

## STUDENT LED LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS, A MODEL OF OWNERSHIP AND EMPOWERMENT

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**Abstract:** *Student led learning paradigm has an important role in the activities accomplished by students in classroom. As educators we want our students to become active and engaged learners, to feel motivated to develop their skills. New learning strategies and didactic methods are important to be used, to determine a high interest in exploring and knowing better the self and the subject. The concept of student led learning is characterised by ownership and empowerment. To do so, there is a stringent need to learn how to apply student led learning principles in primary schools, in order to determine an increased level of involvement in students' activity.*

**Keywords:** student led; leadership; facilitator; collaboration; initiative; involvement; empowerment; ownership; collaboration.

Over the past years, the role of the teacher had changed. The educator becomes a facilitator - he is responsible not only for delivering information, but also to determine the students to search for knowledge, select, analyse, evaluate, ask questions and think. We promoted a student-centred education paradigm, which is now widely used in teaching and learning. There are multiple expressions associated with this paradigm as *flexible learning* or *experiential learning*. The concept of *student led learning* is characterised by ownership and empowerment, it refers to how educators can support students to achieve more, with different effective learning strategies. The most important aspect is that the students have an active role: peer/group work, reflections, having objectives, tracking progress, learning through collaboration, project based learning. The students may feel really engaged in the learning process, teachers allowing them to make their own choices or to come with suggestions. This way education becomes more meaningful and effective for the students.<sup>1</sup>

Student-centered learning is a teaching approach that tries to replace the idea of lectures with active learning, integrating self-knowledge learning and group work, stimulating the student to be responsible for his own development. Therefore, we feel the need to replace the word *student* with the word *learner*, due to the much more

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<sup>1</sup> David Boud *Peer learning in higher education learning from & with each other*, Sydney, Psychology Press, 2001, p. 95.

involvement in the process of education and to the higher responsibility for their own development.

As educators we want our students to become active and engaged learners. We need to develop the whole person, aiming at cognitive, behavioural and emotional development. Students and teachers are now a team, working together for achieving better results. The teacher should be there, helping the students to set their own learning objectives, milestones and actions, and to teach them how to track their progress. Moreover, by promoting a leadership culture within the institution, the students become more and more engaged and responsible for their own progress and development. The student learning approach is based on team work, teachers and students together. The entire process engaged both teachers and students in mutual learning around a complex domain. They had to recognise that they were working with a model and thus, by definition, their view was incomplete. One of the teachers' role was to help the students to describe the assumptions upon which the model was based and to invite the students to critique those assumptions and consider the implications of alternative assumptions, a critical aspect of scientific thinking.<sup>2</sup>

In order to produce the effectiveness of child-centred learning or student led learning, the teacher must know very well the child, in order to produce the most appropriate methods in order to facilitate the development of entire personality (cognitive, emotional, behavioral, motivational and from leadership point of view).<sup>3</sup>

It is thus the aim of this study to explore and investigate how student led learning can be supported in primary schools. Some of the exemplified learning strategies have been successfully implemented throughout the last year in Transylvania College and can serve as good practice scenarios for further student led learning sequences.

### **Principles of student led learning**

The most important thing in the process of student led learning is that the learners have a unique experience during the lessons; the teachers create the space for them to discover more. It is very important to give the students all the tools they need in order to find the most

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Senge *Schools that learn*, London, Nicholas Breanley Publishing, 2012, p. 295.

<sup>3</sup> Horațiu Catalano "Child-centered Paradigm in Early Education", in *Astra Salvensis*, IX (2012), no. 18, pp. 29-36.

relevant information, critical thinking and *frames of reference*. According to Mezirow<sup>4</sup>, it is important for students to benefit from materials that are connected to real life, the experiences they cope every day. Hereupon, the teacher does not only conduct the lesson, he/she becomes a co-learner, a facilitator that lead the students through the process of learning. Being your own leader in the process of learning can be a different experience for each person, for some students this being easy and for others being a difficult process. Here, we need to talk about *self-efficacy*<sup>5</sup>, which is a process that takes into consideration the abilities of each students and also the support of the teacher. For the students, it is very important to learn how to evaluate their work, the strong points, but also what they need to improve. According to Kirketerp and his method *Push*, the students need to be encouraged every single lesson to solve different and relevant tasks in order to make progress. At this point, we need to talk about the differentiation in teaching, making the process of learning individual for each learner, helping them to grow, offering them materials that support their needs.

There are five paradigms that helped us as educators to develop a child-centred education over the past years, influencing our practices and results.

- Everyone can consider himself a leader;
- Everyone is capable of great things;
- I can change myself first in order to see the change in others;
- Teachers empower students to lead their own learning;
- Teachers encourage the development of the whole person.

