity to address the high needs of students who require specialist teaching. They incorporate individualised programming, personal care, specialised curriculum that may centre on mobility needs. Students enrolled in special schools are referred to in this article as students with high or very high needs, consistent with the criteria used in Aotearoa to access resourcing scheme (Ministry of Education, 2019a).

While the MOE allow provision for special schools to continue to exist, there is a stronger drive towards inclusive special education, which involves satellite classes. These are specialist classes that exist within mainstream or host settings (Mitchell, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2019b). Such units primarily meet the purpose of social inclusion needs with students remaining on a special school role.

Recent turns in Aotearoa education policy has seen the implementation of an around $1.2 billion investment into the development of ILEs, where the

government intends for all schools to redesign learning environments by 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2019c). This educational policy involves the redesign of educational space and brings together inclusive principles where inclusivity is promoted by removing potential barriers to participation (Osborne, 2016). It incorporates the view that “sensitivity to individual differences and learner variability must be a driver for decisions relating to pedagogy, practice, and design of flexible spaces” (Te Kete Ipurangi, n.d., para. 1). The changes in educational practices in Aotearoa, afforded by ILEs, provide possibilities to debate the relationship between inclusion and the provision of special education that has been contested concept for some time (Selvaraj, 2015). While the MOE continues to build ILE satellite units within mainstream settings, it is timely to interrogate the appropriateness of the intersection between the purpose and design of these satellite buildings within the new builds.

This article shares findings from research in Aotearoa that addresses the needs of children with disabilities in ILEs. On the basis of our field work, we mobilise an argument that there are possibilities for teachers to embrace the ethos of the pedagogical shifts that are associated with spatial pedagogy. Spatial pedagogy involves utilising the affordances of the spatial design and working with the fluidity of the continuous redesign of space and ongoing evaluation and reconsideration of how curriculum, pedagogy and assessment can be enacted (Blackmore et al. 2011). We signal the benefit of professional learning and development (PLD) for inclusive educators who may not recognise the spatial affordances that can support their students’ learning. We investigate the spatiality of inclusion that supports seamlessness (movement of children

across spaces) and allude to the policy context of special schools and ILE. Consideration is given to the argument that “a flexible learning space will work well for everyone only if it is designed to do so” (TeKete Ipurangi, n.d., para. 5). We signal the need for spatial designs that can accommodate ALL and their differences, with consideration given to the needs of high and very high needs learners.

## Inclusion in ILE

The notion of inclusion in ILE is complex with features that are potentially conducive to it and concerns raised in the extant literature (e.g., Page & Davis, 2016). Design aspects that can support inclusion include rich technological resources, the use of multiple teachers who collaborate in responsive practice, flexible use of support staff, and a physical layout that can support easy movement for students with physical disabilities (Page & Davis, 2016). However, as Benade points out, there can also be a difficulty with teachers reverting “to default practices” (2019, p. 60). These practices may be ablest, in that the collegial potential to work together to support the provision of inclusive education may not be actualised when teachers re-wall open spaces. The teachers’ comfort may be prioritised over what could best benefit students with higher learning needs. This has also been observed with teachers within ILE special school settings (Davidson, 2015).

We note that in ILE there can be the provision for safe places for students on the Autism spectrum, breakout spaces for teachers and students, a range of quiet spaces for students, and acoustic management (Benade, 2019).

However, consideration should be given to those students with greater needs. We argue that the general model of a one size fits all for ILEs could needs adapting to accommodate higher needs students. The current model can therefore, work to exclude some students. While tangible environmental factors are cited as evidence to support inclusion by the MOE (Wall, 2016), they can in fact, work against inclusion for all. Bright colour and lots of light, movement, and sound may not support the individual needs of students with very high needs. Further, noise across levels can be an issue for all students, however it may especially affect the personalised learning of students with disabilities (Tolmie, 2016).

