

PERSONALISING LEARNING: THE IMPACT OF LEARNING MENTORS ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT.

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to show how one aspect of personalising learning, the introduction of Learning Mentors, can have a positive impact on student engagement in learning within a secondary school setting.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Personalising learning is a process in which schools tailor the teaching and learning towards achievement for all students and where students and their families develop as active partners in effective learning. (Hargreaves, 2004; Leadbeater, 2005)

Personalised learning is embedded in the principles of the New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, Ka Hikitia: the Maori Education Strategy 2008 – 2012, He Ara Tika: The Maori Mentoring Project and the New Zealand Secondary Futures project, 2007. Personalised learning is also at the heart of authentic Catholic education.

In 2007 Campion College adopted the principles behind personalised learning as the framework for strategic planning within the school. In particular the College adapted an approach promoted by Hargreaves, 2004.

In 2008 Campion College focussed on developing the student voice in learning through the introduction of Learning Mentors to cater for all students in Years 10 to 13. The Learning Mentors provided guidance and support for students and their parents. The intent was for students to become active partners in their learning supported by their parents and teaching staff. The focus of the relationship was to be on student learning.

After 18 months the impact of the Learning Mentors had resulted in:

- A 38% reduction in behaviour issues for students in years 10 to 13. This reduction was most noticeable at the Year 12 level which showed a 68% reduction.
- Up to 18% improvement in relationships between students and their pastoral teachers as perceived by students.
- An 88% satisfaction rating for the Learning Mentor system from parents.

The results encourage future review and planning to be focussed around a personalised learning framework. The positive impact of the Learning Mentor system in Years 10 to 13 confirms their role within the College and allows for further development of the initiative.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Campion College is a state integrated, Catholic, co-educational, Year 7-13 College situated in Gisborne, New Zealand. The Decile 6 College sits on its maximum roll of 512 students.

The term ‘Personalised Learning’ is often attributed to David Miliband, a former English Minister for School Standards. He stated that “Personalised Learning demands that every aspect of teaching and support is designed around a pupil’s needs.” (Miliband, as cited in Hargreaves 2004, p. 5). He said that the challenge for the education system was in “tailoring teaching and learning to individual need, and developing students as more active partners in effective learning”. (Miliband, as cited in Hargreaves 2004, p.1.).

Within New Zealand the intent behind personalising learning is reinforced through the principles of the New Zealand curriculum which state that “These principles put students at the centre of teaching and learning”. (MOE, 2007, p9)

Personalising learning is also at the heart of Ka Hikitia – Managing For Success: the Maori education strategy 2008-2012. It states that “such a ‘personalising learning’ approach also means that students are informed, active participants in their own learning and are therefore more engaged and purposeful.” (MOE, 2008, p4)

Personalising learning forms a cornerstone of the New Zealand Secondary Futures project commissioned by the Ministry of Education. The booklet on ‘Students First’ emphasises practices that are “about placing students and their families at the centre, building a system around their futures, and expecting that they will succeed. ‘Students First’ recognises that schooling, and education more generally, should be focused on the needs of students and the achievement of best educational outcomes for them.” (MOE, 2007, p. 4)

Campion College is a Catholic school and as such any approach to schooling must be grounded in authentic Catholic teaching. In New Zealand the Proprietors of Catholic Schools have declared that the essential characteristics of authentic Catholic schooling include:

- “Recognising each person as a unique individual ...who finds true significance only in relationship with others.
- Acknowledging parents who are “the first and foremost educators of their children.”(New Zealand Catholic Education Office,2007)

Personalised learning reinforces these characteristics of Catholic education.

