

Nairne School

Preschool - Year 7





Vi TL
he Gift of

Resilience
Empathy
Patience
Kindness
Gratitude
Responsibility
Self-discipline
Service
Trust
Understanding
Unity

VALUES FOR LIFE

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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"¹ 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.

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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.

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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 sizes² 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 William, Kings College, London, 1998.
2. *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*, John A. Hattie, 2008.

