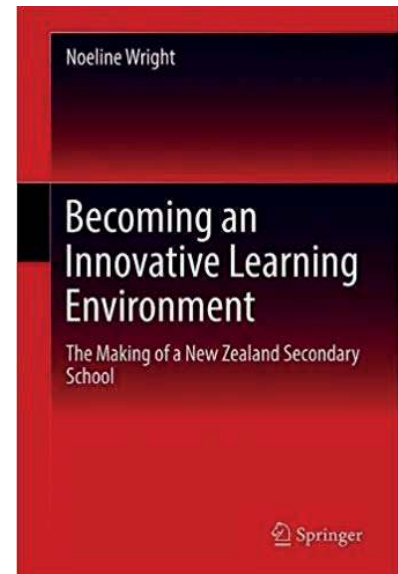


Interview with Noeline Wright

Dr Noeline Wright is Senior Research Officer and Senior Lecturer at the University of Waikato. She sat down with The Education Hub to talk about her research into innovative learning environments in New Zealand and the findings of her new book, *Becoming an Innovative Learning Environment: The Making of a New Zealand Secondary School*.



The Education Hub: Your new book deals with the implementation of innovative learning environments at Hobsonville Point Secondary School [HPSS]. Could you begin by talking a bit about your key findings?

Noeline: The foundation staff at Hobsonville Point began by asking ‘what does school mean for secondary school students, and who do we want our learners to be when they leave us?’ They unpacked the curriculum document and worked out what was the most meaningful in it, and how they could build a curriculum that would suit where they wanted their learners to be when they left, and how they thought learning could take advantage of this new environment or this new set of buildings. In this way they created an environment which is more than the sum of its parts. So that meant helping the teachers work out how to be different, think differently as a teacher, and provide learning that was different from what they might have done before.

an environment which is more than the sum of its parts

That’s a huge ask of a set of teachers, so they had to initially think about how they look after staff and how they help them develop. They also developed a pastoral care model for students, which relates to their academic development as well as looking after them as a whole person and goes hand in hand with the choices students are offered before the year starts and in the middle. They asked, too, what matters for achievement – is it to put them into yet another credit mill, or is it to give them quality learning where they understand things deeply? They went for the latter. Carving a new way of understanding the opportunities available in the curriculum is what they’ve done, and the proof is being shown in the results of what students are doing in NCEA.

a new way of understanding the opportunities available in the curriculum

Interestingly, I was talking with some students at Rototuna High School the other day - that’s a new school north of Hamilton. Foundation staff leaders spent a lot of time talking to people like [Principal] Maurie Abraham at Hobsonville Point and applying the ideas to their own circumstance. Already Rototuna High students are saying: ‘I’m much more relaxed, I know stuff really well, and when you put two subjects together, they help us understand how this stuff works in practice and vice versa’. One girl was saying ‘my brother is two years older than me and he goes to a different school, and already I have the same number of credits at this time of the year at level 2 that he’s got, and I’m not feeling as stressed as he is about doing it’. So these kids were already saying ‘this just makes so much sense’.

So I guess one of the big things is that being brave has worked really well for a whole lot of kids. I’m sure it doesn’t work for all of them. However, a number of parents deliberately sent their children to HPSS because of the pastoral care available. They felt that this level of pastoral care would support their children who had learning disabilities. Their decision, they said, was vindicated by how excited their kids are to go to school every day. They are also able to achieve because it’s a much more relaxed journey than being pressure-cooked. So those are some key things that I think that school has taught me about starting from nothing and looking at what you can do with a curriculum that gives you elbow room to interpret and make new sense of.

The Education Hub: One concern for a lot of parents is the fact that this model of learning might not work for their child. Could you talk a little bit about your thoughts for parents of children for whom that model may not work, and what Hobsonville Point did with their pastoral care model that helped to address those concerns?

Noeline: I got to speak to a group of parents who had arrived for a morning tea that Maurie had set up so that they could have direct access to him and ask the questions that they wanted to. The parents were really happy to talk and all of them talked about their kids as having dyslexic sorts of learning difficulties. One parent said that he was like that too so he understood what it was like being a learner with those issues. He said they spent a lot of time looking for a school and they looked at all the blog posts that staff had put up, at how the school was thinking about what they were doing and how they were looking after the students, and that helped them choose that school. A question asked of Maurie was, 'if our kids are experiencing success and that the learning is structured so that they can have that success, how are they learning resilience?' That was a great question. So they explored that idea about what that is and Maurie said that you don't always succeed the first time, but what they're trying to do is give them the opportunities to understand why it didn't work first time and build the strategies and skills to be able to make it work the next time.