**Inclusive Education and the policy context in Aotearoa**

Aotearoa's commitment to inclusive education remains problematic as it still grapples with what it is to be inclusive (Selvaraj, 2015). The MOE, for example describes inclusion to mean that all learners are welcome in their local school and are supported in all aspects of their life (Ministry of Education, 2019d). This description allows for the broad interpretation of inclusive practice and can be used to argue for separate special education provision via satellite classes that are by virtue of their location exclusionary by design.

Flexibility in the interpretation of inclusion can result in differences in its application. Innovative Learning Environments appear to bring these different interpretations to the fore as the Ministry of Education profile inclusion as a cornerstone of them (Te Kete Ipurangi, n.d.). Haug's (2017) Scandinavian

model of inclusion distinguishes between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the inclusion concept and it can be used to explain why tensions can exist. The horizontal dimension refers to varied definitions of inclusion that range from a narrow framing as ‘special education’ which describes special school placement, through to a broad definition of inclusion that aims to meet social and academic needs for all with a view to create communities. Haug (2017) states that student placement is frequently an element in the definitions used. The MOE’s definition of inclusion, that all children are welcomed by their local school and are supported, incorporates both special schools and full inclusion in mainstream classrooms.

The vertical dimension of Haug’s (2017) model refers to the coherence or unity between the political and organisational levels of society and school. If a lack of consistency between these elements is apparent, then inclusion is weakened. If the aim is to be inclusive, then schools need to support the mandated policy in both teaching and structures. However, as highlighted above, the policy position of the MOE is at best vague, and so inclusive practices in schools may as a result, be weakened.

The Aotearoa Ministry of Education links new building designs with ILEs and inclusivity which is a step toward generating vertical alignment (Haug, 2017). The MOE’s aim is to remove the distinction between special and mainstream school and provide an education for all students despite their level of disability (Hornby, 2014). The difficulty with this initiative is the possibility that schools have interpreted inclusive education in alternative ways.

One alternative interpretation of the MOE policy is adopted by advocates for the provision of special schools. These advocates argue that regular schooling can threaten the education for students with disabilities, with their interests becoming secondary to the needs of all students (Kreitz-Sandberg, 2015). Within this argument, it is considered that the learning of students with disability is a low priority (Haug, 2017). Moreover, given that the MOE ILE policy is premised on a one size fits all approach, there is ambiguity in inclusive education policy and delivery. It remains unclear how ILEs are to meet the expectations of specialist school staff, inclusion policy, and students with high and very high needs.

**The Research**

The researchers investigated the experiences of 15 teachers and 3 school leaders, from a total of 6 schools. These practitioners have been involved in teaching students with disabilities in mainstream Aotearoa primary and secondary schools as well as in ILE designed satellite units within ILE mainstream schools. Qualitative data was gathered from school staff through semi-structured interviews that explored various aspects of the participants' experiences of inclusive education provision in ILEs. The findings of the study are presented to reflect the main themes we generated from the data which relate to participants' perceptions of inclusive education in ILE. The findings indicate a policy to practice gap, differences in perceptions between satellite classroom and mainstream staff, and a suggestion that there can be improved education opportunities for students with disabilities in ILE.

**Policy to practice gap**

The teaching staff interviewed in the satellite schools reportedly perceived that the MOE were idealistic in their utopian view of inclusion for all. Satellite staff participants, who supported the special school as a stand-alone institution, articulated a mismatch between MOE ILE policy and the reality of teaching students with very high needs. These staff described a necessity to match the features of an environment with the sensory requirements of students with very high needs. The requirements of a specialised environment for students with very high needs highlighted a perceived difference between students with disabilities who were able to access mainstream setting, and those with very high needs.

This policy to practice gap signals that attention should be given to the needs of students over the philosophical principles of flexibility and openness in ILE. The environment should be a bespoke design and developed for the students rather than requiring teachers and students to accommodate to the ILE conditions. Consideration could also be give to the nature of professional development provision for inclusive educators in ILE. It could be a focus for further research to consider how PLD can be implemented to promote inclusive educators' pedagogical shifts that are associated with spatial practice in ILE contexts.

A further theme arising from the research were the clear differences in the perceptions about provision for students with disability between Satellite staff and staff who were involved with educating students with disabilities in

mainstream schools. Further research could tease out the nuances of providing for students with disability in these different contexts.

