

# Paths to *personalised learning*

**Mylor** Primary School | **Birdwood** High School | **Nairne** School | **Lobethal** Primary School



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Mylor Primary School, Birdwood High School, Nairne School (Preschool - Year 7) and Lobethal Primary School have crossed paths for years. All located in South Australia's Mount Lofty Ranges region, their respective leadership teams regularly met and exchanged ideas.

## *Four paths, **one goal***

But in 2010, the relationship grew significantly. Their respective leaders had each become increasingly attracted to the educational approach referred to as “personalised learning”. And each - in their own way, at their own pace - had started on the path to implementing it.

Despite their schools' different contexts, their goal was the same. All sought increased engagement, achievement and personal growth in both students and staff. And all were starting to see that happen.

So in 2012 they decided to formalise their relationship as a development group and were successful in jointly applying for a grant through the Commonwealth's Empowering Local Schools initiative to further their use of personalised learning.

Recognising, however, that future success is always more likely when plans are informed by an understanding of the past, they decided to document their journeys so far.

This report tells those stories.





*Mylor Primary School*





The first steps towards a personalised approach to learning at **Mylor Primary** occurred in 2010, and were to prove instrumental in revitalising the school's spirit and standing in the community. Current Principal Ms Ngari Boehm had been appointed at the end of 2009, following consecutive years of significant drops in student enrolments. Since 2006, numbers had fallen from nearly 90 to under 30. There was unrest among the remaining parent body in relation to the way the school was operating, and the children were becoming increasingly disengaged. Change wasn't just desirable, it was essential.

"When I arrived I was alarmed by the lack of a sense of community among the kids," says Ms Boehm. "There were two distinct learning groups then - Reception to Year 3 and Year 4 to 7. They worked in their set areas and had so little interaction that many kids didn't even know each other's names.

"That highlighted pretty quickly for me the need to break down beliefs and barriers about how particular teachers should work with particular aged children."

Ms Boehm took two immediate steps to start the process of rebuilding the school's culture and establishing learning at the forefront of what it was doing. The first was to implement regular whole-school learning sessions.

"Those sessions not only built personal connections among the kids across different age groups, but also opened up communication between teachers. It was about us sharing practice and insights into what works with each child - a first tiny step towards personalisation."

The second action taken was re-engaging the school's Governing Council (GC). Their initial meetings were centred exclusively on discussion of the school's core purpose of teaching and learning, and how the GC could support that.

"I didn't want to get hung up focusing on numbers," says Ms Boehm. "I was much more interested in asking, 'what are we going to do that's different? What will Mylor stand for?'"

Ms Boehm's own thoughts on those issues were already leaning towards personalised learning, and the GC, although initially challenged by the prospect, soon gave vital in-principle support.

*“I wanted our teachers to see that the world of Mylor could be so much more enjoyable, for them and the kids, if we started to value what the kids brought to the table”*

## **Exposing teachers to personalised learning in action**

To establish momentum, Ms Boehm reached out to two members of the South Australian Department for Education and Child Development (the Department) - both part of the Department's Learning To Learn project team - whom she'd worked with at previous schools.

“I really valued their input on teaching and learning, so I asked them where I could take our teachers to show them that you can do things differently and still get the academic results.

“I wanted our teachers to see that the world of Mylor could be so much more enjoyable, for them and the kids, if we started to value what the kids brought to the table and weren't so constrained by what we perceived as departmental expectations around curriculum delivery.”

Two standout schools were suggested, both located in low socio-economic areas of Melbourne. So in Term 3, with full GC backing, Ms Boehm arranged back-to-back student-free days and took her two teachers on a research trip. One of the teachers, Miss Felicity Schirmer, had also arrived new to the school in 2010, and had five years teaching experience. The other, Miss Kylie Kuchel, had been there since 2007 and had taught for 12 years in total.

Ms Boehm also invited colleagues from one other Adelaide Hills school to increase the team's opportunity for constructive discussion and reflection.

The group visited Brentwood Secondary College on day one, followed by Silverton Primary School on day two. At Brentwood they observed a Year 7 program in action, in which children worked together in a large open space on their own learning plans, largely self-directed, but drawing on the skills of a range of teachers. Learning plans were based on individuals' passions and interests, and targeted to their knowledge and skill levels.

Teachers were working together and, in reflection, constructively critiquing each other's practice.

A similar approach, although executed differently to suit the younger age group, was seen at Silverton. Both schools were achieving fantastic results. For the Mylor team, the personalised learning seed was well and truly sown.

“After being to Silverton we thought, ‘We can do this!’ There was a real sense of purpose and a drive to come back and share it with the Mylor community.”

## Creating a more flexible environment

Top of the agenda upon the team's return was freeing up the learning environment to allow greater flexibility in how learning could take place.

Much old furniture was removed from classrooms over the 2010-2011 school holidays to create a relatively "blank canvas" for the start of the new year. Then, when students returned, they were immediately involved in discussions regarding how the spaces created could be used.

"One of the first things we did was to work with the kids around different ways of learning," says Ms Boehm. "How you work in a group, how you need to work by yourself sometimes, and so on. We agreed on four different ways, with each requiring its own space."

It was decided to create a: "Cave" for individual reflection; "Watering Hole" for collaborative work; "Campfire" for story telling, and; "Da Vinci Suite" for messy work. The design of each space then provided a powerful learning experience in itself.

"We divided the kids into teams and asked them to design the spaces within a set budget. They came up with ideas for furniture and equipment, costed it all out, and made sure all learning platforms were covered.

"Then we implemented their plans, went out and bought the furniture and the kids helped us put it all together. It gave them a real sense of ownership and excitement about what they were doing and why."

Not surprisingly, increased parental engagement and, crucially, enthusiasm followed.

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### ***Teacher confidence boosted***

In the new learning environment teachers immediately felt more comfortable doing things in non-traditional ways, because they were no longer facing the traditional rows of desks. Their surroundings now provided constant visual reinforcement that they were there to innovate and be flexible.

To keep things moving forward, Ms Boehm also introduced the team to landmark studies by world-recognised UK education researcher Sir Ken Robinson.<sup>3</sup> As well as challenging the assumption that one lesson could meet the needs of 30 or so kids at the same time, Robinson's studies indicated that children could not be assumed to be at a certain stage in their learning simply because they were at a certain age.

"It was important for our teachers to realise that there were highly respected experts out there espousing the same things that we were trying to do," says Ms Boehm.

"That gave us a lot of additional confidence to stay on the path."





## the teacher's perspective

### Felicity Schirmer

**Junior Primary, 8 years  
teaching experience**

*"I think one of the major benefits [of the personalised approach] is knowing the kids properly; actually sitting and talking to them about their work, getting their understanding of things and going, 'OK, you're not quite there, I need to move you,' or 'I need to explain it in a different way.' If their parents ask I know exactly where they are.*

*It feels like you're actually teaching them more, rather than teaching at them. You're not just up the front; you're actually connecting with them. And I think the kids feel more comfortable to come and say, 'I don't get it.' They know they'll get individual help to nut it out and won't be judged, and they understand that everyone learns differently.*

*In the multi-age groups, the older ones are willing to help the younger ones without groaning, because they realise they were at that stage and needed help. You don't hear any, 'You're dumb!' comments, or, 'I already know that.'*

*I've also noticed, especially in numeracy, a lot more kids explaining their learning to each other. They'll sit there and say, 'well this is how I did it,' 'Oh, OK, this is how I did it,' and they'll actually talk about it and share their understandings with each other.*

*It does have its challenges. It's probably a bit of extra after-hours work; taking piles of books home and looking through each person's book. Instead of just ticking answers we're looking at how they've got it right or wrong. There've been some things that kids have got right, but when I've looked deeper into it, or talked to them, I found they actually got it right for the wrong reason.*

*But it's all manageable. I haven't been up past midnight or anything ridiculous!"*

## *Self-directed learning gets underway*

With the learning spaces performing as they should, the next advance was the introduction of daily “Discovery & Inquiry” sessions, in which the children were to undertake self-directed research projects based on their areas of personal interest.

“We set up groups of learners according to their level of independent learning abilities - beginner, novice and advanced- rather than year levels,” says Ms Boehm. “We talked to the kids about what we would expect to see at each levels and then asked them to self-reflect and put themselves where they thought they were at.

“We then had some really honest conversations with kids who we

thought were taking the easy option, or had perhaps overestimated their skills.”

A clear structure was adopted. The children were to nominate an interest area, articulate what they already knew about it, identify what more they'd like to know, formulate some questions, then do the research and present their learning. Enthusiasm among the kids was at a record high. But when work began it became clear that, for many, it was a step too far.





*“It’s OK to fail, but it’s not OK to give up.*

*What can we learn from it?*

*How do we tweak it?”*

## ***Research skill deficiencies encountered and addressed***

“Most of the kids just didn’t have the independent research skills,” says Ms Boehm.

“They were just clicking page after page on Google search lists and getting random info and sticking it into their books, rather than actually formulating answers to the questions they’d posed. A number of kids were finding it quite frustrating.”

The teaching team was initially deflated, having seen similar approaches work so well at the Melbourne schools. But it soon served to strengthen their resolve.

“I think that was another important turning point,” says Ms Boehm. “It’s OK to fail, but it’s not OK to give up. What can we learn from it? How do we tweak it?”

The approach was quickly adapted. “Master classes” on research skills were conducted for the kids, looking at what good research was, how to differentiate between valid and invalid information sources, and how to use the information.

And to help bed down those skills, it was decided to restructure the projects in a couple of key ways.

The first big change was to set a broad theme for the projects, within which the kids would then select a matter for investigation according to their interests, rather than allowing them to choose an entire, and potentially limited, subject area themselves. “It was pretty open slather to start with,” says Ms Boehm. “We had robots, aircraft, birds - even Pokémon!”

This adaptation would both ensure the usefulness of information and make the monitoring of work more manageable.

A second move was for the teachers to set up a library of information resources on each chosen theme for the children to search within, eliminating the excessive web surfing. And thirdly, a series of full-day inquiries were held, which gave the kids the opportunity to thoroughly familiarise themselves with the research process.



## Tackling literacy and numeracy

With the mixed-age-group Discovery & Inquiry sessions now working well, the teachers' attention turned to tailoring learning in literacy and numeracy.

"At previous schools I'd been at I'd successfully used a lot of data on kids' achievements to group learners," says Ms Boehm. "So we decided to implement 'data weeks' at Mylor.

"We gathered information around the kids' spelling, reading, comprehension, vocabulary and maths, then disseminated it and grouped learners according to their level of skill, and where the next logical learning step was for them.

"We did that twice per year - at the beginning of Term 1 and then again at the start of Term 3 to ascertain if we were on the right track and the kids were still moving forward in their groupings.'

The data revealed that, although most children's development groupings did broadly match their year levels, there were always anomalies. One in particular was a real eye-opener.

"We had one Year 2 student who topped the school in reading comprehension," says Ms Boehm.

"How could we cater for that child with a traditional, 'You're a Year 2 so you'll do Year 2 work' approach, when clearly their level of understanding and expertise was just about ready for high school?"

*"One Year 2 student topped the school in reading comprehension. How could we cater for that child with a traditional, 'You're a Year 2 so you'll do Year 2 work' approach?"*



## *Open communication and teacher development*

With the data results behind them, the teaching team opened the lines of communication with parents and had a series of very honest conversations about their children's development and subsequent groupings.

The teachers were also honest with themselves. They acknowledged that there was now a need to look at different ways of teaching to allow relevant learning experiences for each individual.

*“We engaged in a conversation with parents and their kids to refine the learning goals for each individual child; to say here are their strengths and weaknesses and here are the key targets.”*

“Breaking habits is a very difficult thing to do,” says Ms Boehm. “Even with the intention of individualising the curriculum within the group, we initially still tended to teach to the middle, then just add some extra bits for the top and take some bits off for the bottom.”

To really personalise the learning, new methods were clearly required. One strategy used was the introduction of “I-Plans” - individualised learning plans.

“We engaged in a conversation with parents and their kids to refine the learning goals for each individual child; to say here are their strengths and weaknesses and here are the key targets that we want to work towards.”

Importantly, the I-Plans weren't purely academically driven. They also included aspects of social and physical development, with a view to personalising learning for the whole child.

By mid-2011 around 90% of Mylor Primary students had their own I-Plans.

## Sharing and modelling practice

A second strategy was to engage in greater modelling of practice. Teachers began constructively sharing ideas and insights at regular meetings on what was working for each individual in each area of their development.