In terms of pastoral care, every student has a learning coach, and it's the equivalent of a tutor group for secondary school. Traditionally that's where you go first thing in the morning and get ticked off on the roll and get the notices and any absence notes. The learning hub time is structured into the timetable and it works out about four hours a week, so it's quite substantial. In that time they focus on things to do with the Hobsonville Habits, which are about building a whole person: what does it mean to be adventurous? What does it mean to be curious? What does it mean to be resilient? So they do a whole lot of work in those times to develop those capacities. Each student monitors their own academic progress and every now and then they'll sit down with their learning coach to map out where they've got to, where the gaps are, and then what they need to fill them in whatever they choose next round. It's quite structured, the students can quite clearly see what's going on for them, and it just keeps it all transparent for them, so they take a great deal of ownership. Obviously there are some kids for whom that doesn't work. I think some of the problems people have is because, as a parent, you only know what schooling was like for you, and that's what you expect to see. When it's completely different, your knowledge of what school is is destabilised, and a number of parents might feel that 'this is not how you do this, so I need to keep my child safe and take them out'.

The Hobsonville Habits

- Adventurous
- Creative
- Compassionate
- Reflective
- Purposeful
- Curious
- Contributive

The Education Hub: Could you tell us a bit more about the way the students are part of the pastoral care model and how they're showing agency not only about their own learning but about their environment and their community?

Noeline: They told me a story about one student who'd come from an all boys school - this was a couple of years ago – and he's come at the end of term one. He was exhibiting the behaviours he'd used at the other school, because that's how they did things there. And one of the leaders was walking past in the big corridor where this boy was doing something that reflected that, and another student had said 'you don't have to do that here. It's just not necessary'. So what was really interesting was the way the kids were helping the others settle in and know how to do things. And the next time I saw that particular boy, they were having a onesie day, and there he was in his onesie having a great time and he seemed to have just sort of slotted in and started to blossom.

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The current seniors, the foundation cohort, are in their final year, and they have this kind of leadership council in the school. At a recent meeting they were debating how they can better support the kids who are coming into the school. The entire group show leadership, so if this is how they're feeling about making the entire school community work, that's actually really, really socially aware behaviour.

The Education Hub: Could you tell us about how the spatial design of the school enables and supports their goals for teaching and learning?

Noeline: The school existed before they were in it, so they had no control of how the school was going to be built. The school has big teaching spaces but a lot of breakout spaces with a big wide corridor down the middle and lots of teaching spaces either side, whereas somewhere like Rototuna is just like this big corridor and a few teaching spaces off it. I'm oversimplifying but that's a big difference. At Hobsonville they are using the spaces really well from what I observed. There might be a group of 75 for a kind of instructional time, but then they would have the choice to go with the teacher of English or the teacher of Technology or Maths, and they would work with that teacher over a period of time, and they would use different areas within the bigger teaching space. For example, on one occasion there was a Technology, Maths and English session. The Technology teacher was talking about the technology side of the whole project and then, for those who wanted to work on the English side of the task and work with that teacher, he found a space where they could sit around a big table. He talked about where they were up to and what they were doing and how they might proceed, and then they all found their own spaces in whatever combination of kids they needed to work. One boy took himself off and shut himself off in one of the breakout spaces by himself. The teacher left him there the entire time and right at the end went up and talked to him when he came out. This student, I found out later, was on the autism spectrum, and needed a closed-off space to work in. So what that showed me was that every student could find a space that suited how they needed to work. So there were kids on the beanbags, some sprawled on the floor, some sitting at the table ... they used the space in ways that felt comfortable. I think that if there are opportunities for variety, that's going to suit more and more kids to be able to make the learning environment around them work for them. And they weren't left alone. The teacher spent time with each huddle of students.

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The Education Hub: Could you talk a bit more about the way these flexible spaces are an affordance for and can support that kind of cross-curricular learning that you described as being so powerful?