**Differences between satellite and mainstream staff**

The interview data signalled that students with very high learning needs were considered to have different issues to those students with a similar disability who were mainstreamed. Satellite unit teaching staff were concerned that common ILE design characteristics were not favourable for teaching students with very high needs. There were environmental concerts with issues raised around sound, colour, light movement, ownership of spaces, distractibility). “We need walls” was a common refrain. There were also student safety concerns. The staff articulated the importance for students to have contained spaces for them to feel safe. The mainstream staff interviewed also recognised the value of environmental considerations, such as break out spaces, although considered students’ needs were adequately met in ILEs.

The practitioners’ perceptions of the best place for learning for each child, according to their level of disability, contributed to the third theme which pertained to the impact of ILEs on students with disabilities.

**Improved education opportunities for students with disabilities in ILE**

The staff who taught students with disabilities in mainstream contexts reported that ILE spaces improved their learning. Levels of challenging behaviour also reduced, which further enhanced their students’ ability to engage productively in their learning. This positive behaviour change was suggested to be the result of

student-directed learning which was individualised to meet the individual's learning abilities. It was also suggested by mainstream teaching staff that levels of inappropriate behaviour were noticeably reduced because they no longer saw themselves as oppositional authoritative figures but as facilitators in learning and their students responded positively to the change in power relations. Further, the flexibility associated with spatial pedagogy meant that students with disabilities could find spaces to meet their sensory needs independently or with assistance.

Staff interviewed from satellite units indicated that they supported their students to participate with peers on a social basis. Because of the perception that the satellite and mainstream environments were mismatched, the teaching staff articulated reluctance around the fluid use of space which was potentially afforded to practitioners and students through the building design. Although there was the promise of movement between the satellite class and mainstream buildings, these affordances were not used to their potential. There was however also a desire by some staff to be part of the mainstream school, both in terms of student and their own participation. Staff from satellite units attached to ILEs also reported that although they worked in ILE spaces, pedagogically they did not notice any difference from traditional practices, although many of their key teaching principles were in ways aligned with ILE practices (e.g., student-centred learning, personalised learning).

**Summary of findings**

This article highlights how different practices of inclusion are in operation within Aotearoa ILEs. On the basis of our research findings we conclude that school staff working in special schools and satellite classes can perceive that there are mismatches in the material provision of a suitable learning environment for students with very high needs. The teaching staff interviewed in these settings regarded that the MOE were idealistic in their ILE vision for students who were enrolled in special schools.

Additionally, the results indicated that students with very high learning needs were considered to have very different issues to those students with a disability who were mainstreamed. These issues included a need for a separate geographical setting that was more aligned in design to that of a traditional single cell. It was considered that single-cell designs better met the sensory, safety and dignity requirements for students with complex disabilities.

In contrast, staff who taught students with disabilities in mainstream contexts, reported that ILE spaces were beneficial for learning and behaviour. The sensory needs of these students were regarded as very important in the consideration of managing learning and behaviour. The teachers interviewed identified that mainstream ILE spaces provided for their students' different environmental requirements.

## Conclusion

The existing dichotomy between special and mainstream education within inclusion has manifest in Aotearoa ILE contexts. This dichotomy reflects an orientation and emphasis on privileging student placement over giving

consideration to the quality of teaching and learning processes for students with diverse teaching needs (Göransson & Nilholm, 2014). It is valuable to understand the complexities of teaching students with high and very high educational needs in relation to the design of ILEs. Both vertical and horizonal considerations need to align (Haug, 2017). We highlight two key considerations from this research. Firstly; consideration of inclusivity is warranted with attention to the complexity of creating appropriate educational spaces for supporting students with very high needs. Secondly, we point to the need for further research into professional learning and development for inclusive educators, with consideration given to how pedagogies developed in inclusive education settings may be developed as spatialised pedagogies in ILE. Effective teaching of students with high and very high needs involves teachers maximising the affordances of the spaces available.

