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# 11. Team teaching and innovative learning environments

There has been growing interest in the shift in some schools away from the single-cell, one-teacher-and-their-class provision to having a team of teachers work with students. Some of this is related to the introduction of innovative learning environments, with much larger spaces than traditional classrooms, and more flexibility in how the space is organised.

Our 2019 national survey gave us the opportunity to find out how common these quite fundamental shifts are, and what teachers make of them. We also thought it important to ask open-ended questions about what helped or hindered teaching in teams, and teaching in innovative learning environments, so that others thinking of making these changes could learn from these experiences.

## Team teaching has benefits if teachers are supported to work as a team

Team teaching is becoming a feature of primary schools: 26% of the teachers responding said they taught in a team all the time, and 28% did so sometimes. Teachers in decile 7–10 schools were most likely to be team teaching all the time: 33% compared with 19% of teachers in decile 1–6 schools. This may be related to property funding which has been on the basis of roll, and priority for modernising or building schools in population growth areas, which have included more high decile schools.

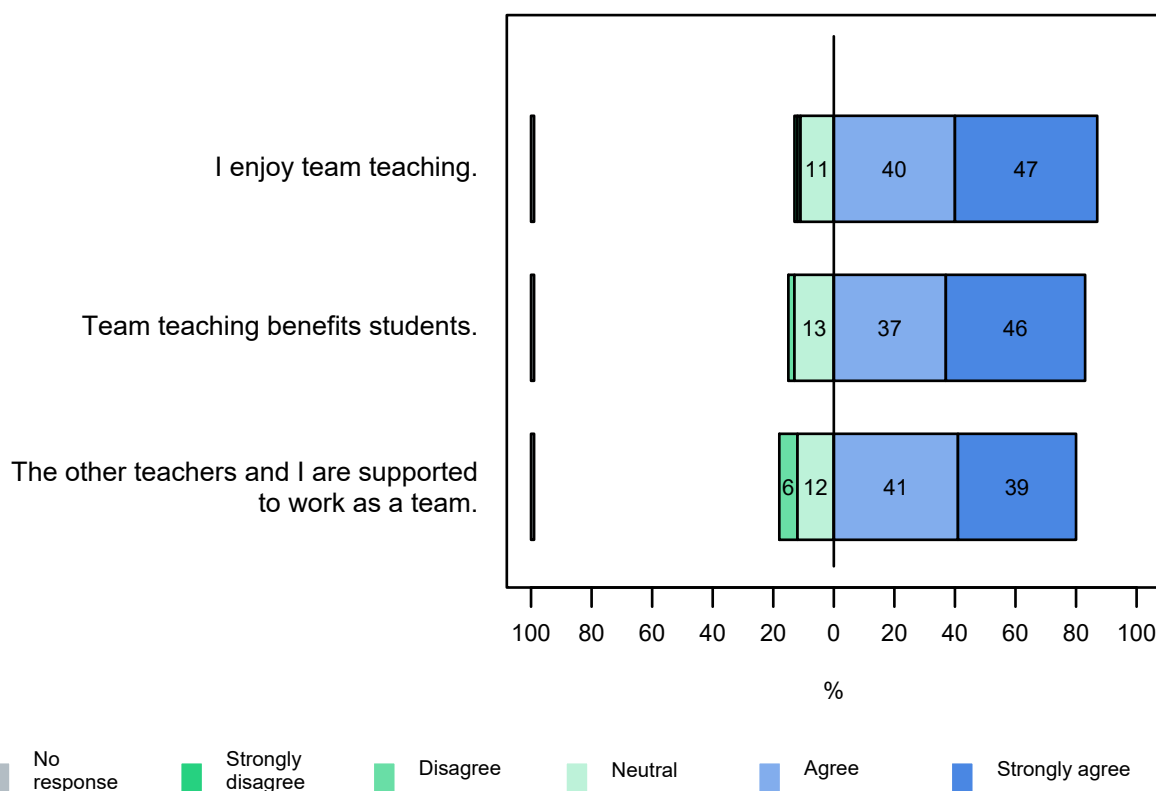
In 2017, we saw in the national picture from the first year of the Teaching, School, and Leadership Practices survey that teachers who team taught were more positive about their school culture, and had more time than others to work together; they were also more confident about the teaching practices asked about.<sup>37</sup>

The 2019 national survey findings also indicate that team teaching has benefits for teachers and, teachers believe, for their students. Teachers who taught in teams were positive about their experiences teaching together, and saw benefits for students, as Figure 55 shows.