Noeline: What the teachers do is that they work with their learning design model. And that is a series of verbs that every teacher has. It's set out as a kind of honeycomb and there are big posters of it all round the school. Every teacher has a magnetic laminated set of these. At the start of every teaching session they will use those on the whiteboard and write the learning intentions for that period of time on that whiteboard. What that does is key the kids into what they're aiming for. So it doesn't matter whether they're working with the English teacher or the maths teacher - the kids are using the same language and so are the teachers to structure how to approach the learning. So they have proper technology spaces, they have art spaces - I guess because of the equipment you need in those spaces - but then they have other spaces set up sometimes with tables and chairs, sometimes they've got bean bags and seats and so on. So the kids can manipulate those according to how they want to use them. When students use paper, they will use the photocopier to turn them into pdfs that upload to their folder inside the teacher's dashboard, so the teacher can check what they are up to at any given time, ready for the next time. The kids are quite used to using the space or the spaces for whatever they need, and the teachers use them for big groups, small groups, intimate groups, individuals ... it just seems to flow, which is kind of a strange phenomenon, because, in individual classrooms, people are closed off from each other and there's no ability to talk across. One of the things that kids told me at Hobsonville, and have been telling me at Rototuna as well, is that they like being in a learning space where they can ask or go to more than one teacher at a time. This makes it that much more personal, I guess, because they're able to go to someone that they think can answer it well for them.

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The Education Hub: You're describing a collaboration model involving teachers from completely different subject areas and disciplines, so could you tell us more about how teacher collaboration can work and does work in those kinds of settings?

Noeline: It does and it can do really well. There are occasions when it doesn't, because we're all human, but the kids know. Students are asked what sorts of things they would like to learn about, and they will give their ideas to the principal. So it might be, 'I want to know how space travel works'. So he might talk to the teachers when they're starting to evolve new ideas, and he will say to them, 'okay, how might you and two other people interpret that at a foundation level (years 9 and 10) programme for a big module over two terms'. So it might be that the maths teacher gets together with the science teacher and the social studies teacher and they nut out what curriculum objectives they could use to connect with that concept, and then they'll work out a project that the students have to undertake that will combine learning from all three. In the senior secondary school it will be two subjects together rather than three, so it becomes a lot more specific. They work not from content per se but from learning outcomes, the concepts that could be understood in a concrete way in this subject but are presented as belonging to that subject. So they're looking at ways of making learning as authentic as possible. The students told me about one occasion when the two subjects didn't work together, they obviously didn't have common ground, and they said 'we ended up learning stuff separately from the two subjects', which they got really annoyed about. They said 'we could tell the teachers couldn't find a link because we couldn't either'. So when the teachers get the synergy right, it works very well for students. It's about teachers thinking outside their own curriculum box, and thinking a lot more creatively and boldly about how they can make their own content knowledge accessible via another means, so it's looking at the potential of other kinds of resources and different ways of thinking. And I think it's the key. If you think about the concept and the learning outcomes boxes instead of the content box, everything else becomes a lot easier.

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The Education Hub: It sounds like that model would rely quite heavily on having collaborative planning time, so does Hobsonville Point do anything different in the way it structures its timetable to allow teachers to have the time to work together?

Noeline: Every morning there's a kitchen table time which is a reasonable length of time, and on one day a week they have a professional development time, and that might be one of the times they do that, but the teachers will often meet and work with others after school or during lunchtime to nut out some of the details. I think, just like other teachers, you fit things around the edges. Because they have much bigger teaching blocks of about an hour and a half at a time, they're not having to churn through five different classes in a day. They might have two or three in a day. So they've got a lot more time to do something that is deep and meaningful rather than shallow and quick and on to the next thing. They're dealing with far more students but in a much more intimate way of going about it. So although they're probably working harder than they've ever worked because the conceptual thinking is quite different, it's probably an awful lot more rewarding than just churning out stuff that you've done forever.

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The Education Hub: I want to pick up on something you said just then about teachers interacting with more students but in a deeper way, so could you talk a little bit more about the different roles and relationships between students and teachers in that collaborative space?

