

Personalising Learning in Primary Schools.

Primary Principals' Sabbatical Report

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Background and Rationale

At Opiki School we aspire to develop self-guiding and self-managing learners. Our work over the past 5 years has focused on learners in Year 7 and 8 and more recently learners in Year 5 and 6 also. We started with what we termed self-directed learning. In essence, learners timetabled their day through having choice about learning tasks, usually but not exclusively, set by the teacher. A strong component has also been passion projects. Over time, practices have been refined and a number of practices trialled such as opt in workshops and flexible grouping of learners. Our senior rooms have evolved over the past few years to enable our learners to have greater choice in their learning and we now want to nurture the concept of *Learners as Explorers*. (At the time of writing this report junior rooms at Opiki School are implementing new initiatives to personalise learning through allowing greater learner choice in learning activities and through discovery based learning.)

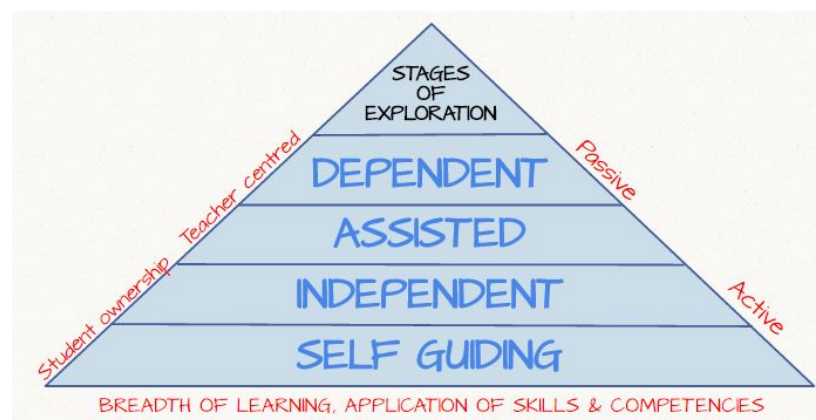
For learners to be explorers at Opiki School, teachers are asked to think of themselves as guides, much like a tour guide. This analogy can be useful in thinking about stages of becoming a self-guiding learner. The first time we travel or explore a new place many of us use a travel agent to help guide our decisions about places to go, our budget, accommodation and so on. We are 'dependent' on their expertise. As we gain experience we discover that we would like to have more freedom in our itinerary, we may want to lengthen our stay in a particular place, or skip somewhere altogether. We may only need to be 'assisted' in our exploring. We still need local guides to help us explore and to pick up the

local language as we move about. Sometimes as we explore, we go off the beaten track, we may want to immerse ourselves in the local setting and we become 'independent' in our exploring. After time, and with our guide still being there when we need them, we are 'self-guiding' and can plan, organise and discover on our own.

Some explorers are adventure tourists, some like to cruise, others like to backpack and freedom camp. It is up to the guide to personalise the experience that all these different explorers have. Giving each of them the same experience simply wouldn't work and if the guide insists on organising everything, then these explorers will never have the opportunity to become 'self-guiding'.

Diagram 1.

To put this in its school context, the diagram above shows my thinking about where each stage of exploration could place a



learner in terms of being active or passive and how, as they move through the stages, they will experience greater breadth of the curriculum.

I was interested in learning more about what a self-guided approach might look like in junior year levels especially and this sabbatical report intends to outline what Personalised Learning is, what some schools are doing to personalise learning and to synthesise common practices across focus schools.

I visited several schools and asked the following questions:

- What does personalising learning mean to you/at this school?
- What are you hoping to achieve through personalising learning?
- Is there a particular approach or model you are taking?
- What professional learning opportunities have teachers had?
- How are you measuring the effect of your actions?
- How has learner choice and voice been included?

What is Personalised Learning?

“Supporting future oriented learning and teaching - A New Zealand Perspective” (Bolstad & Gilbert, 2012) outlines 6 emerging principles, the first of which is Personalising Learning. In essence, this theme challenges us to consider how the system can fit the learner rather than the other way around, which was the industrial age model.

“Make Learning Personal” (Bray & McClaskey, 2015) states that in a personalised learning environment, “Learning starts with the learner. Learners understand how they learn best so they can become active participants in designing their learning goals along with the teacher. Learners take responsibility for their learning, they are motivated and challenged as they learn so they work harder than their teacher.”

Leaders and teachers I spoke with all talked about learner choice when defining what personalised learning means to them and their school. They spoke of knowing learners well, what their drivers are and to allow learners to connect with their learning.

One school leader distinguished between deep and surface personalisation. They spoke of maintaining rigour in the curriculum while giving learners greater agency. They spoke of personalised learning as allowing each learner to fulfil their potential.

