

# Quiet Disappearing from New Zealand Schools

By Dr. Kevin Knight

New Zealand, with its vistas of mountains, lakes, fjords, and geysers, is known around the world as a green and peaceful place. It was perfect for filming the Lord of the Rings movies, and it's a paradise for those craving the joy of quiet solitude. But for those of us who live here, New Zealand is simply home. We drive to work in polluting cars, have mortgages, complain about the weather, and just occasionally glance at the spectacular view over our shoulder.

Nicknamed the 'shaky isles', New Zealand sits astride the Australian and the Pacific tectonic plates and experiences many earthquakes, a series of which profoundly impacted my hometown Christchurch starting in 2010.

The earthquakes have been costly, leading to New Zealand's government being very conscious about expenditures. Our small population (4.7 million) means that government decisions are centralized and can be quickly implemented, which led to the quick creation and execution of flexible learning spaces as advocated by the 21st century learning movement. Before students knew it, they were working in large rooms shared by several teachers and many, many students. There were only external walls and a massive central space—no internal walls. Originally founded in the open schools movement of the 1960s and 70s, the 21st century version of this [discredited](#) strategy comes with extensive use of digital devices and a heavy focus on teacher collaboration. Which was just enough of a difference for it be sold as a brand new idea to New Zealand government.

The Māori people – about 15% of our population – were severely impacted in colonial times, and [studies](#) show that impact has led to low educational achievement for many Māori, even all these years later. New Zealand's Minister of Education, Hekia Parata, is Māori. She has a mission to improve Māori educational success and she advocates shared learning spaces as a strategy to achieve this, on the grounds



that Māori have a collaborative culture. (Similar rhetoric [appeared in the 1960s and 70s](#) to promote open classrooms to improve learning outcomes for Native Americans in America.) Minister Parata created a policy by joining a money-saving strategy to an educational philosophy, and then tying them together with a racial twist. So strong has been the government's advocacy of this model that undamaged schools receive incentives to knock out perfectly good existing walls to create similar open spaces.

So what are these new learning environments like? If the teachers in an open shared space are highly competent teachers, and if their students are by nature self-disciplined, then we see creative teaching and strong learning outcomes. But if the teachers are not from the top echelons of the profession, or if the students need more deliberate management, then these new learning environments are unsuccessful.

Although no studies yet exist proving lowered learning outcomes, I can anecdotally present the following that I've seen in classes:

- Student collaborative learning becoming off-task chat
- Learning conversations between teachers and students weakened by the distraction of surrounding noise
- Teachers taking turns to interact with students: one does the work while the others take a break
- An increase in teacher-centred whole-class teaching

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- Parents withdrawing their children to enroll them in schools with traditional classrooms
- Little opportunity to work alone

And then there is the noise. The never-ending noise! There is little chance for quiet reflection in these classrooms, and in my experience, that is where the learning occurs.

When will this policy of open shared classrooms end? Perhaps only when there are enough statistics available to show New Zealand's government that there has been a drop in Māori learning outcomes - but we can only estimate how many students' learning paths will have been profoundly destabilized by the time those studies exist.



*Dr. Kevin Knight is a teacher trainer, a founding director of New Zealand Graduate School of Education, and an introvert. The graduate school's premises were destroyed by the 2011 earthquake. Kevin now shares an open plan office with three colleagues in the school's temporary accommodation. He copes with the office arrangements....just!*