Critically, this was also introduced on a daily basis between morning and afternoon learning sessions. This allowed teachers to ensure smooth transitions for each child from one session to another.

If a certain direction or approach was working particularly well for a student in the morning, it could be continued

or emulated in the afternoon to keep that progress going.

To facilitate and encourage these interactions, teachers' desks were removed from all classrooms and placed together in a single office. Progress was definitely being made, but according to Ms Boehm there were still barriers to take down.

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## Ramping up the student feedback

"We were all finding it quite difficult to continually monitor and assess every child," says Ms Boehm. "We needed to develop a better system for tracking our kids.

"That's where Dylan Wiliam's Assessment For Learning strategy<sup>2</sup> came in as an umbrella to the way we work, and it really helped. We focused on giving individual feedback to kids as part of each and every lesson about where they were at and helping them identify what might come next for them.

"We started to work within and among the kids, and pushing the responsibility back on to them to take ownership of their learning."

Once the next learning target was identified by and for a student, of course, that needed to be reflected

in an actual exercise or project.

According to Ms Boehm, this was another process of negotiation with the student, as an intersection was searched for between their specific needs and the overall direction of the group.

"This wasn't too difficult if the teacher had strong knowledge and experience with the topic or theme being worked with," she says.

"But if they didn't, it was quite hard. We quickly realised we needed to be far better planned in order to help each child reach his or her next target."

With this in mind, another non-traditional approach was introduced - two teachers working as a team.

## *Two heads are sometimes better than one*

Maths sessions were restructured to place two teachers in a learning space with two groups of children. A single mathematical problem would be pitched around a particular content area, and the kids then questioned on it to find the limit of their understanding. The learning would then start from there.

“Sometimes it was one student, sometimes three, sometimes half a class,” says Ms Boehm. “However many it was, one teacher would take that first group out and start filling in their knowledge gaps at the point

they were at, while the second teacher who was doing the questioning could continue digging deeper with the remaining students to unpack the next level of misconceptions.”

Inevitably, of course, there were often more than two points at which understanding would lapse. Dealing with this challenge was quite an art, according to Ms Boehm.

“It was a matter of identifying which kids were independent enough learners that they could take their next steps without much supervision, which kids needed targeted learning just to plug a gap rather than a skill to practise, and so on.”

Although heading in the right direction, the workload was still proving draining for teachers, so further refinements were introduced.



*“The goal was to give the kids a whole lot of different ways of looking at mathematical problems, so that the next time they reached a point they couldn’t get past with one approach, they could independently try another.”*

## ***Tweaking the weekly structure***

In 2012 the team decided to revise their weekly numeracy structure to include just three days of questioning and unpacking misconceptions - moving kids forward to their next level. The other two would be devoted to building their repertoire of problem-solving strategies, or approaches.

“The goal was to give the kids a whole lot of different ways of looking at mathematical problems, so that the next time they reached a point they couldn’t get past with one approach, they could independently try another.”

In combination with this, a greater focus was placed on crafting tasks that had enough in them to keep kids working and trying different things at all levels.

“These were often scenario-based,” says Ms Boehm. “For example, if I was driving to Sydney and saw 13 wheels on the side of the road, what vehicle or vehicles could they have come from?”

*By questioning the kids to show their reasoning, it had been revealed that many kids who were able to get one right answer didn't necessarily have the understanding to get another.*

## ***A year of consolidation***

Following all the personalised learning initiatives introduced at Mylor in 2011, Ms Boehm chose in 2012 to focus the teaching group on honing their associated new skills. "I thought it was really important not to fall back into the status quo, where teaching is telling and learning is listening," she says.

"It was still very much a matter of laying down those new pathways for teachers. It was still tempting for them to do all the thinking and working out on a board, and leave the kids as passive observers."

One of the reflections the teachers had when comparing the personalised approach with traditional methods was that, in the past if a worksheet was set and a child entered the right answer in a box, it was generally assumed that they understood the problem.

But by questioning the kids to show their reasoning, it had been revealed that many kids who were able to get one right answer didn't necessarily have the understanding to get another.

"Without having learning that's personalised you may never get to know that," says Ms Boehm. "You wouldn't be able to identify the level at which learning was going wrong for some of these kids."

Despite these clear and attractive benefits, however, the personalised approach was still an uncomfortable adjustment for some students.

This was particularly so for some of the older children who had previously experienced several years of traditional classroom learning.

"We had one occasion where one of the older girls said, 'Can't you just tell me what I have to do?'" says Ms Boehm. "She really found the idea of figuring it out for herself quite confronting, because she'd been ingrained with seven years of being told the formula to work it out, not understanding how the formula works."

So 2012 was also treated as a year to build and consolidate the Mylor students' belief in, and enthusiasm for, the personalised approach itself. And one important way in which this was achieved was through the introduction of a new program that reinforced the need for all individuals to take responsibility for themselves in life and contribute to society.

## the teacher's perspective

### Kylie Kuchel

Senior Primary, 15 years teaching experience

*"My traditional teaching experiences have been in much bigger classes, and you don't know the kids as intimately. Also, because we don't just pass the kids on [to another teacher] at the end of the year, we do know them, I think, at a deeper level. We don't have to spend the first three or four weeks of the year getting to know where they're at.*

*I've found kids can explain their learning with the personalised approach. They can't hide or get lost. And because of that, they're not comparing themselves with everybody else as much. That's a culture that's developed. They understand we're all different, with different abilities, and I think that's helpful.*

*Working together with the kids, and them having their own goals, I've found they engage with their tasks more. They work hard and they concentrate. They also discuss things with each other and learn from each other, and get excited when they get it.*

*Sometimes it is daunting, having less control than in a structured room with all the students in their seats. But it benefits the kids.*

*And that's what we're here for."*





## the teacher's perspective

### Jonah Haines Senior Primary, 12 years teaching experience

*"I think the big thing I've noticed with personalised learning is that you can keep everybody challenged. You get to know all the kids really well and you set individual targets for them.*

*Within one lesson there can be many different expectations. To use writing as an example, the outcome I'm after for one student might be using full stops correctly, for another it could be starting to use more interesting sentences, and for another using paragraphs. Everybody's always moving forward.*

*That's a big shift from when I first started teaching, where you're just planning one lesson for however many kids in the class. So it's more of a juggling act, but a very good one.*

*It's more difficult in some areas than others. In literacy and numeracy - the skill-based stuff - you can see where you can set the next goal quite easily. Whereas in inquiry areas, some children have a lot of experience researching*

*and reading on the Internet and others don't. So you can't just expect them all to go off and research.*

*You get in the habit of jotting down a lot of observations to keep in mind for revising students' outcomes and expectations. And you get the knack of setting open-ended tasks that all kids can do, but that allow you to have those different expectations and outcomes. It probably doesn't actually take more time - it's just a different way to think about it.*

*You also realise that some of those lessons that were really fun to teach in the past weren't really teaching very deeply at all. That's been a big change. There's a different type of engagement with personalised learning. It's a deep learning engagement, and I think that's our job. Once kids are learning and thinking deeply, and feel that reward, they get that intrinsic motivation to learn.*

*It's confronting and threatening sometimes, because we're asking kids to move outside their comfort zones.*

*We're not doing the working out for them. But they're starting to realise that if you sit back and wait for someone else to provide the answers, you won't understand. In the past you could learn how to 'do school', without really learning how to do learning or thinking.*

*It can be confronting for some parents as well, if their kids are saying they don't like what's happening - having to do the work. Or if they learnt differently when they were at school.*

*But you know, that can't take precedence over the kids' really learning something."*

## *Civics and Citizenship program*

Civics and Citizenship (C&C) was the brainchild of Mr Jonah Haines, a teacher of 12 years experience who had joined the Mylor team in 2011, taking the teaching group to four.

It was designed to help students understand how their democratic society functioned, and their personal roles, responsibilities and opportunities within it.

Though not strictly delivered with the same personalised approach described previously, it did play an important support role.

“C&C was a reinforcement to the kids that each of them was important,” says Ms Boehm, “and that they each had an opportunity to contribute to, and take responsibility for, their own development and that of their community.”

The idea of actually contributing to society was seen by the teachers as a particularly important message.

“We don’t want to only produce thinkers,” says Ms Boehm. “Yes, you need to be able to critically analyse things and think for yourself. But to be a good citizen you also need to turn that thinking into action.

“It needs to be a balance.”



*“C&C was a reinforcement to the kids that they each had an opportunity to contribute to, and take responsibility for, their own development and that of their community.”*

## *Next step? More meaningfully engaging parents*

With the year of consolidation behind them, the Mylor team in 2013 has set itself the challenge of providing improved, ongoing feedback to parents about their children's learning.

"The system around reporting at the moment is a really false environment," says Ms Boehm. "So for us the crucial next step is to link teachers' ongoing monitoring and assessment of students' progress with regular communications with parents.

"Whilst what's happening on the ground is working really well, we need to continue to build that evidence base, so that we can say to parents, 'We've seen these skills in your child, these competencies - they're marked off here - and here's the evidence.'

"Or similarly, 'This is the area of learning your child hasn't yet grasped, so we need to be having a conversation with them about how we can craft in their passion to this element.'"

Ultimately the Mylor teaching group would like to establish secure, online evidence-based portfolios for each student. According to Ms Boehm, parents would be able to access these assessment portfolios anywhere, any time to see what their children had done, how they were progressing relative to the national curriculum, and what their next step would or should be.

They also plan to "up skill" parents on some of the specific learning methodologies used at school through information and demonstration sessions, so that they can more closely resemble them when assisting their children's learning at home.

Ms Boehm says international research has shown this to be a significant factor in student achievement.

"Mylor was fortunate enough to win a grant in 2012 to pursue our application of personalised learning," says Ms Boehm, "and as a result of that I had the opportunity to meet with the University of Exeter's Professor Charles Desforges in London.

*"We need to continue to build that evidence base, so that we can say to parents, 'We've seen these skills in your child, these competencies - they're marked off here - and here's the evidence.'"*

*“If we’re serious about achieving our aspiration of having every child leaving Mylor Primary at above-average standard we need to get our parents more involved as early as possible.”*

“His research into the impact that parents can have on their children’s learning is arguably the global benchmark in the field.

“He was an advisor on one particularly interesting study that compared the affect of three different parental approaches in reading improvement within a student group.<sup>3</sup> In group one the parents simply let their kids read to them. In group two, the parents had a small degree of understanding of the teaching strategies their children were experiencing at school, and attempted to emulate them as best they could. And in group three the parents employed almost identical teaching strategies to those used at the school.

“Group three clearly showed the greatest improvement. So if we’re serious about moving our kids’ learning forward, and achieving our aspiration of having every child leaving Mylor Primary at above-average standard compared to the rest of the State, we need to get our parents more involved as early as possible.”





## *Far to go, but an important milestone reached*

Clearly the team at Mylor has its progress in perspective. Ms Boehm freely admits she and her fellow teachers are still learning about personalised learning themselves, and will continue to do so throughout their professional lives.

But an equally valid and healthy observation in their honest self-assessment is that they've come an awfully long way since the beginning of 2010.

And as Ms Boehm reflects, they now have a clear answer to the most

important question she and her team faced those three years ago.

"I feel like we're now finally hitting our stride," she says. "You could actually bundle up our approach to personalised learning as a whole-school philosophy and say, 'This is what Mylor holds dear.'

"We now know what we stand for."



*Birdwood High School*





Incoming **Birdwood High** Principal Mr Steve Hicks was told in 2010 that raising academic achievement was at the top of the school's agenda. Upon further investigation, he discovered it had been there for 15 years. Progress had come to a grinding halt and, despite numerous incremental changes, stubbornly refused to restart. A fresh lick of paint clearly wouldn't cut it. So he turned the place upside down.

"The school wasn't failing when I arrived," says Mr Hicks. "It was doing fine. But it certainly wasn't excelling. State averages should be the floor of performance, not the ceiling."

All staff agreed they needed to improve, but had been disheartened by the failure of previous efforts to achieve it.

"When I looked at what the school had been doing though, it was only tinkering around the edges. So we clearly needed to look at genuinely *transformational* change."

*“When kids aren’t engaged, no matter how long you make them sit there in rows doing the same thing over and over, they’re never going to get it.”*

## **A focus on student engagement**

In his more than 20 years experience teaching in secondary schools, Mr Hicks had grown increasingly disillusioned with the traditional school structure and teaching model.

“I was absolutely frustrated at the lack of real engagement in the kids, and particularly in the middle years,” he says. “So many kids just seemed to have zero interest in what was happening in the classroom.

“And that’s frightening. Because when kids aren’t engaged, no matter how long you make them sit there in rows doing the same thing over and over, they’re never going to get it.”

