Abstract: In Australia, Victoria’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has encouraged educational institutions and systems to respond to the global movement of personalising learning in ways – both pedagogically and organisationally – that support the diverse personal aspirations of learners. An evaluation of the leadership structure of a large, regional independent school came at a time when the school was initiating some ideas in relation to personalising learning; ideas that also coincided with innovations that the school had already made with its middle years students. Focus group discussions took place to identify issues and a Web-based survey was utilised to explore the ideas further with all staff. Staff members highlighted the challenges and tensions arising from the seemingly constant introduction of innovations without any parallel processes to ensure organisational and curriculum coherency across the school. In this paper, the research design is described and the responses from staff are discussed as they relate to the concept of personalised learning. The focus of the paper is upon the organisational and curriculum issues confronting the school’s leadership in order for the school to become the vibrant learning community to which it aspires.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Personalising Learning, Middle Years, Research

Introduction

In Australia, Victoria’s Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has encouraged educational institutions and systems to respond to the global movement of personalising learning in ways – both pedagogically and organisationally – that support the diverse personal aspirations of learners (Keamy, Nicholas, Mahar, & Herrick, 2007). Significantly, however, any movement to personalising education in Australia is not part of a ‘new agenda’ as it has been in England (Leadbeater, 2004; West-Burnham, 2007) and is therefore not considered to be a ‘totalitarian’ direction from government (compared to the perspective described by Fielding, 2006). Within Victorian educational settings, the personalisation of education has four characteristics: learners are seen as being central; information and communications technology (ICT) is a key enabler; there is a commitment to lifelong learning; and it involves communities of collaboration (Keamy et al., 2007).

Early in 2008, the principal of Boulder College, a Catholic secondary school in regional Victoria with approximately 900 students and 110 members of staff, negotiated an evaluation of the leadership structure at the College (but not the performance of individuals who held leadership positions). The evaluation brief, developed in conjunction with the College’s principal, required a number of guiding statements to be generated to assist the subsequent internal decision-making processes within the College. The evaluation came at a time when some staff in the College were beginning to discuss ideas in relation to personalising learning; ideas that also paralleled innovations that the school had already implemented with its middle
years students. The purpose of this paper is to report on a particular dimension arising from
the research and the implications this poses for the College’s principal, rather than being an
account of the overall research findings.

Boulder College began addressing the challenges for students in their middle years of
schooling by introducing an integrated curriculum, initially at the Year 7 level in 2007, and
in the following year, in Years 7 and 8. The College did this by providing:

• A focus on the unique needs and challenges of the young adolescent;
• A student centred approach to teaching and learning;
• Programs that foster health, wellness and safety;
• Integrated and negotiated curriculum;
• Inter-disciplinary teaching teams and or sub-school groups to enhance student-teacher
  relationships;
• Flexible scheduling, groupings and settings for learning;
• Comprehensive guidance and time for student advisory periods;
• Fostering relationships with significant adults; and
• Differentiation of the middle school from the rest of the school in terms of physical en-
  vironment and structures (Boulder College internal curriculum documents, 2007).

This innovation meant changes not only in the way in which students in their middle years
would be taught and organised, but also contained features similar to concepts of personalised
learning. Even though personalised learning had not been identified by the principal as a
focus of the research, it became apparent through the project that staff members were con-
cerned about the seemingly constant introduction of innovations. One of these innovations
was seen as the move to incorporate personalised learning without any parallel processes to
ensure organisational and curriculum coherency across the school.

The focus of this article is on staff members’ responses to the anticipated introduction of
personalised learning at Boulder College. The purpose of the article is to discuss what these
responses might mean for the principal of the College. The metaphor of ‘lining up the ducks’
is borrowed from entertainment arcades to represent the organisational and curriculum issues
that the principal either needs to address, or which she sought to address, via research for
implementation of the proposed educational change at the College.