In Campion College we adapted the work of Professor David Hargreaves on personalising learning. Hargreaves is the Associate Director for Development and Research of the Specialist Schools Trust and Chairman of the British Educational

Communications and Technology Agency (Becta). Hargreaves concluded that “personalising teaching and learning is realised through nine interconnected gateways: curriculum, workforce development, school organisation and design, student voice, mentoring, learning to learn, assessment for learning, new technologies, advice and guidance”.(Hargreaves,2004,p1) He found that one of these gateways, the development of the student voice in learning, had the most significant impact in personalising learning.(Hargreaves, 2005,p4) He later refined these nine gateways into four deeps – deep support, deep leadership, deep experiences, deep learning. (Hargreaves, 2006, p25)

In 2007 Campion College had been involved in the He Ara Tika (on the right path) Maori Mentoring initiative. This programme focussed on building the self-esteem and cultural identity of Maori secondary school students. It aimed to “increase participation and achievement of students in education”. (MOE, 2001, p1). Feedback from the programme within the College highlighted that where strong partnerships were developed the students gained significant benefit. Some students involved in the programme however, did not respond positively to being “singled out” from others in the College. The voluntary nature of the mentors also led to more variability within the relationship.

The Learning Mentor programme within Campion College is a further development of the He Ara Tika Maori mentoring initiative.

In 2007 a review of the pastoral care system was undertaken in Campion College. At that time the pastoral care system within the College primarily centred on the role of the Vertical Form Teacher. The 20 Vertical Form Teachers were given a time allowance for this responsibility. The College did not operate a Dean system. All pastoral issues were managed at the Vertical Form level in the first instance. This was an inclusive, generalist approach to pastoral care.

A survey of students in 2007 showed that there was a 63% satisfaction rating from students that the Vertical Form Teacher took an interest in their work. Students also indicated a 69% satisfaction rating that the Vertical Form Teacher was interested in them as a person. From the student perspective, the pastoral care given to them was not seen to be at the same high level of satisfaction as other areas of schooling. (Table 1) These satisfaction ratings were low in comparison to the average overall satisfaction rating of 81% based on all questions students were asked in relation to their perceptions of their Vertical Form Teachers.

Table 1 STUDENT EVALUATIONS of VERTICAL FORMS 2007

		2007
1	The Vertical Form Teacher is on time to vertical.	75%
2	Our vertical has prayer every morning.	86%
3	The notices are read clearly each day.	92%
4	The teacher is enthusiastic about our vertical form.	84%
5	The Vertical Form Teacher takes an interest in my schoolwork.	63%
6	The Vertical Form Teacher is interested in me as a person.	69%
7	I am treated fairly and with respect.	89%
8	I can approach the Vertical Form Teacher for help when I need it.	87%
9	The vertical form is a good place for me to be.	86%
	OVERALL	81%

In keeping with the principles of personalising learning Campion College addressed the above concerns by focusing on the development of student voice through a mentoring programme for students in Years 10 to 13. Hargreaves had identified student voice as having the most significant impact on school organisation.

The College appointed five Learning Mentors to replace the role of the Vertical Form Teachers as the primary pastoral care system for students in Years 10 to 13. The time allowance previously given to Form Teachers was removed. A 40% time release from classroom teaching responsibilities was given to the Learning Mentors. The Vertical Form Teachers had a reduced roll with regard to pastoral care.

The role of the Learning Mentor was to:

- Provide pastoral support in offering and encouraging the education and development of the total person within the College.
- Recognize that parents are the first and foremost educators of their children and as such work in partnership with the student and parents to co-ordinate the student's learning goals and outcomes.
- Recognize and respect the uniqueness of every student as being made in the image of God while also affirming the responsibility all students have for maintaining the common good of the College community.
- Work in a compassionate way with students, staff and parents and encourage others to respond similarly.

The key tasks of the Learning Mentor were to:

- Work in partnership with the student and their parents to co-ordinate the student's learning goals and outcomes over the coming term and year.
- Establish the learning goals and outcomes through Student Learning Plans.
- Meet with the student and their parents to establish the learning goals for the coming year and specifically the following term(s).
- Keep classroom teachers informed of the student's learning goals once they had been confirmed.
- Negotiate with the classroom teachers over the learning expectations for their students.
- Become the first point of contact for parents about their child's learning.