**References**

Benade, L. (2019). Flexible learning spaces: Inclusive by design? *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies, 54*(1), 53-68.

Blackmore, J., Bateman, D., Dixon, M., Cloonan, A., Loughlin, J., O'Mara, J. et al. (2011). *Innovative learning environments research study.* Victoria: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Retrieved from https://www.deakin.edu.au/data/…file/…/innovativelearning-spaces-final-report.pdf

Bradbeer, C., Mahat, M., Byers, T. Cleveland, B., Kvan, T. & Imms, W. (2017). The 'state of play's: Preliminary results from phase one of the ILETC

project. *Journal of Educational Leadership, Policy and Practice, 32*(1), 22-38.

Davidson, K. (2015). *Primary Principals' Sabbatical*. Retrieved from http://www.educationalleaders.govt.nz/content/download/73023/600451/file/Kathleen%20Davidson%20-%20ILE%20special%20schools%20-%20sabbatical%20report%202015.pdf

Göransson, K., & Nilholm, C. (2014). Conceptual diversities and empirical shortcomings–a critical analysis of research on inclusive education. *European Journal of Special Needs Education, 29*(3), 265-280.

Haug, P. (2017). Understanding inclusive education: Ideals and reality. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 19*(3), 206-217.

Hornby, G. (2014). Special education today in New Zealand. In A Rotatory, J.P. *Bakken*, S. Burkhardt, F.E. Obiakor, & U. Sharma (eds.), *Special education international perspectives: Practices across the globe* (pp. 643-660). London: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Kreitz-Sandberg, S. (2015). 'As an educator you have to fix many things on your own': A study of teachers' perspectives on organizing inclusion in various welfare contexts. In Gro Hellesdatter Jacobsen (Ed.), *Rights of children in the Nordic welfare states: Conceptual and empirical enquiries* (pp. 145-167). Århus: NSU Press.

Ministry of Education (2019a). Ongoing resourcing scheme. Retrieved from https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/ors/

Ministry of Education (2019b). Satellite units on host school sites. Retrieved from https://education.govt.nz/school/property-and-transport/school-

facilities/special-education-facilities/special-schools/satellite-units-on-host-school-sites/

Ministry of Education. (2019c). Designing learning environments. Retrieved from https://www.education.govt.nz/school/property-and-transport/projects-and-design/design/designing-learning-environments/

Ministry of Education. (2019d). Inclusive education. Retrieved from https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/inclusive-education/

Mitchell, D. (2016). Inclusive education strategies in New Zealand, a leader in inclusive education. *Eesti Haridusteaduste Ajakiri. Estonian Journal of Education, 4*(2), 19-29.

Moran, P. (2014). No learner left behind: Is New Zealand meeting its obligations under Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities? *Public Interest Law Journal of New Zealand,* Retrieved from: http://www.nzlii.org/nz/journals/NZPubIntLawJl/2014/1.html

Osborne, M. (2016). Innovative learning environments. CORE Education White Paper. Retrieved from http://www.core-ed.org/legacy/sites/core-ed.org/files/Innovative-Learning-Environments-FINAL-web.pdf?url=/sites/core-ed.org/files/Innovative-Learning-Environments-FINAL-web.pdf

Page, A., & Davis, A. (2016). The alignment of innovative learning environments and inclusive education: How effective is the new learning environment in meeting the needs of special education learners? *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, 13*(2), 81-98.

Selvaraj, J. (2015). Inclusive education in New Zealand: policies, politics and contradictions. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19*(1), 86-101.

Tolmie, (E. 2016). *Implementing personalised learning in New Zealand primary schools Innovative Learning Environments*. Master's thesis. Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland, NZ.

Te Kete Ipurangi, (n.d.). *Guide to ILEs.* Retrieved from https://www.inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/planning-innovative-learning-environments-iles/

Wall, (2016). The impact of physical design on student outcomes. Report commissioned by the Ministry of Education. http://www.education.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Primary-Secondary/Property/School-property-design/Flexible-learning-spaces/FLS-The-impact-of-physical-design-on-student-outcomes.pdf.