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# PERSON-CENTRED PLANNING FOR PUPILS AT-RISK

Review by **Levan Lim**

## INTRODUCTION

Certain pupils may experience great difficulties in adjusting to school experiences, such as coping with the pressure to perform better, being able to make friends or integrating with peers. Pupils with disabilities, from disadvantaged backgrounds or troubled homes, may be more at risk to these difficulties. If neglected, these pupils might eventually "fall by the wayside", feel alienated and not realise their potential in contributing to society. Short-term classroom-based interventions without the support of parents and other significant others may not be sufficient for these pupils. Rather, a holistic and individualised approach to viewing the pupil's concerns within the context of the pupil's overall quality of life and involving necessary supports through constructive action planning might be necessary to enhance the pupil's chances for success, happiness and a desirable future in life.



Sam Cheah

A holistic and individualised approach that teachers can use to plan a more desirable life for identified pupils is **Person-Centred Lifestyle Planning**. This approach essentially asks:

*"How can we identify constructive actions that will improve the quality of life experiences for a particular individual?"*

(O'Brien, 1987, p. 178).

To answer this question, planning needs to occur through three activities:

- (a) describe a desirable future for the individual,
- (b) specify a schedule of activities and supports necessary to move toward that desired outcome, and
- (c) use available resources to implement the schedule of activities and supports delineated (Vandercook, York, & Forest, 1989). The basic premise of this approach is that in order to achieve quality lifestyles and desirable futures for an individual, family, friends, community members, teachers and other service providers need to collaborate to build a community of people or a circle of support who will care for this individual in constructive ways. This paper reviews the research on person-centred lifestyle planning and discusses implications for teachers.

## PERSON-CENTRED LIFESTYLE PLANNING MODELS

Person-centred lifestyle planning models originate from the field of special education

where such models are used for planning and implementing the inclusion of persons with disabilities within communities and improving their quality of life. This type of planning model is relatively new and is in contrast to more traditional models of planning which are system-centred and contain standardised "blueprint" responses to addressing concerns. Discontent with these traditional models fueled the support for planning models which emphasise a *person-centred* approach (Condeluci, 1991; Schwartz, 1992). Person-centred planning models that have been used in facilitating quality lifestyles and desirable futures for persons with disabilities include **Lifestyle Planning** (O'Brien and Lyle, 1987), **Personal Futures Planning** (Mount, 1987), **McGill Action Planning System** (Vandercook, York, and Forest, 1989), and **Lifestyle Development Process** (Malette, Miranda, Jones, Bunz, and Rogow, 1992). These models emphasise the importance of five areas which are indices of a desirable life.

- Community presence
- Choice
- Competence
- Community respect
- Community participation

These areas translated in a school context could mean that the pupil is:

- (a) physically present in different spheres of the school community's life (e.g., involvement in a few clubs);
- (b) provided choices in daily school activities (e.g., being able to choose which peers to sit or play with);
- (c) learning the skills to participate competently in school activities;
- (d) taking on valued roles within the school community;

Meanwhile the school community supports the involvement of the individual in activities. In the planning process, the present quality of life is described by people who know the individual well in these areas.

## REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

The research literature on the effectiveness of person-centred planning models has so far been limited to individuals with disabilities, though their applicability can extend to individuals with other needs. The empirical research though has been scarce. Only a few studies have examined the efficacy of these planning models.

Mount (1987) compared the outcomes achieved for individuals with disabilities, transitioning from high school to adult life through the **Personal Futures Planning Model** with those achieved for control individuals through a traditional planning process. These planning processes were compared using the following: independent ratings of the format and content of documents used, the way people and problems were described, changes that occurred since the planning events and interviews with participants. The results showed that there were clear differences in the content of the two types of plans. The results also showed that the one-year follow-up surveys revealed that the individuals' lives did not change as a result of the traditional planning process while the Personal Futures Planning process produced many positive changes for both the individuals concerned and the staff involved. These changes included obtaining more desirable job placements in the community and receiving more

support to do preferred activities. Personal Futures Planning facilitated rich visions for the staff as opposed to the traditional model.