The chart below from “Make Learning Personal”, (Bray, McClaskey, 2015) is significant in that Personalisation places the learner at the centre whereas the other two approaches are both teacher dominated.

The chart is titled "Personalization v Differentiation v Individualization Chart (v3)". It includes a small logo of four interlocking puzzle pieces in blue, green, and red. Below the title, it states: "There is a difference between personalization, differentiation, and individualization. One is learner-centered; the others are teacher-centered." The chart is a table with three columns: Personalization, Differentiation, and Individualization. The first row of the table has the column headers. The second row has "The Learner..." under Personalization, "The Teacher..." under Differentiation, and "The Teacher..." under Individualization. The rest of the table is obscured by a large greyed-out watermark.

Personalization	Differentiation	Individualization
The Learner...	The Teacher...	The Teacher...

Diagram 2 - <http://barbarabray.net/free-updated-resources/>

It would seem that personalised learning approaches have been around for a long time, but that many of these practices are “surface” and for “deep” personalisation to occur, then this might also require a systems-level change.

Educators I spoke to at several schools outlined a number of strategies and practices that are employed to personalise learning. Most of these involve ways to enable learners to have greater choice about learning tasks. It is evident after talking with other educators that greater emphasis needs to be placed on learner voice in the curriculum itself - learners need input into 'what' they are learning (not just to have choice about 'where' and 'when') to take personalised learning further.

This view is supported by the TKI website section on Personalised Learning.

Diagram 3

Personalised learning

[What is personalised learning?](#) | [School stories](#) | [Discussions](#) | [Resources](#) | [Research and readings](#)

What is personalised learning?

Personalised learning allows akonga/students to take control of their own learning. Each akonga is unique and learns in different ways.

Personalising learning means students:

- understand how they learn
- own and drive their learning
- are co-designers of the curriculum and their learning environment

Student learning needs, interests, and capability determine the pace of learning. In a personalised learning environment the learning objectives, content, method, and pace may all vary (so personalisation encompasses differentiation and individualisation).

In this environment, the advantage of technology is that students can use the content and be the experts with their teacher. They can become experts on specific content areas, technology, and create content.

All the resources available for learning including: teachers, parents/whānau, peers, technology, time, and learning spaces, must be used flexibly to meet individual student learning needs.

Personalising learning challenges us to think about what new resources may be needed to support learning, and how learners can access these - including resources that have not traditionally been thought of as part of the schooling system.

In deep expressions of practice, students' learning activities and the curriculum/knowledge content they engage with are shaped in ways that reflect the input and interests of students, as well as what teachers know to be important knowledge.

Bolstad, R., Gilbert J., McDowell, S., Bull, A., Boyd, S., Hipkins, R. (2012) *Supporting future-oriented learning and teaching - a New Zealand perspective*¹². New Zealand: Ministry of Education

What is to be achieved through Personalising Learning?

As show above in diagram 3, there are three components that a personalised approach to learning means for students.

- *understand how they learn*
- *own and drive their learning*
- *are co-designers of the curriculum and their learning environment*

In doing so, learners are able to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Clarity in the Classroom, (Absolum,2006) states that this can be achieved when educators are clear about what is to be learnt. The components that Absolum writes about that cause effective learning are important contributing factors to personalising learning also. Absolum's archway of teaching and learning capabilities shows; building a learning-focussed relationship, shared clarity about next learning steps, promoting further learning, clarity about what is to be learnt, assessment for learning and active reflection.

Learners in the driving seat (Watkins, 2009) states similar outcomes from learners driving their own learning: greater engagement and intrinsic motivation, students setting higher challenges, students evaluating their work and better problem-solving.

Educators that I spoke with expressed similar sentiments as to why their schools are personalising learning. Learner agency was also an important driver. Personalising learning enabled schools to fulfil their school's vision. The NZC's vision of young people who will be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners is well supported through a personalised approach. In fact, many educators expressed that this vision could only be given effect in a "non-traditional" classroom. Many leaders in schools expressed this as a driver for creating innovative learning environments (ILEs) - that is - shared or collaborative spaces with multiple educators in them.

The Key Competencies in the NZC were spoken of frequently. Wanting learners who can manage themselves and make good choices about their learning were key drivers. Through having learners being actively involved in their own learning, having voice and choice in their learning and setting their own learning goals, educators are in a position to make more sound judgements about learners and can provide more authentic contexts for learners to be observed and supported in.

Innovative learning environments are seen as the way forward to allow greater personalisation to occur. Students being co-creators of their learning environment is achievable through having a flexible space to learn in. Withdrawal areas, quiet zones, messy areas, collaborative spaces are all aspects that require attention. Educators spoken with expressed that the traditional classroom can't cater for this. Learners being able to work in a zone that fits their purpose allows for greater personalisation to occur as students can all be doing different things at the same time.