So instituting a new approach to increasing engagement, especially in Year 8-10, stood out as an immediate, and vitally important objective. Hand in hand with that, Mr Hicks was concerned that the right type of engagement be generated.

“When I first started teaching I was a good showman,” he says. “The kids seemed to like me, so I didn’t have behaviour problems and the kids did quite well.

“But if I’m really honest, I wasn’t engaging them, I was entertaining them. I’ve grown up a bit since then, so the level of engagement I was after was much, much deeper.”

Mr Hicks started laying the foundations of an engagement-driven culture even before Term 1 got underway. In the two weeks before students returned, he put in considerable time with the teaching staff to focus their attention on what they *could* do, and stop worrying about what they couldn’t.

“In those first two weeks we really challenged that notion that the lack of improvement had been the kids’ fault, or television’s, or video games’. I wanted to re-establish acceptance that it’s the teachers who can make the greatest difference, so we need to think about what we can do differently.”

## Assessment for Learning

An intense period of research ensued, with Mr Hicks and his team reviewing the major international studies on raising achievement in an effort to identify the factors that had been shown to have the greatest impact.

Dylan Wiliam's landmark work on assessment for learning<sup>1</sup> stood out to all and was chosen as the group's first big step.

"We started looking at how to integrate self-assessment and peer moderation," says Mr Hicks. "How to make sure kids were aware of the success criteria, being explicit about the learning intentions of a task - all of that sort of thing we looked at in detail.

"We thought if we could nail that across the whole school we'd have an immediate impact."

Without yet using the label, Birdwood High had taken its first steps into the realm of personalised learning. But there was still a great deal of thinking to be done in order to firm up what should happen next.



## Acknowledging a changed world

The Birdwood team's ongoing discussions and research, led by Mr Hicks, produced several critical observations that they came to refer to as "the compelling case for change."

The first observation was that the role of schools had fundamentally shifted. "Schools used to be the place where kids came to get information," says Mr Hicks. "From the library and from teachers. A few kids had encyclopaedias at home, but apart from that their stuff was at school.

"That information is now available on their phones. So if schools continue to see themselves as just places that kids come to get information, they'll become irrelevant. We need to refocus on helping kids actually understand and use that information."

That thought triggered a closer analysis of the impact of information technology. "Kids are not only using technology to access information nowadays, but more and more to create their own work.

"They're publishing, blogging, videoing... They can be much more creative. And they can now communicate in real time with people all around the world. So schools need to keep up."

Observation number three, and a particularly relevant one for a secondary school, was the changing nature of employment.

"The traditional model of schooling, which had remained essentially unchanged since the 1940s, was effectively educating kids to work in manufacturing," says Mr Hicks.

"Those jobs are disappearing in droves. Automation's contributing, international outsourcing... And many of those still employed are retiring later. So for kids coming out of school the chance of finding work in those industries is significantly less.

*"Schools used to be the place where kids came to get information. That information is now available on their phones."*

"What employers are now looking for is kids with flexibility and creativity - the ability to adapt and problem solve, transfer skills, to take the lead or work in groups, identify opportunities, and be proactive rather than having to be spoon-fed."

The fourth and final key observation was a logical extension of this. Traditional, one-size-fits-all teaching was entirely unsuited to producing the qualities in students that were required in today's world.



## the teacher's perspective

### Goran Krivokapic

Languages, 20 years teaching experience

*"About three years ago I was about to chuck it all in. Because I'd had enough of the system, trying to teach kids to love languages and they've already come in with a predetermined idea of 'German sucks.'*

*Then I sat down with Steve [Hicks, Principal] and we asked, 'Why should the kids be restricted to just one language?' There's no reason for that with all the technology we have. So I went into a Year 8 and 9 classroom and said, 'OK, pick a language.'*



*And it's proved to be very popular with students. In the years I'd been here I'd never heard students actually chat to each other or call out in a foreign language, and they started last year.*

*This year I have a Year 9 girl who wants to learn Hindi. When asked why, she is into meditation and her mum is into meditation and the philosophy and religion and all that. Absolutely fine. Another boy wants to learn Portuguese because his stepmother is Portuguese. There are all kinds of reasons why.*

*The thing we achieve with that is they are motivated. I don't need to push them and I'm over the moon. It's really working. When it comes to recess and lunch, it's almost hard to get them out of the classroom, which is something unheard of before.*

*The kids have learnt to cooperate and work with each other on a much higher level. It's wonderful to walk into a space and there's two kids who would normally not socialise out in the yard, but they are happily working together and helping each other.*

*And it helps their self-esteem. That's one huge thing. No one is labelled the 'nerds', or 'dumb kids' or whatever. Something like that is not happening.*

*I'm sold on this system 100%."*



## Every child is different

In challenging the notion that teaching the same thing to each child in a class - in the same way and at the same time - was the best way for them to learn, the Birdwood team came to a strong conclusion.

Not only was it *not* the best way, it had been retained for so long for no other reason than it was convenient and comfortable.

“It’s very easy to teach the one thing to every kid,” says Mr Hicks, “even though some of them already know it, some aren’t ready for it and some have no interest in it. It’s cost-effective and convenient.

“We can put 30 kids in a box with one teacher, set up nice timetables - off we go. And because it’s what most teachers and parents grew up with, we think it’s what school’s meant to look like.

“But we *know* every child’s different. They’ve each got different interests, different needs, skills, learning styles and levels of development.”

The *compelling case for change* brought near unanimous agreement among staff. Their approach to teaching needed to be adapted to suit each student, and each student needed to start taking ownership of their learning.

“But at that point,” admits Mr Hicks, “I still didn’t have an answer for how on earth you personalise learning for 600 kids.”

*“It’s very easy to teach the one thing to every kid. But we know every child’s different. They’ve each got different interests, different needs, skills, learning styles and levels of development.”*

*“I saw Year 4s directing their own learning, and then Year 8s and 9s in rows being told what to do. It just seemed crazy to me.”*

## ***The challenge of personalisation in a secondary school***

Halfway through 2010, Mr Hicks had the opportunity to tour some schools in Melbourne that were attracting attention through their use of personalised learning.

Both primary and secondary schools were visited, but the experience left him with more questions than answers when it came to personalising learning at a school the size of Birdwood.

“The primary schools we went to were just brilliant,” he says. “But the high schools, despite having magnificent facilities worth millions of dollars, still weren’t managing to do anything remarkable.

“I just got angrier and angrier, thinking ‘What is it about high schools that stops us from doing this?’ I saw Year 4s directing their own learning, and then Year 8s and 9s in rows being told what to do. It just seemed crazy to me.”

Mr Hicks pondered the question long and hard upon his return and identified three core roadblocks to personalising learning in secondary schools.

One, traditional timetables were too restrictive. Two, classrooms were too restrictive. And three, the ongoing debate between teachers about the way the Middle School years [8-10] should be approached caused progress-stifling compromise.

“Some believe in dedicated Middle Schooling, with students exploring interests and teachers really getting to know them. Others believe students should be drilled in core, specialist subjects to prepare them for Years 11 and 12. I call it the ‘3-to-5-Year Argument.’ And I wasn’t interested in having it.”

With the roadblocks identified, Mr Hicks determined to remove each one. And importantly, he would do so in a way that still gave his teachers and students a choice.



## the teacher's perspective

### Kristina Vonow

**AIL and Drama, 16 years  
teaching experience**

*"The personal investment is huge. Getting to know your Advisory Group at the level that we do – it's big; it's tiring.*

*But we do it together, and we do it alongside a student, rather than at a student. We just come at them from the side. That's how I like to describe it.*

*We do really treat each student as an individual, and we honour that they often know way more than we do in their chosen field, or in their passion.*

*So because we have that sort of relationship with the kids, we're reading stuff they wouldn't normally show a teacher, about their family, about their lives. We have deeper conversations than just, 'How are you going with your work?' They give more than that, and we give more.*

*We see students rise to the occasion and do quite remarkable things in this*

*environment, purely because they feel that they don't want to let us down; they use that language.*

*There's a feel in the yard that's really positive - a sense that Birdwood High can do anything. There's a really different feel in the community of the school, which is what dreams are made of.*

*What we're seeing too is peer-to-peer teaching. Someone will sit alongside someone and say, 'I don't get this,' and they're talking about it, and they're helping each other.*

*That collegiality is just fabulous. That's not to say we don't get any interesting characters who will avoid work. But they're a minority, and the majority don't even look at them."*

## *‘Teachers and students, choose your model’*

Although he did already have his teachers’ in-principle support for transformational change, and some steps - such as introducing assessment for learning - were already being taken, Mr Hicks feared that the reality of actually implementing a wholesale move to personalisation may prove too much of a shock for many.

“Some would’ve been on board, but others - if forced into it - could’ve actively undermined it. So that’s when I hatched the plan of offering dual teaching models from 2011, starting with the next cohort of Year 8s.”

Teachers and the new students could choose to either stick with tradition, or enter what would be called the Birdwood High School “Academy of Middle Schooling”, which would wholeheartedly embrace the notion of personalised learning for Years 8-10.

Within the Academy, students’ learning targets would be self-directed. Interdisciplinary units would be used rather than separate subjects, so as to provide learning in context.

Units would be tailored around students’ interests to maximise personal engagement.

Classrooms would be totally reinvented as flexible learning spaces. Kids would negotiate and manage their own timetables. And each child would be assigned a staff mentor.

Variations of some of these steps would also be implemented in Senior School. But the Academy of Middle Schooling would bravely carry the torch of innovation.

The teachers approved. A wave of excited energy and optimism swept through the administration. And then they realised how much work needed to be done.

*The teachers approved. A wave of excited energy and optimism swept through the administration. And then they realised how much work needed to be done.*

## Getting the Academy off the ground

“Those six months were absolutely frantic,” says Mr Hicks. “We had no integrated units written, no learning spaces prepared... And we had to get out and tell the community what we were doing, so that the next year’s Year 8s and their families could actually make an informed choice.”

Mr Hicks and the Academy team team did more than 20 visits to primary schools in the region to introduce and explain the Academy of Middle Schooling personalised learning concept to Year 7s and their teachers.

They also conducted six community meetings for parents and guardians. And it was these experiences that started to provide an inkling that all the work wouldn’t be for nothing.

*“They were extremely interested, But there was also a huge amount of fear. ‘If this is so good how come everyone’s not doing it?’”*

“These were long meetings,” he says. “Often four or five hours. And what was fascinating was that they got busier as we went along. Word was getting out, and people just had so many questions.

“They were extremely interested, and you could tell they understood what we were trying to do and why. But there was also a huge amount of fear. ‘If this is so good how come everyone’s not doing it?’ ‘Can you guarantee it’s going to work?’”

The latter exchanges were equal parts fascinating and frustrating, he recalls. “Despite putting up with an absolutely broken system for so long, that itself gave no guarantees, that they probably hated when at school, they really struggled with questioning it.

“Because, to them, that’s what school’s meant to look like.”

Overall, however, community support appeared to be building. There was also no shortage of Birdwood teachers willing to put up their hands, ranging from the highly experienced to recent graduates.



## A new approach to staff leadership

In tandem with development of the Academy, Mr Hicks formulated a new staff leadership structure.

Rather than management-focused faculty leaders, such as Head of Mathematics, people would be made responsible for specific groups of students and their entire learning.

“When you look back at what faculty leaders actually did - and some of them were fantastic at it - they managed resources,” says Mr Hicks.

“So we thought, ‘If we’re serious about personalising learning our leadership has to be centred around the child, not the subject.’”

*“If we’re serious about personalising learning our leadership has to be centred around the child, not the subject.”*



## Parent body’s declarations of support

Further fuelling the optimism towards the end of 2010 were two important, and completely independent declarations of support for innovation from the school’s Governing Council (GC).

The first, recorded in the group’s minutes, read: “We want our children to have learning experiences equal to the best in the world, not just good for this region, and we can’t do this by remaining insular.”

The second was: “‘Best practice’ asks, what is working? ‘Next practice’ asks, what could work more powerfully?”

“So that was really important and, I thought, very strategic on their part,” says Mr Hicks.

“They were supporting and encouraging us to get out and see what the most innovative schools in the world were doing, which we’ve been fortunate enough to do on many occasions over the past few years through grant funding, with more trips planned for 2013.

“And they also completely endorsed our decision to pursue transformational, rather than incremental change. That backing was really important in moving forward.”