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<sup>37</sup> Wylie, C, McDowall, S., Ferral, H., Felgate, R., & Visser, H. (2017). *Teaching practices, school practices, and principal leadership: The first national picture 2017*. NZCER. [https://www.tspsurveys.org.nz/images/TSP\\_National\\_Report\\_2017.pdf](https://www.tspsurveys.org.nz/images/TSP_National_Report_2017.pdf)

FIGURE 55 Views of team teaching (n = 337)



More of those who team taught all the time strongly agreed that they enjoyed their job: 59% compared with 41% of those who team taught sometimes, or who did not team teach at all. They were less likely to say they would like more non-contact time for preparation (56% compared with 63% of those who team taught sometimes, and 70% of those who did not team teach).

Those who team taught all the time were twice as likely as those who team taught some of the time to 'strongly agree' that they enjoyed team teaching, that it benefited students, and that they were supported to work as a team. Just over two-thirds of these teachers also worked in modern learning environments.

They also rated their school culture more highly in terms of

- support for taking risks in teaching (52% rated this aspect as 'very good', as did 35% of those team teaching sometimes, and 31% of those who did not team teach)
- sharing of lessons and planning between teachers (53% rated this aspect as 'very good', as did 45% of those team teaching sometimes, and 31% of those who did not team teach)
- sharing of knowledge about individual students (52% rated this aspect as 'very good', as did 44% of those team-teaching sometimes, and 40% of those who did not team teach)
- support for teaching students who need learning support (75% rated this aspect as 'very good' or 'good', as did 62% of those team teaching sometimes, and 59% of those who did not team teach)
- seeing all forms of student diversity as a resource and a strength, not as a difficulty (83% rated this aspect as 'very good' or 'good', as did 70% of those team teaching sometimes, and 66% of those who did not team teach)
- syndicate/faculty meetings are often used for discussing student achievement and strategies to improve it where needed (37% rated this aspect as 'very good', as did 31% of those team teaching sometimes, and 22% of those who did not team teach)

- discussions between colleagues about teaching challenges that have strengthened practice (37% strongly agreed, as did 28% of those team teaching sometimes, and 24% of those who did not team teach)
- Use of reflection and self-review to check what we're doing and keep developing our practice (34% strongly agreed, as did 22% of those team teaching sometimes, and 21% of those who did not team teach).

## Useful guidance to make team teaching work well

We asked for comments on what helps or hinders effective team teaching, and 186 teachers gave their experience, providing useful guidance for others considering or moving into team teaching.

### What helps team teaching?

*Respectful relationships, shared approaches, expectations, and goals, good communication, time to plan and talk together about what is working well or not, fair sharing of the work and resources*

*The team relationships. More ideas generated so easier to plan work. Teaching to each other's strengths and learning from other teachers.*

*Teachers within a team need to be "on the same page"—especially in regards to behaviour/work expectations. Students need to be getting the same messages.*

*Good collaboration and negotiation skills. Able to listen to other teachers' ideas.*

*Time to collaborate is essential, it builds strong relationships and gives us a chance to share student insights. Comprehensive PD prior to beginning team teaching in a collaborative planning space is essential to success.*

*Helps having similar teaching philosophies, positive professional relationships, shared beliefs and understandings about learning.*

*I co-teach with another teacher and both find it helpful when we split our classes into equal groups depending on levels. We have 5–6 groups between us and we plan every week, collectively coming up with different activities and reflecting on what we have taught.*

### What hinders team teaching?

*Hierarchical relationships, a lack of openness, uneven workloads, difference in approaches, poor classroom set-up.*

*Not having everyone "pull their weight" and leaving others to do the "dirty work" like dealing with difficult students.*

*Top down model. It should be on even playing field. Control. Lack of trust.*

*Senior Management Team not supporting transition with effective PLD. Assuming current, single-cell syndicates will transition without thought to teaching partnerships/teams that would work.*

*Size of classrooms—with many students. No breakout areas. Lack of time to set up classroom activities. New way of teaching. Lack of time to visit successful team teaching classrooms in local areas. Lack of P.D. to upskill teachers to teach in a team.*

*Time to plan together—we don't get that luxury within the day and have to find time outside the 9–5pm. This is extremely difficult.*

*Not sharing, being forced into the wrong team, people who are not compatible.*

*Negative personalities in the team who don't contribute and are passive aggressive.*

*Positive relationships between teachers are essential. A team of 3 is challenging— especially when one has a different viewpoint and is struggling to handle the workload and the year level. Too many teachers (4+) is too many.*

*We are in single cell rooms, so students can get lost moving between rooms. We have many students with ASD or behavioural problems, they struggle with loud or differing room environments.*

## Many are positive about teaching in an innovative learning environment

Twenty-four percent of the primary teachers responding taught in an innovative learning environment<sup>38</sup> all the time, and 14%, sometimes. Decile 9–10 school teachers were most likely to teach all the time in such environments (32%), and decile 5–6 school teachers, least likely (13%).