The Concept of Personalised Learning

Clouded in confusion about its meaning, yet having spread ‘virus-like’ through educational
systems (Stewart, 2004), the personalisation of learning has become something of a ‘contem-
porary preoccupation’ (Fielding, 2006, p. 347). According to the Centre for Learning Innova-
tion (2005) in the Australian State of New South Wales, personalised learning is what stu-
dent-focused teachers do when they recognise and address the needs of individual learners,
Whilst personalised learning draws on the individual experiences of students, it is not the
same as allowing everyone to do what they want (Clarke, 2003); nor does it mean students
learning on their own (Miliband, 2003).

Five components of personalised learning have been proposed by the Department for
Education and Skills (DfES) in the United Kingdom (2006), as shown in the following figure:
Each of the five components from the DfES (2006) representation is summarised below, (from the bottom up):

**Beyond the Classroom**: this is integral to supporting learning in the classroom and enhancing pupil well-being, which includes guidance and support for each pupil; effective pastoral care; addressing needs with targeted or specialist support; lunchtime and after-school extended learning provisions, and community partnerships.

**Organising the School for Personalised Learning**: school leaders and teachers are encouraged to think creatively about school organisation including whole-school teams to understand workforce modelling requirements and increased planning, preparation and assessment time for teachers, as well as teachers learning to use ICT effectively and clear and consistent behaviour policies so that students can learn in safe environments.

**Curriculum Entitlement and Choice**: this is characterised in primary and secondary schools by a combination of a guaranteed core curriculum (including the National Curriculum, religious education, sex education and career education); high quality opportunities to extend learning experiences (including raising standards in literacy, numeracy and ICT, and out of hours study support centres); support by adults in school to help students make choices on the basis of assessment results and discussions with parents/carers and flexibility leading to relevant qualifications.

**Effective Teaching and Learning**: for teachers, there is a focus on the development of a repertoire of teaching skills that incorporates whole class, group and individual teaching and the use of ICT to accommodate different paces of learning. For students, it means a focus by them on their learning skills and their capability to move on with their own learning.
Assessment for Learning: clear evidence is required to drive individual attainment along with clear feedback for and from pupils as well as clear links between student learning and lesson planning.

Adding to this framework, Keamy and Nicholas (2007) conducted a review of the personalised learning literature and generated a number of themes that characterise personalised learning, noting that different schools and systems approached personalised learning by adopting different combinations of these themes.

Table 1: Summary of Themes that Characterise Personalised Learning (Keamy & Nicholas, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The student is central and will sometimes work independently, but at other times will work in groups;</td>
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<tr>
<td>It involves physical re-organisation of schools;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It involves administrative re-organisation of schools;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It involves re-organisation of the curriculum;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The professional practices of teachers are supported by the removal of lower-level administrative and clerical activities so that the teacher is freed to concentrate on the core learning and teaching processes for diverse students and to guide and support students to make appropriate choices;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a concern for lifelong learning;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a mix of academic and vocational learning;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engagement occurs in a nurturing environment, including a connectedness with the community;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a community of learning, with strong relationships between adults and students;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools exist not in isolation but as part of networks;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are strong links between the classroom and home (including ICT);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment is related to meaningful tasks;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT will allow each pupil greater diversity for learning to allow for enhanced interactivity between individual students and individual teachers and a more immediate presence inside the classroom of resources from outside the classroom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Importantly, personalisation ‘has the potential to be a fundamental reworking of the historic pattern of schooling’ (West-Burnham, 2007, p. 30), through the approach taken. For instance, a shallow or a deep approach would determine the form of personalisation (Leadbeater, 2004). A shallow view would be nothing more than providing individual choice between predetermined options (Keamy et al., 2007). The application of a deep personalisation model in education, however, would see students setting their own learning targets, and if they did well by demonstrating self-motivation and self-regulation, the students would be able to learn beyond the school and outside of traditional school hours. In a deep personalisation model, teachers and schools would form partnerships and networks with other schools and agencies in order to broker students’ access to them and to assist students to make informed choices that best suit them (Campbell, Robinson, Neelands, Hewston, & Mazzoli, 2007). Campbell et al. (2007) state:
…the danger that personalisation will be implemented only in its shallower form in schooling is very real. It is easier to implement reforms that merely increase system efficiency, but much more difficult to implement the ‘disruptive’ innovation in role relationships between teacher and learner, envisaged by deep personalisation in Leadbeater’s terms (p. 153).