## *Doors open to flood of students*

*“We’d estimated that maybe 50 kids would opt in. We got 120. And that gave us shivers.”*



As 2011 rolled around, the moment of truth arrived. The Academy opened its doors, and it was time for Mr Hicks, his leaders and teachers to find out if they’d covered all bases. The answer came quickly.

They had not. “We’d estimated that maybe 50 kids would opt in,” says Mr Hicks. “We got 120. Out of a 160-child Year 8 intake, only 40 chose to stick with the traditional system. And that gave us shivers.”

It was, however, a strong show of confidence from the community. So the Academy team took that as a positive, put their heads down and got on with it.

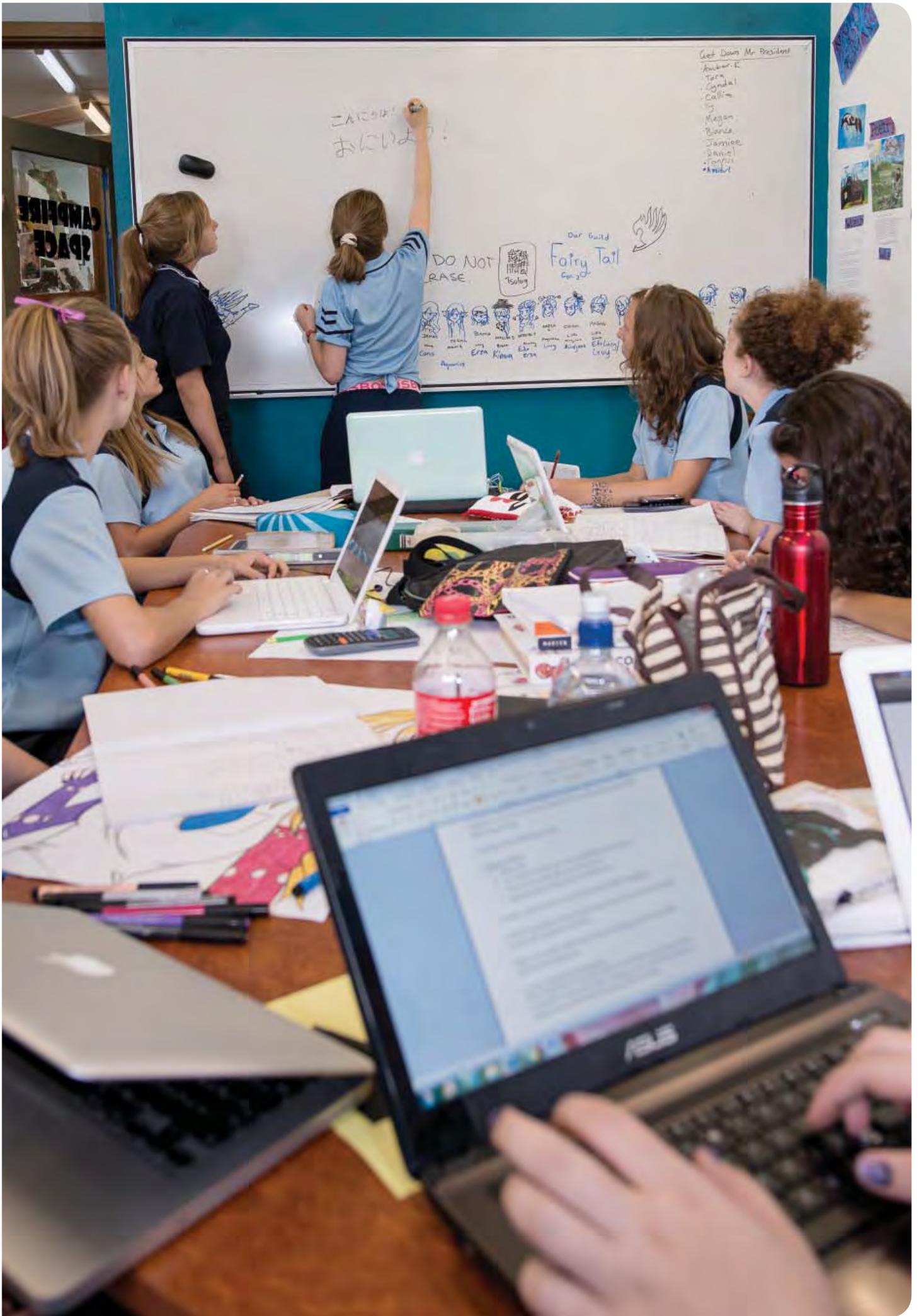
## *Testing to gather improvement data*

The first thing they did was a wide range of testing to establish the students’ initial levels of learning and engagement. This would then be repeated in the middle of Term 3 to provide an indication of growth. The same testing was conducted with the traditional system cohort.

“Our Department for Education and Child Development Regional Director, David Jolliffe, had said to me early in our planning, ‘Transforming the school is the way to go, but it has to be evidence-based,’” says Mr Hicks.

“So we did literacy and numeracy testing, many engagement surveys and creativity tests. And because we had the dual system, we’d be able to compare the data across the two.”

With testing completed, the personalised learning could begin. But that proved easier said than done.





## *Kids “just weren’t ready”*

*“We were constantly having meetings [with the kids], asking them to let us know what was working for them, what wasn’t and why.”*

“When I reflect back on the early days of the first month, our biggest mistake was that, in our enthusiasm, we’d made the assumption the kids were ready for this. But they weren’t.

“We jumped in boots and all, asking, ‘What are you passionate about?’ ‘What do you want to be learning about?’ ‘Design your timetable.’ But we hadn’t done the prep’ work.

“The kids didn’t *know* what they were passionate about. They didn’t know how to direct their own learning. They didn’t know how to manage their time. When we bring Year 8s in now it’s scaffolded very differently to what it was in those early days.”

A hectic period of skill development and interest exploration followed, along with a great deal of open, honest and constructive communication between all parties.

“We were transparent with the kids right from the start,” says Mr Hicks. “We were constantly having meetings, asking them to let us know what was

working for them, what wasn’t and why. But when kids are crying because they can’t work out where they’re meant to be going, it’s a pretty good heads-up that they’re not ready! So we worked that through.”

Staff met nightly to review and refine their approaches, and help each other along. And in the midst of all this, many additional integrated units of work had to be written due to the unexpectedly large intake of students.

This process - the weaving of multi-subject learning goals into single projects to provide learning in context - was entirely new for staff, and required skills that had to be practised and mastered.

Similarly, it would take time to ascertain how the units would best work together, and how many could, or should, be undertaken by students simultaneously.

Although, an indication of the latter did come in short time.

## Excessive rigor

A big message to come out of the 2010 community meetings was that parents feared a lack of academic rigor.

“They were worried that we’d go back to the ‘60s,” says Mr Hicks, “with kids lounging around in beanbags singing songs.”

But in the teachers’ effort to allay this fear, they caused the opposite problem. “We hit the kids with so much work early on that they were just drowning in it. So we had to quickly revise that too.”

Mistakes and misjudgements aside, however, fantastic things were beginning to happen.

*“In a very short space of time we had young kids managing their own schedules, meeting deadlines and just being really engaged in their learning.”*

## The kids start responding

According to Mr Hicks, within just four weeks most kids had adapted to well and truly take responsibility for their learning.

“In a very short space of time we had young kids managing their own schedules, meeting deadlines and just being really engaged in their learning.”

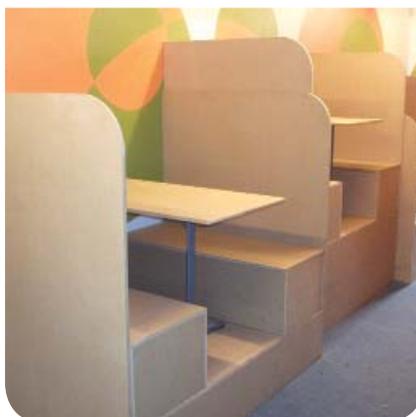
One integrated unit in particular illustrated this. Having vowed to rid the Academy of the restrictiveness of traditional classrooms, the teaching team set the students the task of researching the different modes of learning that they might need or want to engage in, and then designing, costing, building and decorating spaces to support and facilitate them.

“We’d already taken the doors off some rooms, taken out old desks and changed the furniture a bit,” says Mr Hicks.

“But the kids’ really brought the Academy area to life. We ended up with a whole range of different learning spaces kids could choose to go and work in. ‘Watering holes’ for collaborative work... ‘Cave spaces’ for quiet individual work and reflection... ‘Da Vinci studios’ for hands-on art and science stuff.

“They looked at every usable space - even little nooks and crannies and corridors were transformed into learning spaces. And the kids basically did it all - they even organised their own fundraising to pay for it.”

The children’s sense of ownership and pride in the Academy skyrocketed. “And,” he adds, “they learned a hell of a lot in the process.”



## the teacher's perspective

### Graham Rathjen

**Tech Studies, 41 years  
teaching experience**

*"I enjoy this teaching style much more than I ever have. About five years ago I was planning retirement, but now I've pulled the pin.*

*The kids when they come in, they just get their stuff out and get started. They just organise themselves better. Even with something like lining up by height for a photograph.*

*Normally they stand like sheep waiting for direction, but these kids, they do it without any prompting and without offending each other.*

*And the other thing you find, at recess and lunch they don't want to leave the room. In the old system they couldn't*

*wait. Five minutes before the bell they're all clockwatching. Whereas this lot, 'Come on, get out - get some fresh air!'*

*Also, with the kids who are shy and self-conscious, in a traditional classroom they won't put their hand up and ask. But in this system they can, because they have targeted teaching, often on their own, and you're floating around the room so they'll come to you.*

*The kids actually get very possessive of their area. Other people can come in, but they can't take over. And so they have that sense of ownership, which is important."*



## One out, three in

At the mid-year point, something very interesting happened.

At the beginning of Term 1, parents and students had been asked to give the Academy six months to sort out any teething problems. If they still felt it wasn't working for them at that stage, they would be free to shift back into the traditional system.

Of 120 students, only one did. But even more noteworthy, three traditional system students actually came the other way.

"The Academy and traditional-system kids were all mixing in the playground, of course," says Mr Hicks. "Parents talk too. And they could see the new model working."

Around the same time, the teaching group decided to change the Academy's name. They'd become aware that many people had strong preconceptions as to what "Middle Schooling" entailed, and these didn't necessarily match the new model.

The new title of "Academy of Innovative Learning" (AIL) was adopted to sidestep this issue, and has remained ever since.



*"The Academy and traditional-system kids were all mixing in the playground, of course. Parents talk too. And they could see the new model working."*

## Evidence of improvement exceeds all expectations

With the approach to developing integrated units continuing to be “tweaked” in the second half of the year, AIL staff were optimistic that the students’ learning would similarly be improving.

But when the second round of testing was conducted mid-Term 3, the results amazed everyone (*see sample data on opposite page*).

“The [traditional system] Junior High kids mirrored exactly what had happened in previous years for that age group,” says Mr Hicks. “But the engagement data for the AIL kids was off the scale.

“Their feedback was incredible - unheard of levels of pride in their work, enthusiasm, preparedness to help each other... And simple facts backed it up. Attendance rates had risen from 90% to 96%, and trips to the ‘Time Out’ room had dropped by 85%.”

Equally stunningly, the AIL students were improving at a significantly faster rate than their Junior High counterparts in literacy and numeracy.

“That was really important. Because even though parents had been able to see that their kids were engaged at school, they’d still been asking if they were learning anything.”

These eye-catching results also contributed to AIL being formally recognised by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) as an “Innovative Learning Environment”. The honour came through an OECD research study, covering 26 countries, that sought to identify the most innovative educational institutions around the world.

So as year one drew to an end there was a great sense of pride and accomplishment for students and teachers alike. The team felt there was a moral imperative to continue on the personalised learning path, and agreed that from 2012 the dual teaching approaches would no longer be offered to new intakes.

They would direct all Year 8s into AIL. And they would make it even better.

### Interpreting the data

Graphs opposite showing “Improvement” are based on a measurement scale called “effect size”, developed by the University of Melbourne’s Professor John Hattie.<sup>2</sup> The global average for yearly effect size in traditional classrooms is 0.2-0.25. Anything above 0.4 is considered significant.