### **Benefits of student led learning**

The teaching methods need to improve and evolve as a response to students' needs, but also to actual world's needs. The teacher is present in the classroom to provide guidance and appropriate materials, but also to monitor students involvement in the lesson. *Student led learning* approach has a huge value and potential in the classroom. Firstly, when the student is the leader, he has the freedom to explore more around a

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Mezirow *Transformative Learning in Practice*, New York, John Wiley & Sons Inc Publisher, 2009, p. 250.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Bandura "On the Functional Properties of Perceived Self-Efficacy Revisited", in *Journal of management*, I (2012), no. 38 (1), pp. 9-44.

subject in order to find innovative and unique ideas. Also, the student goes deeper with the understanding of a subject, making the learning much more meaningful. Secondly, we need to talk about student's relationship with his colleagues because working in groups or pairs develops their communication and collaboration skills, making the connections stronger and more authentic. A very important aspect is that the students need to have from the very beginning clear expectations in order to *begin with the end in mind*<sup>6</sup>. This habit from *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, is essential for students work because they can set up some steps to follow for finishing the task.

Students working together in this kind of environment are far more likely to ask new questions about a problem that become obsessed with getting the right answer. Although they may need some guidance to stay on track, questioning can lead them further than they - or their teacher-expected.<sup>7</sup>

We identified some areas that a teacher can improve using *student led learning* method:

- Increasing satisfaction, by engaging students in a a new and active way.
- Helping students to find and practice their skills in real-life situations.
- Promoting a growth mindset, focusing on reflection and objectives.
- Shifting the ownership of learning to students, by giving them opportunity to share their thoughts and ideas.
- Raising responsibility among students, by giving them different leadership roles in the classroom.
- Designing the classroom around the students needs, encouraging them to be self-aware.
- Leading, inspiring and coaching students to find passion on subjects that matter, by using critical thinking skills.
- Recognising failure as a powerful teachable moment.
- Encouraging all students to find their talents, gifts, strengths and weaknesses.

### **See-do-get paradigm**

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen R. Covey *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York, Simon&Schuster Publisher, 2004, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Senge *Schools that learn*, London, Nicholas Breanley Publishing, 2012, p. 287.

According to Stephen R. Covey as humans we live and act based on paradigms we learned and experienced over the years. He is using the *glasses metaphor* to understand that we see the world as we want to see, but we also judge the world based on what we choose to see, influencing what we do and after that the result we get. It is a circle, that follows us every single day in every decision we make. If we want to see a change in our lives, we need to start from our behaviour, to take off the glasses we are wearing, in order to see the world as it is. In the *Leader in Me book*, the author discusses about five paradigm that we need to improve in order to change the vision of education.

1. **Paradigm of Leadership**  
old paradigm: Leadership is for few.  
new paradigm: Everyone can be a leader.
2. **Paradigm of Potential**  
old paradigm: A few people are gifted.  
new paradigm: Everyone has genius.
3. **Paradigm of Change**  
old paradigm: To improve schools, the system needs to change first.  
new paradigm: Change starts with me.
4. **Paradigm of Motivation**  
old paradigm: Educators control and direct students learning.  
new paradigm: Educators empower students to lead their own learning.
5. **Paradigm of Education**  
old paradigm: Focus solely on academic achievement.  
new paradigm: Develop the whole person.

By applying this principle of changing the paradigm and seeing the school in a different way, we can think about actions that support our ideas of growth mindset. Stephen R. Covey came up with three big areas of actions to support our new paradigms.

A. Teach Leadership Principles: based on the fact that we are a community formed by teachers, students and parents and we all need to work together to see the change.

- Professional Learning (modeling and developing teachers skills)
- Student Learning (direct lessons and integrated approaches)
- Family Learning (family communication, 7 habits training for families, student teaching at home)

B. Create a Leadership Culture

- Leadership Environment (physical and emotional environment, common language)
- Shared Leadership (students leadership roles, student voice)
- Leadership Events (family, community, school-wide, classroom events)

### C. Align Academic Systems

- School-wide Goal Achievement (having a common goal to work for)
- Student- Led Achievement (student-led conferences/lessons)
- Empowering Instructions (trusting relationship, student-led learning collaborative planning and reflection).

By taking action in this areas, we will see an improvement on leadership, culture and academics in school. The *See-Do-Get model* is helping us as teachers take initiative and find the courage to work differently, giving the opportunity to each students to try his best.

## Teaching and applying 7 habits

It is essential to teach the *7 habits of highly effective people* promoted by Stephen R. Covey based on their experiences and needs.