- Meet with each student and their family at least three times in a year to update the Student Learning Plan.
- Use the information systems available to monitor all student progress on a regular cycle.

Each Learning Mentor had 50 to 60 students in their care with a spread of year levels from Year 10 to Year 13. Students were aligned with one of the five Mentors on a ‘best fit’ model. Siblings were given the same mentor to emphasise the importance of the partnership with the family. Mentors were not involved in discipline, attendance or general administration. They responded to these matters only after they impacted upon the child’s learning.

The Learning Mentors were required to meet formally in partnership with parents and students on at least three occasions throughout the year. These meetings were scheduled at times that suited all people involved and approximately 20 to 30 minutes was given for each meeting. The three meeting requirement for all students meant that no student was overlooked within the College.

The term ‘Learning Mentor’ was purposely adopted to depict both the focus and style of the relationship between the Mentor and the student. Mentoring suggests equality between all partners involved in the relationship. In practice the relationship fluctuates between mentoring and coaching. From a student perspective schools should be places of learning and the use of the word ‘learning’ was intended to reinforce this emphasis within the relationship.

In this report the term ‘personalising learning’ is used in preference to ‘personalised learning.’ Personalising learning “implies a professional process or journey rather than simply a product to be delivered.” (Hargreaves, 2006, p.6) In personalising learning there is no end point. It requires an ongoing commitment to focus all activities within the school on student learning needs.

METHODOLOGY

Four indicators of student engagement in learning were used to evaluate the impact of Learning Mentors within the College. These were:

- Student evaluations of teaching practice
- College-wide behaviour management system
- A parent survey
- ERO 2009 Review of the College

Student evaluations of teaching practice.

Since 2004 students within the College had been annually surveyed for their perceptions of teaching delivery and pastoral care support. The surveys are conducted with all students on a predetermined date in the school year. The surveys are anonymous and are collated independent of students and classroom teachers. The questionnaire has six options for response and a grade point average is established where “always” responses were multiplied by a factor of 5, “mostly” responses were multiplied by a factor of 4, “more often than not” by a factor of 3, “sometimes” by a factor of 2, “occasionally” by a factor of 1 and “never” was not counted. The grade

point average gives an overall percentage rating for each question and this allows for ease in comparison and generalisations.

Table 2 STUDENT EVALUATION OF TEACHING PRACTICE

	Indicator	Always	Mostly	More often than not	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never	Grade Point Average
1	Question inserted here	Multiply By 5	Multiply By 4	Multiply by 3	Multiply by 2	Multiply by 1	Not counted	%

College-wide behaviour management system.

A College-wide behaviour management system operates throughout the whole school. All minor classroom behaviour issues are addressed through this system. If there is a breach of school discipline students are given:

- A warning (W). This indicates an initial breach of discipline.
- A report (R) The second breach of discipline within the same Period. This requires the student to formally meet with the teacher at the end of the classroom teaching day and reach a resolution on the way to manage their behaviour in future. Often a third person is in attendance at these meetings. This report is formally logged with the resolution and 10 demerit points are recorded against this student’s file.
- An out (O) for the third breach of discipline within the same period. A student is moved to another class. The student is required to meet with the teacher during report time. The student is given 30 demerit points.

Parent Survey

A survey was circulated to all parents in the College. The survey forms were posted to all homes and the responses were anonymous. 82 responses were received from a student population of 512. These responses were largely from students in Years 10 to 13. Where parents had more than one child in the College they were asked to choose their responses based on the child of their choice.

ERO 2009 Review of the College

In October 2009 the College underwent an ERO Review as part of the regular reviewing cycle. The College was interested in an external evaluation of the school’s work relating to the impact on student engagement through the learning mentors programme in Years 10 to 13. ERO agreed to carry out this evaluation.

FINDINGS.

Student evaluations of teaching practice and pastoral care.