### Key

The colours on all graphs opposite refer to the following:

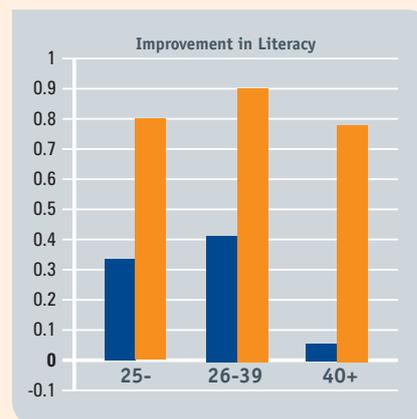
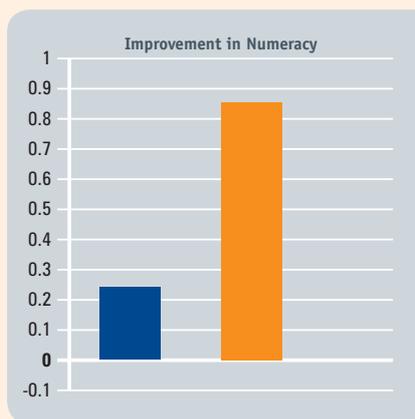
- Traditional Teaching (TT)
- Academy of Innovative Learning (AIL)

*“Unheard of levels of pride in their work, enthusiasm... And simple facts backed it up. Attendance had risen from 90% to 96%, and trips to the ‘Time Out’ room had dropped by 85%.”*

# 2011 AIL Data Snapshot

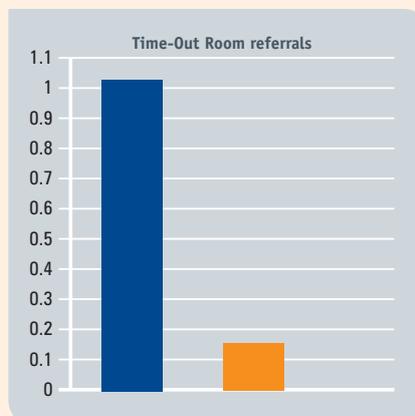
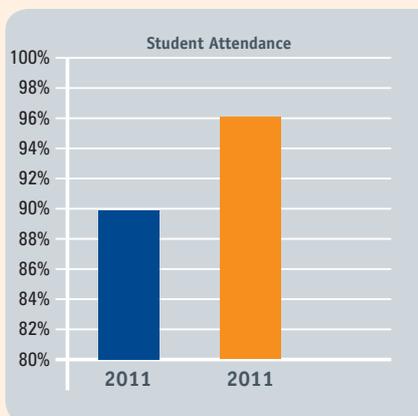
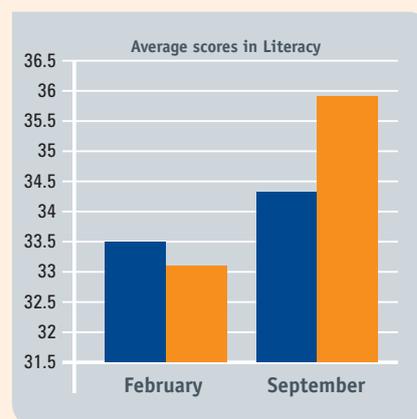
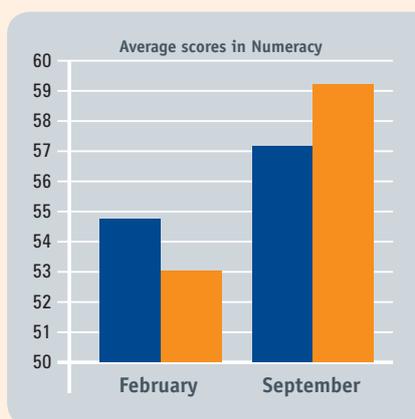
## More improvement

In Numeracy, the Traditional Teaching (TT, blue) result is consistent with the average improvement experienced in classrooms around the world, while the AIL cohort's (orange) improvement is quite exceptional. In Literacy, the three groupings represent the students' initial scores (out of 50) at the start of Term 1.



## Better Marks

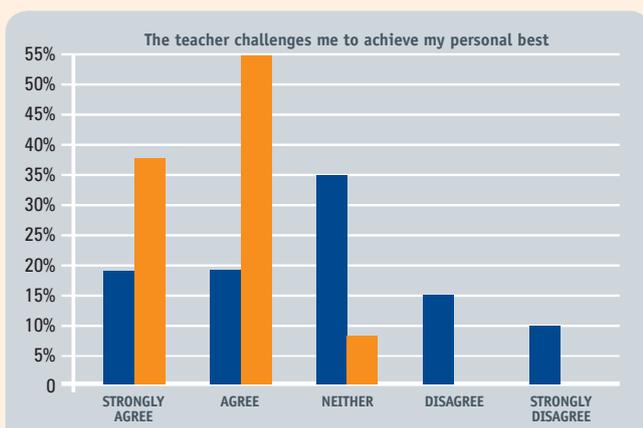
These graphs compare average exam scores. In both Literacy and Numeracy, the average achievement score for the AIL cohort was actually lower at the start of the year, but higher in September - a remarkable turnaround.



## Greater enthusiasm

Historically, Birdwood High's Year 8 attendance rate has been 90-91%, and this was repeated in 2011 within the TT cohort. So the AIL figure of 96% indicates a significant increase.

Similarly, Time-Out Room referrals match previous years for TT students. But the AIL group's numbers represent an incredible 88% reduction.



## Stronger student-teacher relationships

Over 90% of AIL students agreed that they had been challenged to achieve their personal best, strongly indicating very positive teacher-student relationships. Notably, not one student disagreed.

*NB: Additional 2011 data comparing the engagement of the Year 8 AIL cohort with those Year 8 students remaining in the traditional system is available upon request. Contact Birdwood High School Principal Steve Hicks (see contact details at rear).*

*Each student would present to their mentor teacher, parents and any friends they'd like to invite, explaining what they'd learned and how it met the learning plan.*

## **Enhancements for 2012**

A comprehensive performance review and analysis was done by the ALL team at the end of 2011, and several key areas for improvement were identified and addressed for 2012.

The process and content of integrated units was tightened up to ensure all areas of the emerging national curriculum were covered.

The approach to "Creative Passions" units - which allowed students to choose an area of great personal interest and build their own learning plan around it - was reworked to provide more structure for the children to work within, ensuring consistent academic rigor.

And end-of-Term individual exhibitions were introduced to further encourage the students to take pride in their work and share their learning "journey".

Each student would present to their mentor teacher, parents and any friends they'd like to invite, explaining what they'd learned and how it met the learning plan they'd designed for themselves.



## To integrate or not to integrate

*Each cohort coming in would create their own learning areas and retain them for their full three years in AIL. Where possible, they would continue working with the same group of teachers to create the strongest relationships possible.*

With the impending intake of a new cohort of Year 8 students, consideration also had to be given to whether they should be integrated with the original AIL cohort, who were moving into Year 9, or treated as a separate group.

“We ended up leaving them in their separate year levels,” says Mr Hicks, “because the relationships the first student group had built were just so strong. We really wanted to preserve that.”

It was decided that each cohort coming in would create their own learning areas and retain them for their full three years in AIL. Where possible, they would continue working with the same group of teachers to create the strongest relationships possible.

“And just to keep things interesting we also invited our Year 10s to move over from Junior High to AIL, and 50 of them did. So AIL expanded quite a bit in 2012.”

Progress was happening administratively as well. In no doubt that personalised learning was Birdwood High’s future, the school’s leadership team fully aligned every operational function to reflect and support it.

“We looked at HR, the types of teachers we were recruiting, our infrastructure, communications technology, furniture... Even finance. We changed the way budgets were done to reflect the fact that we were allocating money to serve groups of students now, not faculties. So that was a huge shift.”

And the operation of the Senior School was also given a closer look.



*Students were assigned mentor teachers, just as in AIL, who would advise them on their personal learning needs in subjects relative to their vocational plans and requirements.*

## *Personalised learning in the senior years*

Although Mr Hicks and his team felt they couldn't completely revolutionise their approach to Year 11 and 12, as they had to the middle years through AIL, important moves toward greater personalisation had still taken place.

A new structure had been adopted in 2011 that gave students the option of entering either a Pre-Uni Academy, or a Vocational Education and Training (VET) Academy, depending on their intended future pathway.

Traditional subjects were still taught within each Academy. But students were assigned mentor teachers, just as in AIL, who would advise them on their personal learning needs in these subjects relative to their vocational plans and requirements.

“And in 2012 we got a lot better at that,” says Mr Hicks. “We did a lot of work around the VET pathways in particular. Things like, if a student's doing a school-based apprenticeship in plumbing, how do we support that child with the specific maths, English and applied science they need?”

Equal attention was also paid to the needs of senior students who, for whatever reason, needed some additional personal assistance, through the establishment of the Birdwood High School Flexible Learning Centre.

“Students can go to the Flexible Learning Centre for some help to catch up on a lesson they missed, or to nut-out something they're struggling with. If they have a personality clash with a certain teacher they can go to the Centre for their lessons instead of turning up and continuing to struggle.

“It might even be a child who needs a helping hand returning from a suspension. No-one need fall through the cracks now.”



## Time Out Room scrapped

The last major development of 2012 was possibly the most concrete indication yet of the remarkable level of student engagement that had been achieved across the entire school.

When the Term 3 data came in, it was discovered that since 2010 there had been a staggering 96% reduction in total behaviour management problems across all year levels. According to Mr Hicks, around 12 kids used to be sent out of class a day, but in 2012 across Years 8-10 no more than that were sent out for the entire year.

“Not long after we learned that, I had to do an interstate trip. And when I walked back into the coffee room I was told, ‘By the way Steve, we’ve shut the Time Out Room’! And that gave us a brilliant opportunity.”

With staff no longer tied up monitoring “naughty” kids in a Time Out Room, a permanently staffed Tutorial Centre for the senior students was able to be opened.

“Senior teachers are all rostered in there during the week, so that kids who’ve got free lessons are able to book in and get specific, personal support with their work.”

As satisfying as these successes were, however, Mr Hicks and his team were champing at the bit to take another huge step forward in 2013.

“When we launched ALL, we described our mission as being for every kid in the school to flourish,” he says. “By that we meant not just academically successful, but to be happy, vibrant, confident and creative kids as well.

“And we thought there were some key areas we could improve in to get us closer to achieving that.”

*In Years 8-10 around 12 kids used to be sent out of class a day, but in 2012 no more than that were sent out for the entire year.*





## the teacher's perspective

### Dave Swann

**AIL and Mathematics, 34 years  
teaching experience**

*"It's going to be emotional at the end of this year when we let these first AIL kids go. We're more than their teachers; we've moved away from the term.*

*Their personal growth is huge. The way they conduct themselves in conversations. When people visit us and speak with the kids the response is always that they don't feel like they're talking to Year 10s - they seem much older.*

*That's not to say we don't have issues with some kids who are still not there. But I think the majority are much further down the track than any Year 10 students I've seen before. We've got some students designing their own learning units around things they're interested in.*

*When we started this we all wanted to know what the end of year 10 would look like. 'Would we have missed something?' But we're now seeing that, where we've missed something, they're picking it up quickly.*

*Even at the end of the year they were working to the last day, without being told to. They weren't even asking, 'Can we get the videos out now?'*

*We're not racing to get stuff done. Who says a student should be able to do a particular thing at Year 10 anyway? They could be ready in Year 8 or 9. Or they might still not be quite ready yet, but they'll get there eventually.*

*The important thing is they've got to believe they're going to get there. You can't convince them of that."*

*An hour of advisory time is now scheduled every Monday and Friday, and two hours on Wednesdays, for Advisory Teachers and their students to connect, plan and review.*

## **Better personalised planning**

The biggest opportunity for improvement, the teachers felt, was in the planning of personalised learning programs.

In the existing structure, mentor teachers were responsible for overseeing the learning programs of 15-17 students in their mentor group. The intention was for the mentor to regularly catch up with each of those students to discuss how they were going, and provide input into their next steps.

According to Mr Hicks, it worked well when both parties were available at the same time. But without set timetables, they often weren't.

"It was also making it difficult to do some of the assessment-for-learning tasks, like peer moderation. It's very hard to get all the kids sitting down to help someone assess their work when they're scattered all over the place."

They needed a better arrangement, and one had presented itself through the US-originated Big Picture educational movement.

Mr Hicks had investigated the largely personalised-learning focused group, now gaining traction in Australia, as part of his ongoing research in 2012, and had been impressed with what he found.

After introducing the school's GC to the group's concepts they had agreed to make Birdwood High a Big Picture "Exploration School", which gave the school permission to experiment with individual Big Picture ideas, without being bound to their philosophy exclusively.

"Big Picture schools have what they call Advisory Teachers and Advisory Groups, with regular catch-up times locked in place. And that's what we're doing at Birdwood in 2013."

An hour of advisory time is now scheduled every Monday and Friday, and two hours on Wednesdays, providing a total of four hours each week for Advisory Teachers and their students to connect, plan and review.