What approaches are schools taking to personalise learning?

Two schools visited have adopted the Walker Learning Approach. All other schools are using what they each termed as a "hybrids".

The Walker Learning Approach has been developed over 20 years by Kathy Walker. A major element of the WLA is engagement through the learners' investigations and interests; however, it still requires formal, explicit teaching in literacy, numeracy and other curriculum areas. (<http://walkerlearning.com.au/info/>)

Another aspect related to the approach that schools are taking relates to how educators are being utilised in Innovative Learning Environments. Some schools had one educator in the "learning coach" role, while others took instructional groups. This was seen as being a critical role to support the learning and to ensure learners were developing the necessary skills to lead their own learning in the future. A learning coach can be a teacher or teacher aide whose role it is to support those learners who are not attending direct instruction from a teacher. The benefit of having a learning coach, from those schools that have this, is that learners are given greater support when they are working independently, therefore the learning tasks can be more challenging.

Most schools visited did not have a learning coach role but were aware that there were times during instruction when educators would need to be available to other learners, not just those in instructional groups. This often led to a discussion about the changing roles of teacher aides within the innovative learning environment and how they are now being used to support learning in the learning coach role. Teacher aides spoken to about this changing role, spoke positively about this, as they feel that they are more part of the team they work in, that they have greater variety in their work and they have greater input into future learning as they are able to discuss a wider range of learners with teachers.

What professional learning opportunities have teachers had?

Leaders that I met with had mainly had “in house” professional learning for staff about personalising learning and creating ILEs. School visits were also a commonality and perhaps the most used vehicle for educators who were beginning the journey into personalising learning. Stonefields School in Auckland and Amesbury School in Wellington were frequently mentioned as points of reference.

Some schools have worked with CORE also. One school had its leadership team all work with a CORE facilitator for 12 months and another school has on-going support from a CORE facilitator. Schools that have taken the Walker Learner Approach have gone to Melbourne for an initial visit and have then had a trainer visit prior to the school year starting as well as ongoing Skype support sessions each term.

Ulearn, various local and national conferences and educamps were also mentioned as ways of continuing professional learning. Leaders spoke of the strength of any professional learning lay in doing things as a whole staff. This included the Office Manager, Teacher Aide and BOT members to ensure that everyone involved understands what is happening and what is to be achieved.

Leaders at schools that have been implementing personalising learning through ILEs for several years spoke of the challenges they had in finding appropriate professional learning opportunities for themselves and for their staff.

How are school actions to personalise learning being measured?

Leaders in schools that I met with talked mainly about measuring learner performance in the Key Competencies. Exactly what this might look like was still being developed.

Many schools that I visited operate learner profiles (usually online) and these covered learner disposition traits and reflective comments.

Most schools were also operating a “license” system or had a rubric that showed learner skills in areas such as self-management. Learners usually had a photo or avatar placed next to a stage or a goal. Learners that I spoke with found it motivating to set their own goals in relation to these. Tracking, monitoring or recording this type of system to show learner progress in these areas was something being considered at some schools.

Two school leaders made the connection between personalising learning practices and academic achievement. Their schools had seen recent significant accelerated shifts in

student achievement information and the leaders at these schools attributed it to the change in approach to teaching and learning that their school had taken. One leader spoke in terms of National Standards and the other was quoting PAT data from November to November.

One school leader spoke of a positive change in learner behaviour at the start of this year, compared to the start of previous years.

How have learner voice and choice been included to personalise learning?

Most schools visited had “must dos” and “can dos” to allow for learner choice. This was especially evident in reading and maths when learners were working in independent ways. Especially evident at senior year levels in Maths and Numeracy was learners selecting their own goals within a level or stage.

One school made specific mention that the words, “Collect learner voice to...” start each of the goals in their annual plan. This same school was interviewing selected learners in each class to learn more about consistency in teaching approaches used across the school.

Two different approaches, mentioned at some schools, were used to enable learner choice within Inquiry learning. The first of these saw learners opting in to a group that would have a particular focus. An example given was where a team was learning about Cultures and learners could choose between buildings, foods and several other options. A different, novel approach that I saw was based in a junior team Inquiry on Heroes where activities were organised into four different groups and each group had 4 choices in it. Learners would roll a coloured dice to determine which group they would choose from. This was to ensure that learners covered a range of experiences.

Another feature of learner choice related to learners being able to leave an instructional session if they found they already knew it, or “got it” along the way, or if it was making no sense at all. There was no compulsion to stay at the session if it wasn’t meeting the learner’s needs. This approach could provide invaluable feedback to the educator working with that learner.