Research Design

The research at Boulder College was undertaken from February to May, 2008 and included a number of pragmatic decisions about data gathering. Following negotiations with the principal, combined with the necessary ethics approval, techniques for gathering data were chosen based on the way they provided opportunities for teaching and non-teaching staff to articulate their thoughts about the leadership team structure at the College. Multiple methods of data gathering were employed to ensure methods triangulation (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). The methods included focus group discussions; a Web-based survey; and a secure comments drop-box.

A total of five focus group discussions took place – four had initially been planned for; the fifth, with members of the Year 7 and Year 8 Teams, arose as a consequence of requests made by participants in the first four focus group discussions. The focus group discussions were recorded and a research assistant took note of the comments made. After each discussion, the dominant issues were identified and formed the basis for the questions asked in a second form of data gathering, a Web-based survey.

Even though Web-based surveys as a research tool are still in their infancy (Sue & Ritter, 2007), it is claimed that internet-based research procedures ‘give results comparable to non-internet procedures’ (Hewson, Yule, Laurent, & Vogel, 2003, p. 44). A Web-based survey, SurveyMonkey (2008), was chosen because of its apparent practicality; cost-effectiveness; its potential to reach a large number of participants; speed and immediacy, along with the potential for text files being produced instantaneously.

The purpose of the survey was not to validate or eliminate comments or suggestions that had been gathered in focus group discussions or in other comments made by staff members. Rather, the purpose of the survey was to canvas all members of staff in an attempt to ascertain the extent of agreement with the comments and suggestions made in the focus group discussions. The survey and secure drop box were attempts to hear from staff members who may not have been a member of a team or who may have otherwise been omitted from the sample for a focus group discussion.

Notwithstanding a number of unanticipated technological difficulties encountered with the survey, 35.2% of staff members responded via this means, which, according to Sue and Ritter (2007), is slightly higher than the average response rate for such surveys. The way that these data were used was to treat the survey responses as being indicative of patterns that were emerging at Boulder College; patterns augmented by comments made by members of staff via the other data gathering approaches. SurveyMonkey collated the data and provided response rates, rating averages and open-ended responses for each question asked in the survey.

In the following discussion of the data, Rating Averages are used to communicate the strength of responses to particular items on the survey. The Rating Average figure is automatically generated by the survey, whereby the ratings from Strongly Disagree through to
Strongly Agree are given a numeric value – from 1 through to 6 respectively, as per the following table, Table 2:

**Table 2: Equivalence of Descriptive Ratings and Numeric Values**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating Used</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Totally Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numeric Value</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Responses**

It is worth reiterating that the research was not an explicit investigation of personalised learning at Boulder College. Rather, it was an evaluation of the leadership structure at the College, which revealed, amongst other things, reactions to what was known about an aspect of personalised learning, that being a movement to the introduction of Learning Advisers.

The idea of the College introducing a system of Learning Advisers is gaining traction at Boulder College. Although still in its formative stage and not yet formally introduced to the broader school community, the issue was brought up by staff members in focus group discussions. During the first two focus group discussions, reference was made to the proposed introduction of Learning Advisers, something that the College had been investigating in Canada as well as Australia. Specific questions were therefore introduced into the discussions with the final three focus groups. Items were also incorporated into the survey to explore the staff members’ thinking further.

As it was conveyed in the focus groups, a Learning Adviser structure would most likely see one teacher working with a small pastoral group at a particular year level, with this teacher remaining as the Learning Adviser as the students progressed from one year level to the next. This would have an immediate impact upon Boulder College’s pastoral care structure, currently known as Homebase Meetings, which are daily gatherings between a particular teacher and a group of students from across different year levels (that is, Year 7 to Year 12). Several staff members in focus groups expressed their concern about Homebase Meetings, saying that they no longer provided a pastoral role for students across different year levels and that they amounted to little more than marking the attendance roll. When raised in focus group discussions, the alternative position to Homebase Meetings was that of Learning Advisers.