"And to back that up we've now also introduced our own formal model for Individual Learning Plans (I-Plans)."



## *I am, therefore I-Plan*

From 2013, every child at Birdwood High – AIL and Senior School – will be given an I-Plan.

An overall planning meeting is held between Advisory Teacher, student and parents at the beginning of every term, to identify, explore and document the child's learning goals, as well as their strengths, weaknesses and areas of interest. From this a general agreement is reached on how all parties will work together to help the child meet their goals.

Then as each and every unit of work is undertaken throughout the year, specific steps to personalise the

student's learning from them are worked out with the unit's supervising teacher and incorporated into the I-Plan.

"So if a child's gifted in maths, you look at how to increase the challenge of the maths component of the unit," says Mr Hicks. "If they happen to be dyslexic, let's find ways to modify the literacy component so they can still achieve success."

The student then discusses these ongoing additions with their Advisory Teacher in their regular catch-up sessions.

"There may also be times when the Advisory Teacher will need to become an advocate for the student. If the agreed modifications to the unit aren't properly made, or prove too easy or too difficult, they can accompany the student to bring it to the attention of the unit's supervisor."

*As each and every unit of work is undertaken throughout the year, specific steps to personalise the student's learning from them are worked out with the unit's supervising teacher and incorporated into the I-Plan.*



*“Importantly, the student also has to identify how they will benefit the mentor’s business, and what their learning goals are.”*

### **External mentors**

A second major step in 2013 for many Year 10 students has been the replacement of the traditional work experience week with external vocational mentors and professional internships.

“This is another Big Picture framework,” says Mr Hicks. “Say the child’s interested in becoming an engineer. We’ll help them find an engineer to be their mentor. A rigorous learning plan will then be worked out between the student, their Advisory Teacher and the mentor.”

Regular interviews are arranged. A number of ‘work shadow days’ are scheduled, which involve the student accompanying and observing their mentor as they perform their job. An internship is negotiated, involving a period of actual work with the mentor and his or her organisation.

“And importantly, the student also has to identify how *they* will benefit the mentor’s business, and what their learning goals are.”

Occasional work shadow days are also being considered for Year 9s.

## *Additional personalisation in Senior School*

Within the Senior School, greater flexibility and opportunity for personal choice has been provided to students in 2013 through the adoption of a “block” timetable.

Each senior class has just two lessons per week, each of two hours duration. And Wednesdays have been kept completely lesson-free.

“That’s really helping them,” says Mr Hicks. “They can do whatever they need to do with that day. Most of the VET courses are on Wednesdays, but other kids might come in and access the tutorial teachers, or they can work from home. Some kids have even arranged part-time work on that day.”

Senior students have also been given the benefit of access to a private, quiet learning space, with the conversion of a large former drama room into a

whole-school “Cave space”, set up with many individual corrals. This arrangement replaces the Cave spaces within AIL that Years 8-10 formerly used exclusively.

“I suspect what we’ll ultimately end up with in the Senior School is a university-style model, with all-in lectures and small-group tutes, discussions and prac’ classes, all on at different times and students managing those schedules.

“We’re aiming to flesh out what that will look like ready for 2014.”

*“I suspect what we’ll ultimately end up with in the Senior School is a university-style model, with all-in lectures and small-group tutes, and students managing those schedules.*



Year 8s are being offered a range of alternative experiences to choose from called “Immersion Activities”, designed to link students with common interests.

### *Challenging the notion of school camps*

Yet another staple of traditional high school education is being re-imagined at Birdwood in 2013 – the Year 8 camp. According to Mr Hicks, they’re just not needed any more.

“For year after year, we’ve hauled the new Year 8s off to a camp somewhere to go surfing, windsurfing, canoeing and stuff like that,” he says.

“And the aim of that was always to build bonds between kids who may not otherwise see that much of each other, because they were put in separate classes and those classes didn’t much mix. It also built the kids’ relationships with the teachers.

“But in ALL the kids are sharing the same learning spaces, constantly interacting and they know their teachers incredibly well.”

So instead, the 2013 Year 8s are being offered a range of alternative one-to-three-day experiences to choose from called “Immersion Activities”, designed to link students with common interests. “One interesting example early in the year will be an Adelaide Fringe camp for those into the performing arts.”

Getting the students out of school to learn will remain a focus, but opportunities to bring in external expertise will also be explored.



## Promoting advanced performers

Wherever deemed appropriate, ALL students excelling in any academic or sporting area during 2013 will be promoted to a higher year level in that field. The practice was first introduced in 2012 for a handful of students, but is expected to grow considerably this year.

“We had a couple of Year 9 kids last year do the Year 11 computing course,” says Mr Hicks. “And they actually topped the class.

“We also had at least six Year 9s who, despite not having any traditional maths lessons, covered the entire Year 10 maths curriculum. So those students have joined the Year 11 high-level maths classes this year and have slotted straight back into the traditional-style subject classes with no worries at all.”

By the end of this year, Mr Hicks believes, there will be hardly a Year 10 student who hasn't completed at least one Year 11 subject.

“So it's wonderful to be able to really extend those kids, not to mention being able to show parents more evidence that the ALL approach doesn't disadvantage students when it comes to transferring back into individual traditional subjects for the senior years.”

*“It's wonderful to be able to really extend kids, not to mention show parents that the ALL approach doesn't disadvantage students for the senior years.”*



*“And the kids’ level of maturity and responsibility is beyond all expectations. They’re not just able to manage their own time and learning, they actually enjoy doing it.”*

## ***So what does it all mean?***

When asked to reflect on his key observations of the impact of personalised learning at Birdwood High, and particularly through ALL, Mr Hicks does not hesitate.

“It’s made us all love going to school again.

“The teachers are working together and supporting each other like I’ve never seen. Their relationships with the kids are incredible. And the kids’ level of maturity and responsibility is beyond all expectations. They’re not just able to manage their own time and learning, they actually enjoy doing it.

“When I walk into that Year 10 space now, and see those kids who started ALL two years ago, it really does feel like going home.

“It’s just a joy to be part of.”

1. *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, Kings College, London, 1998.

2. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, John A. Hattie, 2008.



# Nairne School

Preschool - Year 7





The Gift of...

- Generosity
- Kindness
- Patience
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Self-discipline
- Service
- Fact
- Thankfulness
- Tolerance
- Trust
- Trustworthiness
- Understanding
- Unity

VALUES FOR LIFE

VALUES FOR LIFE

At the beginning of 2012, **Nairne School** Principal Leesa Shepherd asked herself an important question. If we want our students to really embrace the notion of personal challenge and development, then shouldn't our teachers be embracing it themselves? The answer was obvious, of course, as were the myriad potential benefits. The only unknown was how to actually make it happen. So she and the school's leadership team did what they wanted the staff to do; they took a risk and tried something new. Twelve months later, it's paying off for the entire school community.

Nairne School's first experience with personalised learning had been a frustrating one. In 2009 the staff had started moving towards a personalised approach in the teaching of mathematics, in the hope of improving what the leadership team felt had been less than acceptable results.

With the support of an on-staff maths coordinator, a small group of teachers had adopted new practices, but overall there was little "take up".

Change was again sought in 2011. The school started working with a maths consultant focused on formative "assessment for learning"<sup>1</sup> techniques that involved tracking individual students' progress. Each child's skills and knowledge were plotted by their teacher and, in some cases, by the students themselves. And their next personal learning step was regularly considered and tailored accordingly.

"This produced some movement," says Ms Shepherd. "But we hadn't been able to produce wide reaching improvement. There just wasn't the big energy shift we needed."

Similarly, the students' development in literacy was falling below expectations, particularly in reading. "We had children coming out of Junior Primary as competent, capable readers, and by Year 5 they were saying, 'I hate books.' Their interest and enthusiasm had really dropped off, and their skill level had plateaued. Yet we had experienced and dedicated staff."

At the end of that year, Ms Shepherd and her Deputy Principal, Derek Miller, were absolutely determined to rectify these situations in 2012.

*Leading up to each consultant visit, Ms Shepherd would pose the same challenging question to each teacher: “What do you need to work on next?”*

## ***A light switches on***

Early in Term 1, Ms Shepherd and Mr Miller attended a meeting with Lobethal Primary School Principal Garry North, Birdwood High School Principal Steve Hicks and Mylor Primary School Principal Ngari Boehm.

Their conversation turned to the personalised learning approaches that each was using. And a light bulb turned on.

“As we were chatting I thought, ‘Why can’t we talk about personalising learning for teachers?’” says Ms Shepherd. “The more I thought about it, the more it made sense.

“I became convinced that personalised professional development for our teaching staff was the essential step in our efforts to address the decline in students’ maths and literacy; we should really experience and understand it for ourselves before starting to think about it for the kids.

“Better results couldn’t help but follow.” The leadership team made it their number one priority for 2012, and Ms Shepherd decided that, since she would be asking her staff to try something new, she should be prepared to take a risk herself. So she settled on a unique delivery strategy.

She would engage expert maths and literacy consultants to regularly visit and work with her team throughout the full school year, and with a commitment to continue the work for at least three years.

Occasionally they would all learn together in the traditional way, at a staff meeting or on a pupil-free day, especially when a new topic

was introduced. But most of the time the learning would be one-to-one, or in very small groups, based on individual teachers’ self-assessed needs, allowing them to map their own learning paths.

Leading up to each consultant visit, Ms Shepherd would pose the same challenging question to each teacher: “What do you need to work on next?”





## the teacher's perspective

### Gary Skuse

Junior Primary, 30+ years  
teaching experience

*"I think it's very positive knowing there's some whole-school stuff happening, and that there's a chance for individuals to work at whatever level they need, and that it's ongoing.*

*Whereas [in the past] you might go along to a professional development session and find you already know a fair bit about a subject, and think, 'Oh here we go again,' or, if it's something above your head, 'What am I doing here?' with the personalised approach it's what you need when you need it.*

*And it's been delivered with some sort of progression about what you need next, so your input's valued.*

*It's given me more options for going beyond just what might be provided to me, such as linking up with people with similar interests, whether at this school or others. I think that's a real positive step.*

*With the support that's there, there's a real collegiate feeling around the place, that we're all doing this together and it doesn't matter if you're not great at one thing because you're great at something else. So there's all that positive self-regard and collaboration, which is great.*

*And in the end it just means the teaching is more effective."*

## Getting staff buy-in

Ms Shepherd knew which consultants she wanted to bring in. She favoured two in the maths field and one in literacy, all of whom worked in ways that she felt would sit perfectly with Nairne's commitment to pursuing personalised learning.

The maths consultants were known and respected by staff already, but the literacy consultant was a new face. So, after lengthy conversations with the leadership team, Ms Shepherd organised a question-and-answer meeting in an effort to gain her teachers' full support.

"The staff elected two representatives to come along from each area of the school – Junior, Middle and Upper Primary," says Ms Shepherd. "Then they spent some time with the consultant, kind of challenging her and talking to her about the sorts of things she could offer.

"I'd put aside half a day for it. But after only an hour and a half they came out and said, 'when can we start?' So off we went."

## Honest self-appraisals

To get the ball rolling, the Nairne teachers were asked to rate themselves professionally as Learners, Beginner Learners or Advanced Learners, just as their students had been asked to do when appraising their mathematics abilities.

"We were asking people to really pull down their facades and put it all out there on the table," says Ms Shepherd.

"We made it clear that it wasn't about judgement. We said, 'Everyone's a learner in this and there's no problem if you're a Beginner Learner, Advanced or anywhere in between. We just want to know where you're putting yourself so that we can support you in the next step of your journey.'"

According to Ms Shepherd, the desired effect soon took hold. Almost all teachers regularly shared with her

or Mr Miller their own frank appraisals of where they needed, and wanted, additional input and support.

"They'd say, 'I really want to sit down with consultant A and look at how I'm going with comprehension.' Or, 'I really want consultant B to teach side-by-side with me in class so that she can see what I'm doing and give me feedback, and I can see what she's doing and learn from that.'"

As the year unfolded, the professional growth that became evident across the entire teaching group was exceptional.

"I'd never seen anything like it," says Ms Shepherd. "I'd tried so many different things over the years without ever really getting past first base. But here we had people taking full ownership of their learning and really thinking about what their next step needed to be.

"People were just so much more open about their practice. They genuinely wanted to talk and plan with their colleagues and the consultants.

"It was incredible."