The first indicator of the success of the Mentoring programme was shown in the student evaluations of teaching and pastoral care practice. These evaluations were conducted in June 2008 and again in June 2009. Whereas students had previously indicated only a 69% rating for the Vertical Form teacher interest in them as a person this rose to 78% under the Learning Mentor initiative. Likewise, a Vertical Form teacher in 2007 had rated only a 63% satisfaction level in the student's perception of their interest in the student's school work and this rose to 78% under the Learning Mentor system 2008 and 81% by June 2009. (Table 3)

Table 3 VERTICAL FORM TEACHER VS LEARNING MENTOR

Question	Vertical Form Teacher			Learning Mentor	
	2007	2008	2009	2008	2009
The Vertical Teacher/Learning Mentor is interested in me as a person	69%	65%	65%	78%	78%
The Vertical Teacher/Learning Mentor takes an interest in my school work	63%	56%	55%	78%	81%

The impact of these results is more significant when the overall trend is taken into consideration. From 2004 to 2007 the student evaluations were conducted in week 3 Term 3. In 2008 the timing of these evaluations was moved to week 8 of Term 2 to better align them with other practices in the College. This resulted in an overall 4% drop in student satisfaction rating to 83%. In 2009 the overall rating was again 83% which reinforced the belief that the drop in 2008 was due to the timing of the evaluations (Table 4).

Table 4 STUDENT EVALUATIONS of TEACHING PRACTICE HISTORICAL SUMMARY

CATEGORY	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Overall	72%	84%	85%	87%	83%	83%

The impact of the Learning Mentors within the College required time before students began appreciating the advantages of the revised system. For example, the Board of Trustees Student Representative reports of 2008 show some of this change when he commented that: “most students find no need to utilise their mentor or see them, and find their role perhaps redundant”.(Campion College Board of Trustees, April 2008). By the following month he wrote: “response from students regarding their Learning Mentors’ roles has become vastly more positive, especially in the wake of the parent-teacher interviews”. (Campion College Board of Trustees May 2008)

The student evaluations of Learning Mentors showed that students were initially not in favour of having three-way meetings between themselves, the Learning Mentor and their parents. This rated only a 62% satisfaction level in 2008 however, this increased to 67% in 2009(Table 5). While this is still low in comparison to most other responses in the survey it may take further time before the cultural shift within the College is fully realised. The 2008 survey was conducted after only six months of the mentoring programme. The 2009 survey was done after 18 months implementation of the programme.

Table 5 STUDENT EVALUATIONS-LEARNING MENTOR –Overall Analysis

		2008 satisfaction rating	2009 satisfaction rating	% INCREASE
1	The Learning Mentor has helped me set my goals for this year.	77%	78%	1%
2	The Learning Mentor has helped me to achieve the goals I have set for this year.	71%	73%	3%
3	The Learning Mentor takes an interest in my school work.	78%	81%	4%
4	The Learning Mentor is interested in me as a person.	78%	78%	0
5	The Learning Mentor treats me fairly and with respect.	82%	82%	0
6	I can approach my Learning Mentor for help when I need it.	81%	82%	1%
7	The Learning Mentor understands the way I like to learn.	74%	75%	1%
8	I have found it helpful to have my parents meeting with me and my Learning Mentor.	62%	66%	6%
9	Having a Learning Mentor has helped improve my motivation to do well at school.	63%	67%	6%
	OVERALL	74%	76%	3%

When comparisons are made between gender and ethnicities it was found that male satisfaction with the Mentoring programme sat at 74% by 2009 in comparison to female satisfaction rating of 78%. Male Maori students were no different to male non-Maori students in 2009. Female Maori students were initially slow to adopt the Learning Mentor programme. In 2008 their satisfaction rating was 68% and this increased to 77% by 2009. (Table 6) Feedback suggests that it takes a while before the trust in the relationship is recognised.