Most views of their and their students' experiences were positive or neutral, perhaps because most were positive (59%) or neutral (17%) about how well designed their innovative learning environment was for teaching and learning.

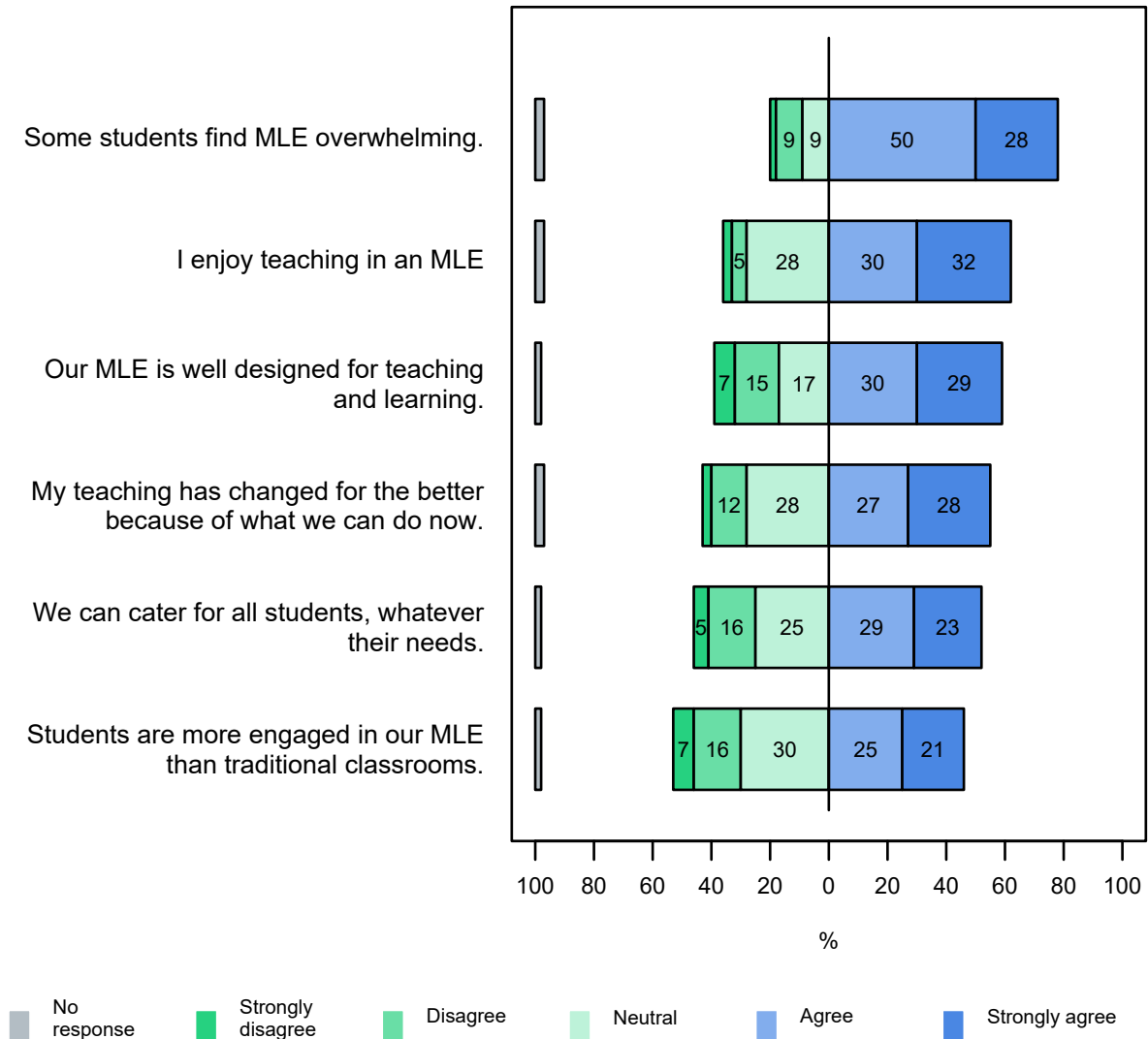
Sixty-two percent of those who taught in an innovative learning environment enjoyed teaching in such an environment, and 55% thought their teaching had changed for the better.