### **Habit 1 - Be Proactive**

This habit is essential for students to learn that every person is in charge with his own actions. While the word proactivity is now fairly common in management literature, it is a word you won't find in most dictionaries. It means more than merely taking initiative. It means that as human beings, we are responsible for our own lives. Our behaviour is a function of our decisions, not our conditions. We can subordinate feelings to values. We have the initiative and the responsibility to make things happen.<sup>8</sup>

### **Habit 2 - Begin with the End in Mind**

The second habit teaches us that is important to have a plan ahead, to set targets and to work hard in order to achieve them. To Begin with the End in Mind means to start with a clear understanding of your destination. It means to know where you're going so that you better

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<sup>8</sup> Stephen R. Covey *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York, Simon&Schuster Publisher, 2004 p. 33.

understand where you are now and so that the steps you take are always in the right direction.<sup>9</sup>

### **Habit 3 - Put First Things First**

The third habit is about prioritising our entire actions, to have a schedule, to become disciplined and organised in order to work hard for my goals, *practicing effective self-management*.<sup>10</sup>

### **Habit 4 - Think Win-Win**

With habit 4 we move from personal victory to public victory, focusing on how can improve our communication and collaboration in order to have a win-win situation for all of us, not win-lose or lose-lose, a *Paradigm of Interdependence* (Stephen R. Covey, 1989). Win-win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions. Win-win means that agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial, mutually satisfying. With a win-win solution, all parties feel good about the decision and feel committed to the action plan. Win-win sees life as a cooperative, not a competitive arena.<sup>11</sup>

### **Habit 5 - Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood**

This paradigm is focusing on the idea *Listen before you talk*, developing the principles of empathic communication and active listening. Although it's risky and hard, seek first to understand, or diagnose before you prescribe, is a correct principle manifesting many areas of life.<sup>12</sup>

### **Habit 6 - Synergize**

Habit 6 is the habit which underlines the importance of team work and collaboration, having a common goal in order to achieve more. As a teacher, I have come to believe that many truly great classes teeter on the very edge of chaos. Synergy tests whether teachers and students are really open to the principle of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>13</sup>

### **Habit 7 - Sharpen the Saw**

This is the single most powerful investment we can ever make in life -- investment in ourselves, in the only instrument we have with which to deal with life and to contribute. We are the instruments of our own performance, and to be effective, we need to recognise the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 103.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 136.

importance of taking time regularly to sharpen the saw in all four ways (The Physical Dimension, The Spiritual Dimension, The Mental Dimension and The Social/Emotional Dimension)<sup>14</sup> Habit 7 is teaching us that we all have the chance to improve ourselves by having a fresh start every single day.

### **Examples of activities which support student led learning paradigm**

#### **1. Problem-Based Learning**

- Students work together to explore and find solutions for a real problem. They share the ideas, present the results and solutions to the colleagues. They will receive a feedback from their teacher and colleagues.

- Feedback and reflection always need to focus on:

+ plus/WWW (What went well): The students identify the strong points, what they succeeded and what they are really good at.

Δ Delta/ EBI (Even better if): The students identify what they need to improve in order to know better.

When the students learn and apply this method of giving or receiving feedback they will start focusing on their own progress. They can apply this method during a lesson when they have a peer assessment or self assessment activity.

**2. Goal planner:** it is important for students to set targets for each subject, based on what they already know and what they need to improve. Also, it is not enough just to set the targets, they need to find some steps they need to follow to achieve that goal. We need to identify here the roles of the teachers:

- We need to help students clarify their goals and the steps to achieve it.
- We must get them establish real and tangible goals.
- We have to hold students accountable for following the steps.

#### **3. Differentiated work**

In order to help students to achieve their goals, we need to support them with suitable materials for their levels. It is important to remember that each students has his own level of development and a specific learning style, as teachers we need to learn how to help each of them to learn in their own style.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 147.



In differentiated classroom, teachers begin where students are, not the front of a curriculum guide. They accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways. Thus, they also accept and act on the premise that teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction thought different learning modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity. In differentiated classroom, teachers ensure that a student competes against himself as he grows and develops more than he competes against other students.<sup>15</sup>

### Conclusions

Taking into consideration the literature, we underline the importance of *student led learning* approach, encouraging an environment where students can learn and express themselves in an open way. By practicing this principles, we observed that students became able to express their point of view, to communicate more and formulate more detailed and sustainable reasons for the topic or for their opinion, to use technology during lessons in order to bring relevant information to the topic. The students also know exactly where they are against a criteria or list of competencies, they are aware of what they need to improve, but also, they learn to ask for materials that are relevant to their level and needs.

As teachers, we need to change lessons from teaching to learning, even more, to learning together with our students, ensuring the topics are interesting, interconnected and relevant, to make sure the students understand the concept *Have the end in mind*, by giving them clear expectation, encourage pair work and group work during lessons, sharing ideas and opinions.

Bringing into our classrooms *student led learning paradigm* we can improve our communication with students, learning that we are a team, working for the best.

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<sup>15</sup> Carol Ann Tomlinson, *The differentiated Classroom. Responding to the Needs of All Learners*, Alexandria, ASCD Publishing, 1999, p. 2.