Table 6 LEARNING MENTOR OVERALL EVALUATION COMPARISON with GENDER and ETHNICITY

	Overall evaluation	Male Maori	Male Non-Maori	Female Maori	Female Non-Maori
2008	74%	73%	71%	68%	80%
2009	76%	74%	74%	77%	78%
% INCREASE	3%	1%	4%	13%	(3)%

Parent Survey

In March 2009 a community survey was sent to the parents seeking feedback regarding the Learning Mentor programme. There was a high level of satisfaction from the parents (Table 7).

Table 7 PARENT SURVEY of the LEARNING MENTORS

		2009 Grade Point Average
1	The Learning Mentor has helped my child set learning goals for the year.	86%
2	The Learning Mentor has helped my child achieve the goals set for the year.	78%
3	The Learning Mentor treats my child fairly and with respect.	97%
4	I have a better understanding of my child's educational progress since the introduction of Learning Mentors.	81%
5	I have found it helpful to meet with the Learning Mentor and my child.	90%
6	I am comfortable in contacting the Learning Mentor over any matter concerning my child.	95%
7	The Learning Mentor takes an interest in my child.	91%
	OVERALL	88%

GROUP	2007	2008	2009	% REDUCTION 2007-2008	% REDUCTION 2007-2009
All School	70.8	62.0	52.9	12%	25%
Male	103.4	96.2	85.0	7%	18%
Female	34.4	29.7	24.4	14%	29%
Maori	76.7	83.4	60.7	(9%)	21%
Middle School	63.0	71.1	53.0	(13%)	16%
Senior School	77.6	52.9	48.4	32%	38%

A further breakdown of the demerit points shows that the most dramatic results have occurred at the Year 12 level. Between 2007 and 2009 there was a 68% reduction in demerit points given at this level. This was followed by a 48% reduction at Year 13 and a 45% reduction at Year 11. The Year 10 students showed an increase in demerit points given. These students are in their first year of mentoring. It may be that the mentoring relationship takes some time to develop or age and curriculum flexibility could be influencing factors at this level (Table 9).

Table 9 AVERAGE DEMERIT POINTS GIVEN BY YEAR LEVEL

YEAR LEVEL	2007	2008	2009	% REDUCTION 2007-2008	% REDUCTION 2007-2009
Year 10	54.2	68.6	76.9	(27)	(42%)
Year 11	97.0	51.8	53.8	47	45%
Year 12	98.1	45.3	31.2	54	68%
Year 13	60.9	45.7	31.5	25	48%
Senior School Average (Years 10-13)	77.6	52.9	48.4	32	38%
All School	70.8	62.0	52.9	12	25%

In August 2009 ERO conducted a review of the College as part of their regular review cycle. ERO agreed to carry out an evaluation of the impact on student engagement through the learning mentors programme in Years 10 to 13 as part of this review. Its findings were:

“Since 2005, the principal, senior managers and staff have been developing strategies focused on personalising learning to meet students’ subject interests and career aspirations. Comprehensive self review through surveys and discussions with students, teachers and the community resulted in a learning mentor initiative being introduced in 2008. The purpose of this initiative is for mentors to work with Year 10 to 13 students and their family/whānau to develop a learning plan that starts to map their career. Personalised learning, facilitated through the learning mentor programme, is tailored to the uniqueness of each student’s needs and aspirations. Parents are empowered and sufficiently informed to support their children at home. The flexible nature of contact time and the immediacy in responding to issues gives parents confidence that their child is well supported. Close links between home and school promote students’ academic and social well being”.

“Initiatives such as the learning mentor programme are firmly grounded in research and reflection. Personalised learning, facilitated through the programme, is highly responsive to each student’s needs, achievement and aspirations. The involvement of parents in this programme acknowledges the significant role they have as partners in their children’s learning and development of life skills. Parents and whānau value the close relationship developed with their child’s learning mentor”. (Campion College E.R.O. Review 2009)

IMPLICATIONS

In reviewing the Champion College pastoral care system in 2007 we could have adopted a more traditional Dean structure as modelled in many school settings. The risk involved with the Learning Mentor system is that the personnel investment was centred on the relationship between students and their families. These focused more intently on student learning and not on discipline or administration. The premise used was that this approach would eventually reduce behaviour issues within the College and should lead to academic improvements. This refocuses resources away from ‘bottom of cliff’ practices.