In another study, Malette et al. (1992) examined the efficacy of the **Lifestyle Development Process** for individuals with disabilities. Empirically validated instruments were used to evaluate lifestyle changes. One instrument was designed to measure the quantity of leisure and personal management activities performed monthly, e.g., the number of times the individuals went out to do “fun” activities such as bowling, swimming and shopping. Another instrument collected information about the persons who are socially important in the life of the focal person and the types and frequencies of activities in which persons in the social network typically engaged with the individual. The results showed that all the individuals were found to engage in a greater number of preferred, integrated activities during the mid- and posttests than at baseline. A third study, Miner and Bates (1997), evaluated the impact of person centred planning activities (examples of activities are listed in the next section) on special education pupils and their families. These activities had a significant effect on parent participation in meeting with service providers. In addition, families who experienced the lifestyle planning reported high levels of satisfaction with the process. For example, one parent commented that the person-centred planning experience helped her realise just how important it was to plan long range goals. Other than these studies, there has been some anecdotal documentation of changes as a result of using such planning (e.g., Vandercook et al., 1989).

## CONCLUSION

Schools are responsible for teaching and enabling individuals to become contributing members of society. Through school experiences, individuals not only receive a formal education but also learn to relate with others, develop friendships and form an identity of self. Schools can be seen as “communities of practice” where individuals participate in and are socialised through activities to learn to live with others in society. This perspective of schooling means that besides teaching subject content, teachers also have the responsibility of encouraging social interaction and facilitating a sense of belonging and community on the part of their pupils. This responsibility can be more challenging when there are pupils who have learning or behavioural concerns in adapting to school life.

Person-centred lifestyle planning is an alternative way of informing and developing individualised school and post-school curriculum. It has so far been used successfully for crafting more desirable lifestyles and futures for individuals with special needs. Many of its principles and strategies can be applied to pupils in mainstream schools whose needs demand greater home, school and community involvement. Person-centred planning provides the context and mechanism for such involvement to occur. By involving significant and familiar people in the person’s life, this model of lifestyle planning promotes an interactive and individualised process rather than a blueprint response to addressing pupils’ needs. With adequate support, care and constructive action from teachers, peers and parents, engaged through the person-centred planning process, pupils’ preparation for life can be enhanced.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Teachers can gain an understanding of the person-centred lifestyle planning process through the following activities suggested by Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, and Rosenberg (1994) and Vandercook et al. (1989). These activities are posed as questions that can be used by a facilitator to guide the process of the person-centred group meetings where the individual concerned, family members, friends and significant others are present.

### **1. *What is the individual's history?***

Since family members and significant others are the most important members of the circle of support, involve them to tell their stories related to the history of the individual. Ask them to talk about some of the milestones in the person's life. The facilitator can check the emerging picture of the individual with the individual himself or herself and with other members of the group.

### **2. *What are your dreams?***

This question is for the person and his or her circle of support to think about a desired vision for the person's future. The vision should not be solely based on present realities. The point is that if people share in a vision, dreams can become reality. This question forces the group to think about the direction in which the individual is heading and to come up with some goals to strive toward.

### **3. *What are your nightmares?***

Nightmares represent the situations that the individual and his or her circle of support must keep away from. To strive towards a better future for the individual, nightmares are as important as dreams to consider. By describing nightmares with others who care, people are allowed the dignity of voicing their fears in a supportive atmosphere.

### **4. *Who is the individual?***

Everyone in the group gets the opportunity to describe the individual. There are no right or wrong words. After a list of words have been collected from the participants, the facilitator asks the individual to choose three favourite words that he or she thinks describe her well.

### **5. *What are the individual's strengths, gifts, abilities and talents?***

The list developed by the participants describing the individual is then reviewed by the facilitator for the purpose of identifying the individual's strengths and unique gifts. In addition, the participants are requested to think about what the person can do, what he or she likes to do and what he or she does well.

**6. What are the individual's needs?**

This question is meant for the participants to think about the individual's needs from different perspectives and what it would take to make the dream(s) come true.

**7. What would the individual's ideal day look like and what must be done to make it happen?**

To achieve the dream in terms of an ideal day for the individual, the group starts to come up with ways for meeting the needs identified in the previous question. Plans of actions are drawn up at this stage for implementation.

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