Another common practice in giving learners choice was having them establish their own timetables for the day or the week. While most schools “saved” this for senior classes, some schools did have junior learners doing this also. It usually involved cutting and pasting printed icons onto their own sheet to show the order of the tasks they wanted to do. In

senior classes, timetables were often in a digital format, often on google docs where students had access to the “fixed timetable” and they then looked through their must do and can lists and placed these where they wanted, allowing for teacher workshops etc. School leaders and educators spoken to mentioned the impact that effective use of technology can have on personalising learning. Learners are able to work far more independently and connect in new ways to support their learning. BYOD was a feature in many schools, especially in senior classes.

Learner voice was gathered in a variety of ways. Some schools used student “think tanks” to gather input into learning activities. This might be at the planning stage where a group suggested additional considerations for learning opportunities or along the way when learners thought of additional learning opportunities.

Learner interests were included in a variety of ways, whether this be termed passion projects, genius hour or another term.

Common practices across focus schools.

Must Dos and Can Dos

The most common approach being used was through having “must do” and “can do” learning tasks. This was highly evident in Literacy, especially Reading and was well supported through the Daily5 approach. Many schools were also taking this approach within Mathematics.

Must dos and Can dos is simply a list of learning tasks, usually generated by the teacher or teachers, but sometimes learner suggestions were included also. The Must Dos are compulsory and get done first before choosing from the Can Dos. There was often a minimum number of both Must Dos and Can Dos that were required to be done.

In junior rooms this approach was often used in place of a reading rotation. The difference being that learners were able to stay on a task for as long as they wanted, rather than having to move on after a set time. Obviously there would be many advantages to this approach and learners spoken with certainly expressed that they enjoyed working at their own pace and being able to complete a task rather than having to move on, finished or not.

Timetabling

This approach was mainly used in senior school classes. Learners were able to record the order of tasks for their day around fixed instructional sessions. Mostly this was done in paper form, but some schools where all learners had their own device were able to do this digitally.

Some schools did have junior learners timetabling and this involved them cutting out and pasting icons onto a sheet to show the order they wanted to do their independent learning tasks. Another system used was to have the Must Dos and Can Dos displayed on a large wall display and learners simply put their name by the one they were doing.

Visible Learning Goals

A very common and powerful tool observed in many of the schools was having learning goals, usually in “kidspeak” visibly displayed on the wall. Learners often had a photo or avatar displayed beside the goal that they were working on. Often these learning goals were self-selected by the learner, and sometimes they were established by the learner and teacher together.

Learning goals were often grouped by Stage for Numeracy or by Level for Writing and this enables learners to see who might be able to assist them with their learning and it also resulted in focused instructional sessions, as learners knew their specific learning needs.

Implications for our school.

The focus of our work is on transforming the practice that occurs in each of our classrooms. It is possible to achieve many of the goals that can be achieved through ILEs. There are already strong elements of personalised learning evident; learners have choices within their learning, who they work and learn with, passion project selection, play based learning and mixed ability grouping are all contributing to learners experiencing a more personalised approach than many traditional classrooms.

Personalised learning has a wide range of interpretations, but there were some common elements that were evident at several of the visited schools:

- learners having “must dos” and “can dos”
- visible learning goals that learners were self-selecting from
- learner voice being used to assist in the development of learning opportunities
- a clear vision of learning and the roles of the learner and teacher
- flexible learning environments

In order to achieve this at our school our immediate next steps are to:

- increase learner voice and choice - listen to how learners see themselves learning within different learning areas, allowing them more choice within their learning and what they’re learning about, as opposed to just where and when they might do set tasks;
 - this involves us setting the learning framework, such as Big Ideas but also having learner input into learning activities/opportunities
 - it also includes continuing to develop “learning progressions” so learning is visible to our learners. i.e. charts or docs that have learning goals on them that learners can self-select from
 - we need to establish “must do” and “can do” learning opportunities within all learning areas
- continue to create more flexible learning environments which allow for:
 - independent work without distraction (caves)
 - collaborative spaces (watering holes)
 - whole class gathering (camp fires)

- establish school wide/team wide Key Competencies so we are able to measure the effects of taking this approach in relation to learners being more self-regulated.
- increase our collaborative practices, such as planning across the entire school rather than individually and making assessment and achievement information more team oriented.

Conclusions.

It is the practice of our teachers that will have the biggest impact on our learners. Aligning our practices to those which support a personalised approach will enable our learners to work towards becoming self-regulated explorers of their own learning.

Through retaining high quality instructional sessions for core curriculum areas such as Maths, Reading and Writing, learners are able to access expertise when needed, while still retaining ownership over many other aspects of their learning through having Must Dos and Can Dos to support their learning. By ensuring that Must Do and Can Do tasks are related to learning goals then teachers (and parents) are assured that learners are focused and operating within a framework, as opposed to selecting irrelevant learning goals and tasks. It is the gradual release of learners that will ensure their success and develop their ability to become confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners.

References

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