In one of the groups there was certainly confusion between the title ‘teacher adviser’ (as is currently used in Years 7 & 8) and ‘learning adviser’ and what this role might entail. One focus group discussed the need for any ‘teacher advisers’ to receive leadership training, though in the context of the discussion, it seems as though they were meaning leadership training for the ‘learning advisers’. A point to glean from the data here is that most groups that discussed this change felt that not enough was known about what the role might be. In the groups where this idea was discussed, there was agreement that if such an approach were going to be introduced at the College, then everyone needed to be party to the decision-making and that any decision about the introduction of learning advisers needed to be incorporated into any review of the leadership structure.
One staff member in a focus group stated that he thought Homebase teachers ‘seem to be getting told less and less’ and the rest of the focus group agreed, stressing that ‘Homebase is important, but the structure doesn’t support them’. One person expressed indignation that the College was relying on educational thinking from Canada.

In response to the proposition on the Web-based survey that ‘The idea of a Learning Adviser with a teacher and the same group of students moving from year to year is worth considering’, the Rating Average is 5.19. This suggests Agreement to Strong Agreement for this proposition by the 32 staff members who responded to this item.

![Figure 2: Support for the Introduction of Learning Advisers to the College (Rating Average: 5.19; n=32)](image)

One staff member made particular comment in the survey in relation to learning advisers, saying:

The learning advisor is one of the ideas that could potentially make a big difference to education.

Staff members felt that not enough was known about what the role/s of Learning Advisers might be, as the school community had not yet had the opportunity to discuss the concept. Notwithstanding this apprehension, as indicated above, there was quite strong agreement that the idea of a Learning Adviser with a teacher and the same group of students moving from year to year was worth considering.

When staff members were asked in the survey to offer ideas for a revised leadership structure at Boulder College, many ideas were generated, amongst them ideas for the introduction of Learning Advisers. One comment made on the survey is provided here, which points to the cascading and complex changes that would also be required to the school’s leadership structure if Learning Advisers were introduced:
If all staff became involved in a Learning Advisers role - Years 7 to 12 would not need a year level co-ordinator. But instead there would be a need to create Learning Advisor Leaders. These new leaders would support the Learning Advisers by: assisting them in understanding the new processes involved to work closely with students, staff and families; mentoring teachers with classroom management problems; pastoral care for students as a Learning Advisor Leaders would be responsible for one [of four houses in which students are organised]…this would mean that an ongoing relationship with students could be established, etc. IDEALLY there would be TWO LA Leaders for each house. These LA Leaders may also deal with students who require additional support to keep them on track, when the LA needs additional support - for Minor NOT major pastoral care issues. Ultimately the LA Leader will work with the student and the LA to work out strategies and procedures to support the student more effectively [copied verbatim].

Discussion

Given that the focus of the research was on the leadership structure of the school and not on personalised learning per se, it is not appropriate to speculate whether the school is embarking upon a shallow or deep model of personalisation.

There is little doubt about the influence of the individual teacher on student achievement (Hattie, 2002), and that school principals create the pre-conditions for improving student learning by creating a climate for teachers to teach and for students to learn (Council of Australian Governments, 2006; Dinham, Aubusson, & Brady, 2008; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). One of the most challenging aspects for school leaders is in the cultural change required in some schools to move to a personalised approach to learning (West-Burnham, 2007), and it is this point that is discussed further.

One conclusion that could be drawn from the research is that the leadership structure at the College is struggling to accommodate the educational demands that have progressively been imposed on it by a series of principals. The College’s concern for the needs of its students is not being challenged, and evidence that this is paramount is clear from the College’s vision statement and recently-introduced middle years initiative, with its student-centred approach to teaching and learning and its desire to foster relationships with significant adults, to name but two of the principles of the initiative (Boulder College internal curriculum documents, 2007). The parallels with the two foundational components of personalised learning advanced by the DfES (2006) are evident, these being Beyond the Classroom, and Organising the School for Personalised Learning.

But it is at this point that the metaphor of ‘lining up the ducks’ comes to the fore. It may well be that the principal intentionally used the research as an opportunity to extend the discussion to a broader cross-section of staff members, or it may be that the issue of Learning Advisers serendipitously appeared in the process of data gathering. Either way, the principal is faced with an opportunity to shift the focus away from the murky leadership structure that she had inherited, towards one that could support a personalised approach to education.