Just over half thought they could cater for all students, and 45% thought that students were more engaged in the flexible learning environment than traditional classrooms, and 30% were neutral about this. But 78% of the teachers thought that some students find innovative learning environments overwhelming. Figure 56 has the details.

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<sup>38</sup> Our question asked about teaching in a "modern (innovative/flexible) learning environment". Modern was the term first used in Aotearoa New Zealand education. The current term is "innovative", in line with international reference.

FIGURE 56 Experiences of Innovative Learning Environments (MLE) (Teachers n = 337)



Not surprisingly, given the overlap between those team teaching and teaching in an innovative learning environment, answers from those teaching in an innovative learning environment were also more positive about some aspects of their school culture, particularly in relation to

- taking risks in teaching
- support for students who need learning support
- seeing all forms of student diversity as a resource and strength, not a difficulty
- having sufficient time to work together to plan teaching and discuss student work
- syndicate/faculty meetings often used for discussing student achievement and strategies to improve it where needed
- good processes for making group discussions and/or solving problems
- collegial discussions about teaching challenges that strengthen practice
- guidance for teachers new to the school into practices found to be effective with the school's students.

## Useful guidance on effective teaching in innovative learning environments

We asked for comments on what helps or hinders effective teaching in innovative learning environments. Often comments included both what helps and hinders, indicating the multi-faceted shift involved from single-cell to team teaching in larger spaces, and in students becoming more self-directed. Noise and insufficient space posed challenges to innovative learning working well.

*It's not the space/room that determines purposeful and focused learning. It's the quality of the teaching and learning. Relationships between teacher and students. It's a new way to teach so teachers need to upskill, have PD.*

*Helps: flexible groupings, teaching to strengths, time to talk, learning space culture, changes of pedagogy, open mindset. Hinders: Fixed mindset, doing the same thing, grouping children due to behaviour.*

*Too many opportunities for distraction, too noisy, poor listening environments. Easier for students to be off task. Quality of work goes down when students lie on the floor.*

*Some students find doing their own thing hard to comprehend if told what to do 24/7. Many students become self-regulated learners very quickly. Some students don't become self-regulated learners quickly. Changes from one class organization to next means students need to learn to change—can be good or not!*

*Noise level. Easily distracted students. Establish clear values. Ensure students are involved in establishing rules and values/ways of working together.*

*MLEs in old schools (ours) can be loud, lacking in breakout space and feel overcrowded, (but) the mix of teachers allows more choice for our children when it comes to asking for support.*

*Our special needs especially autistic behaviour problems struggle to cope in our MLE. Too noisy, not structured enough, not monitored closely enough.*

*Noise can be an issue for students with anxiety issues but you can set up different spaces and ways for students to work.*

*Equally some students find traditional spaces overwhelming. It depends on teacher dynamics/confrontational styles/adaptions etc. Flexible learning environments where we can open/shut/change are preferred.*

*Not all our classrooms are MLE so students are having to adjust year to year. Students seem more settled moving from one MLE to the next.*

*Working in a MLE that has been made by knocking out the wall between two prefab classrooms hasn't made any improvement to the acoustics. When you have 56 students in one space it can be very noisy if it hadn't had any sound proofing done. When getting students to pack up and move to next activity it takes a lot longer. Children who find big groups hard or lots of noise (these are just some things) can get easily overwhelmed or distracted.*

*Our MLE works as single cell classes with a variety of MLE furniture and open doors between classes. It doesn't work as an effective MLE because there is barely any cross grouping etc.*

*Teachers attitudes to being in a team—still think as individuals. The space is not purpose built. Sharing of knowledge and expertise is great.*

*The students have more teachers that know them and to relate to if a staff member is not present. Shared planning and problem solving in teaching grows your practice.*

*Personal development on team work helps. Trust between team members and leaders and their teams. Good communication and setting expectations. Being open and visible, being able to use your strengths and talk about your weaknesses. Feeling valued is key.*

## Summary

Teachers who team teach all the time were mostly positive about their experiences, and were in schools that had stronger professional collaborative communities than teachers who team taught sometimes, or not at all. They identified the value of sufficient time to plan, reflect, and share, of being able to use different strengths in the team, of being consistent in their practice, and the importance of preparatory development in how to work well as a collaborative team. The model did not work so well if the teams were not well constructed, workloads were uneven, teachers had different approaches, and the space was too small.

Just over two-thirds of those who team taught all the time were in innovative learning environments. There is a similar picture here about the benefits of working in these environments, and the support that is needed to make them work well. Well-designed space came to the fore, as did the importance of mitigating noise.

While most teachers thought that some students found innovative learning environments overwhelming, most also thought or were neutral about whether students were more engaged in this environment.