*As the year unfolded, the professional growth that became evident across the entire teaching group was exceptional.*

*Teachers began routinely discussing research articles and texts, and proactively planning and arranging development workshops around areas that particularly excited them.*

## **Benefits of tackling maths and literacy together**

An important, though unintended influence on the teachers' openness, believes Ms Shepherd, was the fact that maths and literacy teaching were being worked on simultaneously.

She noticed that most teachers tended to feel confident with at least one of the disciplines, which seemed to make it easier to deal with a relative lack of it in the other.

"People thought we were crazy," says Ms Shepherd. "No one expects teachers to look at their literacy development and maths at the same time - that's just too hard!" But we ask our kids to do it every day of the week.

"And it really did appear to help staff not only build on strengths, but admit and confront their vulnerabilities."

The atmosphere of honesty and openness also translated to a greater preparedness to share and suggest things with each other.

Teachers began routinely discussing research articles and texts, and proactively planning and arranging development workshops around areas that particularly excited them.

Ms Shepherd feels this represents the formation of a vibrant new school culture.

"I regularly hear teachers saying, 'This author was saying this about how they start their morning;...' Sharon's recommended this text which is quite different, so what does that mean for me;...'I like this bit of this and that bit of that.'

"We've created an environment now where people are prepared to really put themselves out there and take those risks."





## the teacher's perspective

### Helen Arbury-Smith

Senior Primary, 13 years  
teaching experience

*"I just think the amount of learning we've done this year has been absolutely brilliant. I've found it invigorating. It gives you this energy. You think, 'Whoa, I can do this.'*

*The way we've been working [with personalised learning] is much more engaging. The bits I've done with my class, they say things like, 'I feel really smart doing this.' A Year 7 girl said that. And another said, 'I forgot we were doing maths it was so much fun.'*

*It also gives you another way of approaching those kids that don't get things first time around.*

*I've got one little boy who used to just shrug when he didn't know an answer, and I'd think, 'What can I do? I don't want to humiliate him.'*

*But now I've done some questioning. 'OK, you don't know that bit, but what about the bit that comes before?' And we keep going back until we find a bit he does know, and it starts to get through to him that he can answer. In one particular session he ended up with quite a sophisticated understanding of something that I would have previously thought he wouldn't be able to grasp.*

*It is, to start with, pretty time consuming, because you've got to learn it yourself and practise. But it certainly does make a world of difference.*

*I think the [professional development] experience in 2012 has really helped*

*me get my head around it, and I'm very eager to put it into action across the board.*

*I remember early on one of the maths consultants came into my room to teach a class, and my job was to observe how she was doing this. And the number of times I wrote down 'Could use this in science!'*

*I'm very excited by it all."*

## Changes in the classroom

*Teachers will be encouraged to regularly look at personalised learning delivery in their continuing professional development activity, and parents will be better informed about what their children are doing*

Just as the leadership team had hoped, the benefits of the teachers' development were in time also reflected in the children's learning. As teachers' energy and enthusiasm rose, so did the students'.

The leadership team had established a whole-of-school data collection process to sit alongside the ongoing tracking of students' learning in maths (and eventually literacy).

And although it was too early to describe learning effect sizes<sup>2</sup> across the school, or look at NAPLAN results, staff were seeing an across-the-board increase in students' engagement with their work. They were also more confident and taking more risks.

Pleasingly, many teachers had also begun proactively applying in lessons some of the personalised learning principles and methodologies that they were experiencing themselves.

Maths activities became more hands-on, with individualised components. Mini-libraries were established in every classroom, with kids helping to choose books that best suited their level and interests. Junior Primary teachers were running shared "Discovery" sessions, giving kids from different classes a chance to learn and interact with each other through purposeful play.

For Ms Shepherd and her team it was heartening to see. "That's when you know people are really taking it on board and assuming ownership," she says.

"There was even one particular teacher who I thought just wasn't responding to it, but who must have been listening,

listening, listening, because towards the end of the year she just took this enormous leap.

"She came up to me one day and said, 'Come and have a look.' She'd renovated her classroom to create a more child-oriented and flexible space. The kids were going to have their own pockets for communications with [and between] her and their parents, and there was a big board to communicate focus areas for the day and individual tasks. 'I'm just getting ready,' she said. 'But next year I'm going for it.'

"I can't wait to see what she's going to do."

The move to personalised learning for Nairne's students will become an increasing focus in 2013, says Ms Shepherd, although staff will still be allowed to move at their own pace and continue their own learning.

Teachers will be encouraged to regularly look at personalised learning delivery in their ongoing professional development, and parents will be better informed about what their children are doing, through planned updates to the school website, more class blogs and additional IT investment.

"We can now use some common language across the teaching group in terms of the children's learning. So I'm really imagining that this year we'll see professional conversations going much deeper."



## *Looking beyond literacy and maths*

While emphasis will still be placed on maths and literacy improvement in 2013, Ms Shepherd is looking forward to seeing the methodologies that teachers are learning through their work in those fields being applied across the curriculum.

“What we’ve done, and are still doing, in maths and literacy is not a specialist programme. It’s a principle-based approach to all learning.

“One teacher said to me last year, ‘We’re doing so much on maths and literacy, it’s hard to work on anything else.’ So I asked her to describe the approaches she was using for maths and literacy.

“She said, ‘In maths we’re working with individual kids doing really

hands-on experiences and they’re really engaged. We’re tracking their progress and tailoring what happens next.

“And in reading we’ve created our own class library with the kids helping to choose books, and they’re really engaged...”

“She looked at me and the penny dropped. ‘It’s all about learning.’”

Ms Shepherd says plans are already emerging among staff to put a special effort into enhancing science delivery, with regularly scheduled planning days.

And the Upper Primary team, with the incentive of moving into a purpose-built new unit currently under construction, is working on a more collaborative approach to support every child in their efforts to reach their full potential.

It’s all evidence, she believes, that the Nairne team is well and truly on the right track.

“We know it can be done now. We know we can enjoy learning together, and we know that all of us - kids and teachers - get more out of it when we do.

“The risk was worth it.”

*“What we’ve done, and are still doing, in maths and literacy is not a specialist programme. It’s a principle-based approach to all learning.”*

## the teacher's perspective

### Alissa Cartland

Junior Primary, 7 years  
teaching experience

*"It's been nice to be asked [about professional development] and considered as a professional who has thoughts about how they teach and what they need to know to be better, rather than just being treated like a kid and told, 'OK, we're doing this lesson at this time.'*

*You know that if you have areas to be developed that you'll be supported to seek out that development, [so you're not] trying to hide that you're not good in an area.*

*We've been trying to think about personalised learning in the classroom as well.*

*That's my main focus. I mean, I'm learning about it for myself, but it's for the kids.*

*There's been heaps of stuff come up in discussions with other people, with Leesa [Shepherd, Principal] and through the training we've done. I've tried lots of different things already and had lots of little successes along the way.*

*It definitely makes me excited for the future."*



1. *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, Kings College, London, 1998.
2. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, John A. Hattie, 2008.



*Lobethal Primary School*





There are many reasons a school might embrace personalised learning.

But when **Lobethal Primary** did so in 2010, none but the most basic applied. It was often pointed out to their Principal, Mr Garry North, that the school was growing in enrolments. It didn't have high special needs or behaviour management requirements. Student achievement was in line with national standards. So why personalise? His answer was always the same. "Because I think we can do better."

As in most professional fields, news of imminent change spreads fast in the education sector. This is particularly so in small regional areas. So it was that, as the 2010 school year began, Mr North heard the first whispers of potential innovation at nearby Mylor Primary and Birdwood High.

In both schools' cases, as he confirmed in discussions with their respective Principals, a transformative shift to personalised learning was being planned. It further piqued an already growing interest.

"Although what Steve [Hicks] and Ngari [Boehm] were talking about doing at Birdwood and Mylor respectively wasn't exactly what I was considering, it did feel like the 'personalised learning stars' were starting to align," says Mr North.

With Lobethal Primary enjoying relative freedom from the sorts of issues generally accepted to hold schools back, Mr North had been asking, "Why aren't we achieving magnificence? Our kids should be *flying*."

After a period of investigation into the latest educational research, he and his team felt relatively sure of the direction in which they should head.

"We were reading a lot about John Hattie's research around measuring student improvement<sup>1</sup> and what makes the really significant differences to kids' engagement and learning. Dylan Wiliam's work showing the impact of personalised assessment practices<sup>2</sup> was also coming through.

"It really hit us that it wasn't rocket science. A personalised approach just felt right. And now here was world-recognised data backing it up. So why wouldn't we have a go with this stuff? Because we can't be bothered? Because we're *comfortable*?"

The team was agreed that they should take the plunge. But coming to a consensus on what the first step should be, with limited budget, proved difficult. So rather than try to force things through in a big way, Mr North decided to start small.

## Changing rooms

Late on a Term 1 Friday afternoon, a Year 2 teacher expressed a desire to Mr North to create a more flexible learning space in her room. He seized the opportunity with both hands.

“I asked her, ‘If you’re going to do this are you prepared to be a bit of a pioneer and let me have a play?’ She said, ‘Yep, go for it.’ So I dragged in one of the Dads who was a builder, bought some ply and varnish, and we went hell for leather all weekend.”

They built a number of new table tops in different shapes that were then screwed onto some of the old desks. Circles were created to allow four or five kids to work together in a small space. Semi-circles would enable the teacher to sit on the flat side across from three or four kids for close monitoring and intervention. And some other shapes were added for variety.

On the Monday morning, Mr North waited in an adjoining room for the teacher to arrive. “I heard her stop at the door,” says Mr North.

“At first she was silent. Then I heard, ‘Wow.’ So I came out from hiding. She was blown away by all the new possibilities.”

A gallery of other teachers soon gathered. According to Mr North, one of them, a Year 3-4 teacher, remained completely quiet. “I said, ‘What do you reckon?’ And he replied, ‘I want some of those!’”

In the following weeks, another four classes were re-imagined in similar fashion at very little cost.

Extensive “decluttering” of each room’s resources was also undertaken, with those remaining made more accessible to both teacher and student.



*Extensive “decluttering” of each room’s resources was also undertaken, with those remaining made more accessible to both teacher and student.*

“It won’t last forever,” says Mr North. “I’m sure we’ll end up having to get something more durable.”

“But it was enough to start changing people’s thinking.”

## Wireless works

Around the same time, the school needed to update its IT equipment for the students, and the decision was made to go wireless.

“I really didn’t want another traditional computer room, where everybody goes and sits in rows in front of machines,” says Mr North.

“So we went wireless, got 60 laptops and put in some lounges. Now the kids and teachers have options.

“Kids can come and get a laptop and take it back to their classroom. Or they can work on the lounges, on the floor - whatever works.”



## the teacher's perspective

### Tracey Constable

**Middle Primary, 24 years  
teaching experience**

*"If you'd asked me three years ago what personalised learning was I wouldn't have known, but I think now I actually have a really clear picture in my head.*

*It's about putting more responsibility back onto the kids and them being able to identify what they need to know and want to know, as opposed to everybody doing, say, three-letter words just because that's what we're doing.*

*It's not one-size-fits-all anymore, and that's what I love. If there are kids who need books and worksheets, they're provided with that. If there are kids that want to present on the computer, they're allowed to. Kids that like another creative way are given opportunities.*

*The students are far more confident to say, 'I'm struggling,' or 'I've got this covered.' And they're very honest - probably even more honest than us. Where we might have said, 'I think you're travelling OK,' they say, 'Actually, I need a bit more practise.'*

*That's giving children ownership, and I know some staff and adults find that challenging. But for me I couldn't see that we wouldn't involve the kids in the learning process. We're gearing them up with all these new tools that are just going to make them better learners.*

*I think some parents worry that their kids will get 'show-offy' and arrogant, but it's not like that. They've just become involved in the process and they feel like they own their own learning. And that's what it's about.*

*The relationships we're building are really amazing too. The more you give of yourself, the more you get back, because they realise that you really are there for them.*

*We've come a long way."*

## Uncovering students' misconceptions

*“We adopted a process of questioning that’s designed to uncover exactly where their misconceptions are, so that we can then get to what they personally need to do in order to learn.”*

Alongside the physical changes, in 2011 new pedagogy was being introduced, with the teaching of maths chosen as the initial vehicle.

“We wanted to get the kids out of the habit of pretending they knew something,” says Mr North.

“So we adopted a process of questioning that’s designed to uncover exactly where their misconceptions are, so that we can then get to what they personally need to do in order to learn.”

The teachers were amazed with the impact. “It can be stunning, the misconceptions that come out,” says Mr North. “Even in kids you thought were solid. They might be able to do something one way, but ask them to do it in another and their understanding can get very shaky.