Boulder College is not alone in realising the true impacts of introducing an integrated curriculum into a traditional and established secondary school curriculum. As Boulder College, under the guidance of its principal, explores its options, however, it would be wise that it encourages ‘structural’ rather than ‘adjunct’ approaches (Commonwealth Department of
Education, Science & Training and University of Queensland, 2003). Further change – the ducks that need lining up across the entire College in the form of the inner core to which DfES (2006) refers: a flexible curriculum; effective teaching and learning; and appropriate assessment for learning – needs to be on a whole-school basis (Department of Education and Training, 2003). It would be important, for instance, to extend the decision-making to the broader school community, something that Ryan (2006) had observed in earlier research conducted at the College:

The introduction of any significant change into the College was always going to be problematic…. For change to be effective, a focused whole school approach was required (Ryan, 2006, p. 29).

If this opportunity is ignored or missed at Boulder College, there may be negative impacts for some time to come:

You cannot have an educational environment in which change is continuously expected, alongside a conservative system and expect anything but constant aggravation (Fullan, 1993, p. 3).

Given the staff members’ responses in the research, in the following four-phase description of the introduction of change, it is possible to conclude that the introduction of Learning Advisors is at the Implementation Phase:

• Orientation or Needs Phase, in which an expressed need for change is articulated in response to a perceived problem;
• Initiation Phase, in which a person or group promotes the change;
• Implementation Phase involves the varying levels of adoption of the change; and
• Institutionalisation or Continuation Phase whereby structures and routines are established to ensure the change becomes accepted practice, though before an innovation can reach this phase, the change must be embedded into the structure of a school, which includes the school’s policies, budgets and timetables (Brady & Kennedy, 2003, p. 308).

There are many factors that could hinder change, including teacher workload and accountability; teacher isolation; conformity to group thinking; the difficulty of identifying teacher expertise; narrow teacher roles; the organisation and staffing of schools, and the difficulty of demonstrating change, whilst factors facilitating change include: the explicitness of change; planning and support groups; the incentive system; organisational climate; resource support; the scope of change; evaluation; appropriate staff; differences in perception, and the adoption-development process (Brady & Kennedy, 2003).

The approaches for the principal at Boulder College to ‘line up the ducks’ essentially fall into two groups: first, the simultaneous enactment of leadership principles and second, management strategies (West-Burnham, 2007). Convincing staff members of the value of personalised approaches to learning is unlikely to be the most difficult challenge facing the principal, and given the level of support by teaching staff to move towards a Learning Advisor model, changing the culture at Boulder College may not be the most difficult leadership task confronting the principal. If the principal is able to successfully implement the change, then the tandem management strategies that she employs to create school structures to reflect
aspects of personalised learning, may not be all that unachievable – at least with the staff. Effecting change on a whole-school basis, however, may be more difficult as the need for the change at the time of the research did not appear to have been canvassed beyond the staff.

If the leadership at Boulder College is working towards creating a school that is a person-centred learning community in which ‘a sense of place, purpose and identity within which emergent, fluid forms of learning are encouraged’ and ‘deliberatively [developing] more participatory, less hierarchical forms of engagement and decision-making’ (Fielding, 2006, pp. 360-361), then appropriately identifying the ‘ducks’ – or stakeholders – will be part of the task for the principal, as will her ability to convey to all stakeholders the desirability of personalising education. Given the ethos of Boulder College and the amount of goodwill of staff members evident in the school, Boulder College is well-placed to become the genuine person-centred and vibrant learning community to which it increasingly aspires.

References


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**About the Author**

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Kim is Campus Co-ordinator for the Centre for Regional Education at the Albury-Wodonga Campus of La Trobe University, having previously taught in a variety of educational settings that include primary education, physical education, drama, special education, prison education, adult education and Aboriginal education. As well as teaching in pre-service teacher education programs, Kim convenes a number of adult education programs and is the Postgraduate Research Co-ordinator, supervising masters and doctoral candidates. Kim’s research interests are in the areas of educational leadership; pedagogy; middle years of schooling, and personalising education.