Noeline: Every teacher is a learning coach which means that every teacher works quite closely with a group of about 15 or 20 students throughout their whole school career and that group of students belongs to a larger group of other smaller groups, so they become this hub or community. The teachers work with each other across that dynamic as well, so they get to know individual teachers quite closely. And because teachers are working with a different group of students, let's say at the foundation level, a couple of times a year, it might be that they work with different students on the same things in the same year, but they also get to know more students across the year, so very quickly they get to have a relationship with a wide range of students. And because they're not dealing with five classes a day, they have a lot more opportunity to sit down with individuals over the school week than they might have if you've got a class of 30 for 50 minutes, so it's quite a different way of thinking about the relationship between the teacher and the learner.

A lot of those breakout spaces have a lot of glass, so it's not like kids can hide ... everything is pretty visible, both for the teachers and the kids, so there's always more than one set of eyes keeping tabs on how things are going and what's going on. The teachers that go to a school like that are the ones who are ready to put themselves out there and try something else and test their own professional mettle.

The Education Hub: You mentioned that Hobsonville Point didn't have any say over the design of their school, but I wonder if you have any thoughts for teachers who aren't teaching in new builds with open spaces and how they can try and make the most of the affordances of these ways of teaching even if they are within a single-cell classroom.

Noeline: I think it's more about how you think about teaching and learning than the space you're in. Obviously if you're in a bigger space you're able to be relaxed rather than if you're squashed into a space where, if you move the furniture, there isn't any room for the humans except standing up in the middle. So it's about thinking about how do I work with the space I've got and the resources I've got but maybe with other subject areas. So how could we combine where we need to take our learners together, even if we're in separate spaces. When students are in the senior school, they're going to be choosing a bunch of subjects that don't necessarily work in tandem, but in Year 9 and 10 they tend to go in small cohort groups from one subject to another, so there's no reason why those teachers can't plan together and look at how they can work so that the synergies of one can work for the synergies of another. In that way, learning can be made much more real for kids by combining different disciplines, and maybe moving from 'prove to me you know this content' to 'how do you solve this problem where you need to bring in the science or the maths or the English or technology or art to help do this thing'. That might be much more fun for a teacher to plan around anyway.

At Hobsonville they concentrate on students getting quality Level 2 credits over two years, so if some kids need to take longer, they can do it, whereas some kids can start looking at Level 3 in that time period, or just aim for higher quality credits over that time. If your role as a principal is tied up in the impression-management of being top of the table for Level 1, then that's going to affect what you say matters for teachers and students. Surely the role of a school is to support learners to succeed both academically and as people? Kids I've spoken to at Hobsonville Point – I could ask random kids anywhere in the school and they could always tell me what they're doing, why they're doing it, and how this subject is working with this one to help them understand what they need to do, which I found really profound. As a teacher educator I go into a lot of schools and talk to a lot of kids about their learning and that's not always the case – they can't always tell me why they're doing something or what the learning outcome is going to be for them and how they're going to get there. But those kids at Hobsonville can, so there's something going right.

The Education Hub: Could you talk a little bit more about the role of technology and digital learning and how that has changed the landscape of learning, what the role of those tools is in an innovative or modern learning environment, and how teachers might really benefit from what they can offer?

Noeline: One of the things that I keep striking is that a lot of people think that having access to digital technologies and the internet means that it's an either/or, but it has to be a both/and. By that I mean we still use pen and paper and we will use digital technologies – whichever one we choose is going to be because the learning purpose means we've made a decision that this learning resource or this tool is most fit for purpose.

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At Hobsonville they would say the same thing, so kids can work on paper or manipulate real things. Sometimes they won't even use their own device, but sometimes they will – they can move in and out of those things because they are tools of practice. They're not this thing they've got to use all the time. And they offer students options to present their work. They might present it in different ways but what matters is the quality of the learning being exhibited within the conventions of a specific text type. If we want our students to be adaptable and able to be creative in a whole range of modes, we've got to use all the modes available to us for them to be able to show off what they can do.

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It might be that you want your students to work face-to-face and collaborate on something, but another time you might want to force them into reading an unseen text that might otherwise stump them, so you might want to make it a Google doc and put them into groups and get them to do it online with some starter stems that they can use to respond with, and then use it as a discussion tool in the classroom. You've got to find ways to make the content and the concepts accessible – if it's digital and it works, use it; if it's not, use something else. Digital technologies can also mean that students have access to their learning wherever they are – what's not to love about that?

To learn more about Noeline's research, her latest book is out now, or you might like to read her blog:

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