Personalising learning offers a way of orientating a school’s strategic planning to focus explicitly on the learning needs of students. Personalising learning can look very different in different schools. How one school responds to student needs may be quite different in practice to another school but there are common principles that can be followed. Within the College we found that the 9 gateways proposed by Hargreaves offered a practical approach to reviewing practices within the College. Adopting this approach resulted in prior assumptions regarding school practice being held up for scrutiny.

The introduction of Learning Mentors into the College was a significant break from our standard approach to schooling. Its acceptance within the community has provided a platform for further developments within the College. The data to date has confirmed the benefits of the Learning Mentor system but has given rise to many

other questions about how to further engage students and their families in their learning.

“The frontline of learning is not the classroom but the bedroom and the living room. Our education’s biggest untapped resource is the children themselves” (Leadbeater, 2005, p3). The transformation possible within a school system that adopts a personalised approach to learning is best summed up by the following adaptation of Leadbeater’s thoughts on a personalised learning school.

Imagine a school in which each child has a daily timetable, made up of different combinations of common building blocks. Some are short intense periods of study, others last much longer than the standard 50 minute lesson. Much of the learning is done in small groups, some as a class and other sessions are one-to-one. The way a child’s learning is designed to progress has been discussed by staff, with the student and their parents. The child’s Learning Mentor talks to parents, usually at least once every two weeks. All students take part in sessions that build up their learning skills. They reflect on what they enjoy about learning and what they find hard. By the time they take NCEA they are practised in a variety of techniques to accelerate their learning and make it more rewarding. Teachers design the formal learning that goes on in the school but do not deliver all of it. Teaching assistants assist in the delivery. This allows students who need more intensive attention to get it. All lesson plans, complete with homework, are held on the intranet. Students can follow what the teacher is doing on their laptops. Electronic records make it easier for students to keep track of their performance, for the school to work out where it needs to deploy resources to address emerging problems and to share with its many partners. Learning takes place in many different spaces across the school, not just in classrooms. Teachers have rooms to prepare lessons, talk to parents and conduct one-on-one sessions with students. Many students are learning at other partner schools, other providers or with employers. The school collaborates with local counterparts to share resources and make better use of specialist knowledge. (adapted from Leadbeater, 2005, p8)

Many schools model aspects of this personalised learning vision without naming it as such. Identifying the processes involved may help focus a school’s future strategic planning

BENEFITS

The introduction of Learning Mentors into Campion College has significantly improved relationships between students, their families and College staff. Primarily these relationships focus around the Learning Mentors.

The introduction of Learning Mentors has reduced discipline issues within the College. Many issues are being managed before they become obstacles to learning in the classroom.

Learning Mentors have enabled parents to become more involved in their child’s secondary schooling. The Learning Mentor offers a single point of contact for parents and students.

CONCLUSIONS

Personalising learning is a process that can provide a framework for focusing strategic planning within a school.

The introduction of Learning Mentors into Champion College has brought with it significant benefits in reducing student behaviour problems within the College along with improved relationships between students, staff and parents. It has encouraged parents who would not normally have a strong relationship with the College to become more fully engaged in helping with their children's learning.

The Learning Mentor programme has had a positive impact on most groups within the College; in particular males, females and ethnic groups.

While there have been NCEA academic gains within the College over the period of the implementation of the Learning Mentor initiative they are not conclusive enough to directly link them to the Learning Mentor programme.

A further development to consider is to more closely align learning goals with academic achievement and to modify the programme so that it can be extended to Year 7 to 9 students. Results to date also suggest that student motivation to achieve at their highest levels could be further developed.

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