A brief introduction to personalised learning

What is personalised learning? An overview

Personalised learning has been variously defined and interpreted in practice. Larry Cuban provides a useful discussion of the range of personalised learning offerings, including examples from practice.

Personalised learning refers to the various educational programsmes, instructional methods, and academic support strategies to address the distinct learning needs of each individual student. The goal of personalised learning is to help each student achieve academic success by first understanding the learning needs, interests, and aspirations of individual students, and then providing customised learning. The foundation of personalised learning is for each and every student to become involved in making decisions about their education: what they would like to learn and how.

Personalisation of learning is conceptualised in a range of ways:

1. Personalisation of content; students engaging with content, topics and areas that are of particular interest to them.

2. Personalisation of pace and progress; students progressing through the content and curriculum levels at their own pace.

3. Personalisation of process; instructional approaches and learning environments vary based on the students' needs and interests.

Personalisation often includes the following tenets:

- Learning is competency based, with students moving on once they have demonstrated mastery of a concept.

- Learning is flexible, and is not restricted to traditional schooling structures or timetables

- Students are encouraged to demonstrate agency and to take a level of ownership over their learning journey

- Students' interests, strengths and passions are incorporated into their learning

How effective is personalised learning?

There is mixed evidence regarding the effectiveness of personalised learning, primarily because of the lack of consensus in defining personalised learning. The purpose, tools, and instructional techniques that make up personalised learning vary because it is tailored to each pupil's needs and goals.

One study commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation found that students who experienced personalised learning approaches made greater achievement gains in math and reading than similar students at more traditional schools. Other research has relied on self-reported findings, which does not provide robust enough evidence to draw strong conclusions about the overall effectiveness of personalised learning. More research is required to be conducted to demonstrate empirical evidence for the effectiveness of personalised learning.

When/ how should personalised learning be used in the classroom?

Personalised learning can be a used for all ages and learners, and is most effective when students have a voice in their own education. For younger students, in primary school, it is possible to provide an element of choice in their own learning, by building an understanding of what they need to achieve their learning goals. For example, asking children to find different ways to calculate a maths problem allows them to discover different ways of working, and think about the method that works best for them.

In primary and intermediate years, students can start keeping reflection portfolios of their work. For example, students can reflect on school work they think they do well, school work they enjoy doing, school work they find difficult and wish to improve, how they learn best, what their goals are for school work in the current term, and how they will know if they have achieved their goals.

In secondary school, students can create and maintain their own learning plans that describe their academic and career goals, and map their decision making in relation to their goals, with a particular focus on post-secondary goals. Students can also adopt continuous self-assessment for learning through personal portfolios, which are a cumulative record of their work and accomplishments. Students are encouraged to learn beyond and outside of the traditional school setting. Teachers can also choose to use alternative educational approaches and instructional methods that that may give students more personal choice in their education.

Research also recommends reconfiguring the operational and educational structure of a larger school. This way, students are organised into smaller groups and paired with a consistent team of teachers who get to know the students and their learning needs well. Some schools have reorganised teaching assistants, mentors, and administrative staff to provide more flexible support to students. These smaller group settings work well as "advisories" for secondary school students. During advisories, students meet with their teachers and mentors in school to discuss academic, social, and postsecondary-planning issues.

These elements of personalised learning can be applied at all levels of schooling, and teachers should take care to ensure that these strategies are developmentally appropriate.

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