“So that has to be firmed up before they move on, otherwise we’re setting them up for failure down the track.”

Concurrently, Dylan Wiliam’s personalised approach to assessment was adopted.<sup>2</sup> Referred to as “Assessment for Learning”, it involved students rating their own level of learning, then reflecting on their work to self-assess whether or not it was delivering on the expectations of someone at their level.

Peer and teacher assessment were also provided, but self-assessment was the priority. Forms itemising all expectations of each learning level for the particular task being undertaken, called “Rubriks”, were provided to each child and explained at the outset.

This call for honest self-appraisal brought up some misconceptions itself, says Mr North.

“We used a ‘Traffic Lighting’ system. If you’re a red light that means you don’t understand at all. Yellow’s almost there, but a little wobbly. Green’s got it covered.

“But we also added a blue rating, which was for an expert – someone who basically knew more about something than the teacher. And at first, everyone was an expert in everything.

“So we let that go for a bit. But inevitably the gaps in understanding would be exposed.”



A logical follow-on from the use of self-appraisal and assessment was students starting to identify their own learning needs and targets. Again using mathematics as a vehicle, this concept was introduced through voluntary sessions called “My Maths”.

“My Maths isn’t necessarily connected to the bigger ideas you might be covering in normal lessons,” says Mr North. “It’s about the stuff behind the scenes that the student’s sitting on - that you’re not seeing.”



## Beginnings of self-directed learning

Students are first asked what they would like to get better at in any maths-related area. They’re then helped, through careful questioning, to set themselves an appropriate target in that area, given the resources to pursue it, and a suitable success “marker” is agreed.

“A great example happened with a Year 2 student. I started the conversation by asking, ‘What’s bugging you about maths?’ He said, ‘I wish I knew how to use a ruler properly.’ ‘OK, how would you know when you’ve got it sorted?’ ‘Oh, I could draw a shape.’ ‘How many sides?’ ‘Ah...six.’ ‘Right, there’s your target. So is everything you need in this room?’ ‘Yep.’ ‘Do you know where it is?’ ‘Yep.’ ‘OK then, why don’t you go and get it and I’ll help you get started.’”

There are still “checks and balances”, however. Each child’s target is documented, and there’s a formal weekly review, where the student writes a reflection on their learning for the teacher to discuss with them.

My Maths was initially run three times a week. But its popularity increased to such an extent that students were soon offered half-hour sessions at the beginning of every day.

The kids took to it “strikingly well,” says Mr North, and without any sense of competitiveness. “They moved really quickly away from the attitude that, ‘You know more than I do,’ or vice versa. Once they started seeing their own growth they forgot all about what the others were up to.”

*The kids took to it “strikingly well,” and without any sense of competitiveness. “Once they started seeing their own growth they forgot all about what the others were up to.”*

## “Scaffolding” independent research

*“We’re trying to pull everybody back to continually doing what’s important; continually doing what matters in class.”*

Where the self-directed learning approach demands the student engage in some research, the school has taken steps to avoid this resulting in endless Internet searching.

A framework, or “scaffold”, is provided for the children to work within. They’re advised of one or more information sources known to be of high quality – referred to as “exemplars” – to provide benchmarks for other sources to be judged against. Rubriks are provided and explained, with very clear criteria for “good research”.

Regular “flight checks” are also required, in which the students’ progress is discussed.

“It can be very easy for kids to waste so much time on pointless research,” says Mr North. “Googling for hour upon hour. It drives me nuts.

“So we’re trying to pull everybody back to continually doing what’s important; continually doing what matters in class.”

## the teacher’s perspective

### Jo Simpson

**Reception, 12 years teaching experience**

*“I emigrated from the UK four years ago and we were already using personalised learning there. So after working in a few Australian schools that were very much ‘one size fits all’, arriving at Lobethal was really refreshing.*

*Gary [North, Principal] gave me the green light to go ahead and teach differently and know each kid is different, each starting point is different, and there’s no end point. There’s no, ‘You’ve hit your year level mark, so I can stop worrying about you.’*

*I teach in Reception, so being able to personalise means I’m able to go backwards for the kids who still need the early learning framework and carry on with that until they’re ready to use the national curriculum.*

*Relating the kids’ learning to their interests has been great. I’ve used that a couple of times on projects now. They’re really into what they’re learning, but I can still get my curriculum in.*

*One time I ended up with 24 different topics, ranging from fairies right up to turning water into fuel! I thought, ‘Where am I going to find a book about that suitable for a five-year-old?’ So I just had to find something on the internet and re-type it into kid-friendly language.*

*It certainly has its limits - you only have so much time. But also, every year group is different; different maturity, readiness to learn and abilities. So what you can do varies, and with it the time required.*

*But even if it’s as simple as a child wanting to learn about the letter ‘c’ today, ‘Because c is for cars and I love cars,’ it’s still developing the habit of them thinking about their learning.*

*And the kids really respond. I had this one little guy last year who’d learned all his single sounds through a range of activities. So he came to me and said he wanted to learn all his two-letter sounds by the end of the year. ‘If you give me the list of sounds I can pick the activities that will help me learn them.’ And he did it.*

*When I wrote in his report that he was a responsible learner, and had done all this himself, his Mum said she hadn’t seen that side of him. ‘He’s a daydreamer.’ But given that opportunity to take ownership, he went for it.”*





*“I’d grown disillusioned with the traditional SRC model. You know, six kids get elected to make all the decisions. Often it’s more of a popularity contest than a student voice.”*

## **SRC out, Student Forum in**

Another important recent step in the move towards personalised learning for Lobethal Primary has been the replacement of the traditional Student Representative Council (SRC) with a more inclusive Student Forum.

Mr North wanted all students to feel that they had a genuine voice in the school community, and to feel confident and enthusiastic about using it.

“I’d grown disillusioned with the traditional SRC model,” he says. “You know, six kids get elected to make all the decisions. Often it’s more of a popularity contest than a student voice.”

Rather than impose another new structure on the kids, however, they were consulted on how *they* would like it to run. “We had a forum about the forum! We said, ‘If you want to have a say about student voice in school then come along.’ And together we worked it out.”

It was agreed that if a student raised an issue during a normal class meeting, some appointed student representatives would then canvass the rest of the student body to gauge interest in it. If interest was strong, a forum would be held to address it.

The students would negotiate a time and place with teachers, then advertise it. Anyone who had something to contribute on the issue could then attend and present their thoughts.

“The depth of conversation at them is just incredible,” says Mr North. “A teacher initially facilitates, but as it warms up they pull further and further back. So the kids are getting used to managing those conversations and that responsibility.”

## **Master Class introduced**

In 2012, additional short-run, skill-based development sessions called “Master Classes” were introduced to give the kids the chance to extend their knowledge in specialist areas, whether for interest or need.

The trigger, according to Mr North, had been him noticing that several children in a couple of Year 2 classes seemed to be unsure of themselves when telling time.

“I went out on a limb and said to their teachers, ‘I reckon there are a heap of kids in your classes who can’t read a clock. I want to offer a Master Class on time over three days, and your job as a teacher isn’t to sell it, or tell kids to go – it’s the kids’ job to work that out.”

The teachers simply stuck a flyer on the wall, mentioned that it was there if anyone wanted to have a look, and left it at that. Both were very sceptical that anyone would show up, says Mr North, but eventually his faith in the kids was repaid.

“On the first day we had just three brave souls. And one was my son, who I think just wanted to come and have a chat! But by the third day’s session we had 25.

“So now that sort of concept and language is much more embedded in the school. People see it as something to really build on in 2013.”

## Potential time management opportunities

Mr North also hopes to provide a variation on the Master Class concept in 2013 in a way that helps to build the students' time management skills. His idea involves an innovative use of relief teachers during mandatory school planning time.

Rather than conduct each term's planning in a series of sessions over three days, as in previous years, Mr North intends to condense it into a single day. Reception to Year 3 teachers will be released for 150 minutes in the morning, and Year 4 to Year 7 teachers for the same period in the afternoon.

Specialist relief teachers in Music, Japanese and Physical Education (PE) will then be brought in to run targeted

sessions throughout the day pitched at different learning levels, and held at different times.

Based on their self-assessed learning levels in each area, the students will then be required to work out their own schedule of attendance.

"So if they identify that they're an advanced learner in Japanese, and that session is on at, say 10am, then that's the one they'll need to book into," says Mr North. "And they'll need to work out appropriate PE and Music times around that."

*Based on their self-assessed learning levels in each area, the students will then be required to work out their own schedule of attendance.*



## Personalising reports

Just as project assessment methods have been overhauled to more accurately reflect and support personalised learning, the Lobethal Primary teachers are determined to overhaul student reports.

"We want to get a lot better at producing accurate, personalised reports for our kids, rather than the generic approach of the past," says Mr North. "We've taken some small steps, but we certainly haven't nailed it yet."

Improved use of online technologies to allow *ongoing* personalised reporting

will be a focus, with a view to not only providing more meaningful feedback for student and parent, but also reducing administrative time for teachers.

"Honestly, the hours we spent [on reporting] at the end of last year... We had people stressing around photocopiers, yelling at computers trying to drop pictures in... I think just as much effort went into printing it as it did writing it!"

## Moving beyond maths “gently, gently”



Despite the popularity and positive feedback generated by the moves toward personalised learning so far, Mr North remains reluctant to push his team to do too much too soon, believing a more organic approach will be more sustainable.

“A couple of teachers have jumped in boots and all, and aren’t afraid to make a few mistakes and learn from them - or ‘fail well’ as Dylan Wiliam says. Some others have gone in, then backed off, gone in, backed off... And that’s OK. Everybody’s behind it and taking it on at their pace.”

A particularly pleasing thing to see for some teachers has been students actually asking for the personalised approach to be expanded beyond maths.

“We were getting some kids’ feedback on My Maths one day last year and a young girl said, ‘I’d like to do a target for English’. She wanted to work on tense. I said, ‘Cool, let’s do it.’

“Not long after, another suggestion happened in a conversation with another teacher, and a student piped up with, ‘Why don’t we just call it personal learning?’ So they really are embracing it.”

Such requests have already led to one Year 5 and 6 class and one Year 6 and 7 starting what they’ve called ‘Green Sessions’, in which students simply get on with whatever they feel they need to get on with, but in a targeted fashion.

“So a lot’s happened,” says Mr North. “But there’s a lot more we can explore.”

*A particularly pleasing thing to see for some teachers has been students actually asking for the personalised approach to be expanded beyond maths.*

## *Personalising professional development for staff*

One thing likely to help that organic process along, believes Mr North, is to support his teachers in pursuing self-directed learning themselves. He sees personalised professional development as an important driver of teachers' skills, knowledge and confidence in delivering personalised learning for students.

"I think this will be my next big challenge," he says. "I want to get beyond the boring, generic training that fits everybody into the same template. I want to see our staff challenging themselves and asking, 'What are the really useful things I can do with this time?'"

"But what that will mean structurally, I don't know. When are the individual times? When are the shared times? What's the balance? Where's the accountability?"

Then, after a moment's reflection, he closes the loop. "Yes, we are now doing better.

"But we're not there yet."

*"I want to get beyond the boring, generic training that fits everybody into the same template. I want to see staff challenging themselves and asking, 'What are the really useful things I can do with this time?'"*

1. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, John A. Hattie, 2008.

2. *Inside the Black Box: Raising Standards Through Classroom Assessment*, Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, Kings College, London, 1998.

## the teacher's perspective

### Simon Dorr

**Middle Primary, 7 years teaching experience**

*"I think a lot of the time in the past, teachers just feel obliged to teach things, rather than identifying where each individual actually needed to go next.*

*So what I really like about [personalised learning] is that we're giving students an opportunity to extend themselves when they're ready, and the kids that are struggling a bit, we can identify and cater for a lot better.*



*There are challenges as well - being able to set up activities so that kids can enter at their own level and then be able to move on from that, and still identify what we need to know. But some of the physical changes we've made have really helped that, like with the classroom set-up.*

*All the resources we use are a lot more accessible. Even the computers. You can just grab things and get them out on the floor. I like it.*

*We've knocked down walls in terms of teacher relationships as well. There's so much more openness and communication; so much more willingness to communicate ideas, try new things and work together as a team.*

*Taking a risk isn't frowned upon and think that's really good for us. There was a time when I'd be pretty scared to give [personalised learning] a go, whereas now I feel confident. I think I've changed myself as a teacher.*

*The school's Behaviour Policy needs to be adapted to what we're doing though. We just don't get the extreme behavior any more. And I think that's back to the ownership the students feel.*

*This is what they want, so they don't want to muck it up."*

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