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An overview of the summary report findings

This short publication does three things in relation to NCSL's Leadership Network's Research Associate Programme project on personalised learning. It:

- establishes the background to the project
- provides a brief description of what it set out to do and how it was conducted
- synthesises the themes to emerge from its findings

It offers the reader a starting point and an overview.

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Special series on **Personalised learning**
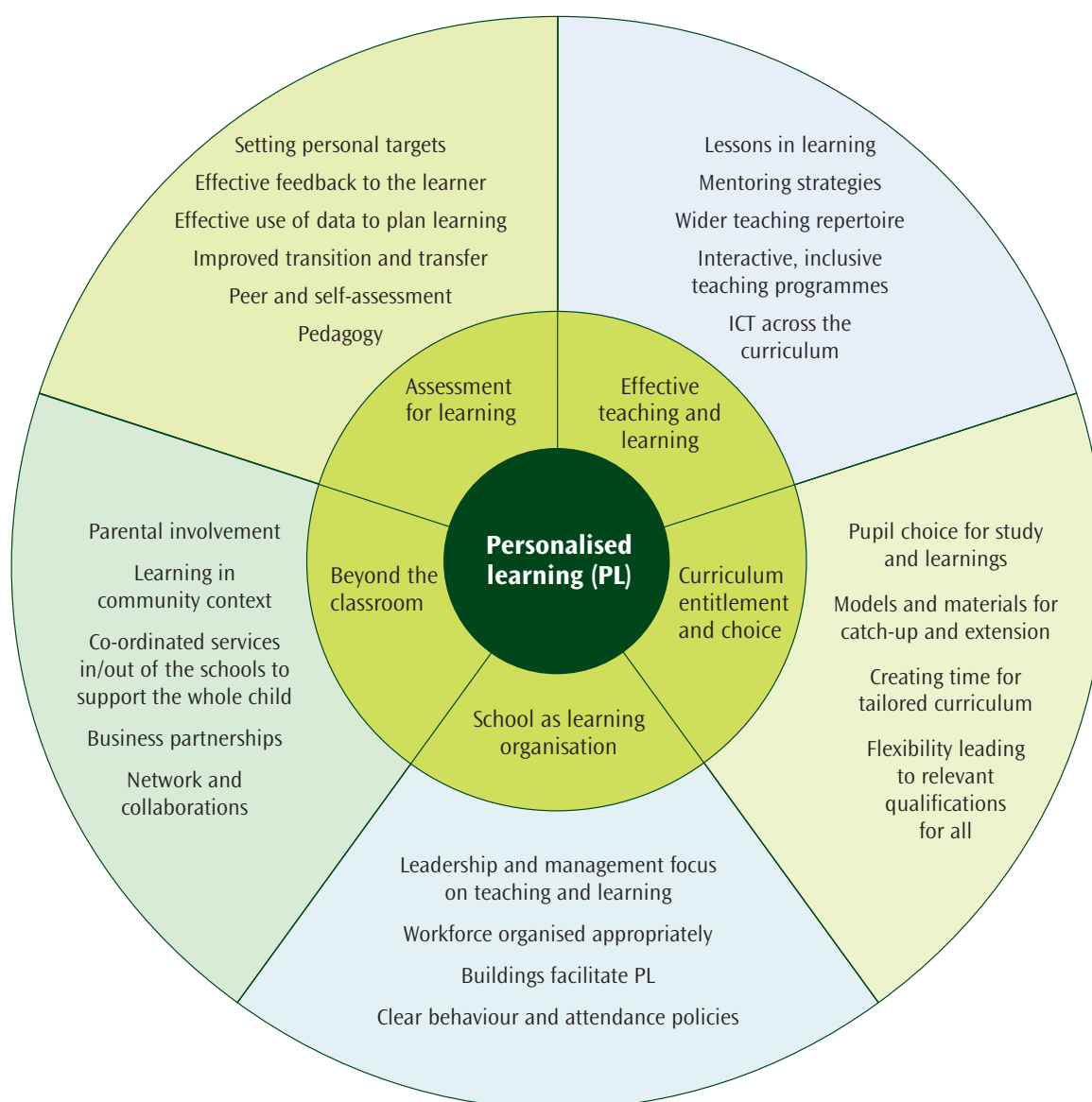
Background: personalised learning

Personalised learning is an idea born of a wider political context than education, but, as with many ideas, since it floated like a butterfly into the educational ether, much energy has been expended on pinning it down, dissecting and categorising it. Is it customised learning, personalised schooling or individualised learning, to name but a few?

In an attempt to focus the debate where it mattered – in the school and in the classroom – the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2004) set out five components of personalised learning. These are represented in Figure 1.

DfES (2006) states that: '(Personalised learning) is not individualised learning, where children work alone, nor is it pupils being left to their own devices. It means shaping teaching and learning around the different ways children learn.' DfES also states that it is not a new initiative and that many schools have been 'tailoring their curriculum and teaching methods to meet their pupils' needs for years'. What is new, it claims, is the drive to make practices such as a flexible curriculum universal.

Figure 1: Five key components of personalised learning

Source: *Personalised Learning TLRP/ESRC 2004,* Editors James, A and Pollard, A

Setting personal targets
Effective feedback to the learner
Effective use of data to plan learning
Improved transition and transfer
Peer and self-assessment
Pedagogy

Lessons in learning
Mentoring strategies
Wider teaching repertoire
Interactive, inclusive teaching programmes
ICT across the curriculum

Parental involvement
Learning in community context
Co-ordinated services in/out of the schools to support the whole child
Business partnerships
Network and collaborations

Pupil choice for study and learnings
Models and materials for catch-up and extension
Creating time for tailored curriculum
Flexibility leading to relevant qualifications for all

Leadership and management focus on teaching and learning
Workforce organised appropriately
Buildings facilitate PL
Clear behaviour and attendance policies

Assessment for learning

Effective teaching and learning

Beyond the classroom

Personalised learning (PL)

Curriculum entitlement and choice

School as learning organisation

The government's most recent education white paper, Higher Standards, Better Schools for All (DfES, 2005) has again reinforced personalised learning as a central theme in its bid to raise standards and provide excellence for all as part of the Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) agenda.

Many school leaders have recognised and embraced the possibilities for values-driven innovation that the personalisation debate offers. Accepting the challenge and the invitation to contribute to a conversation (DfES, 2004), NCSL's Leadership Network established a research project. This would explore, describe, report and comment on the approaches existing in a sample of schools across the country which were endeavouring to meet the challenges of personalised learning and enhance the educational experience of children and young people.

The project

Eight headteachers and/or deputy headteachers/vice principals were invited by the network to take up the research challenge as research associates.

Between them, they would explore the five components of personalisation described above (Figure 1). They would do this within their own phase, or across phases, and in each case identify a focus area from these components. Their studies are not representative of all aspects of practice identified within the five components model shown in Figure 1, for example in relation to the use of ICT in personalising learning and teaching; however, the studies cover a range of the aspects. The study areas are identified below.

Does it help to know? focuses on the use of a range of assessment for learning (AfL) practices in a group of four primary schools.

"Are you learnin' us today, Miss?" explores effective teaching and learning, including AfL, within a culture of relationships in a group of four primary schools.

Mentoring: from data to people explores the role of adult-pupil mentoring and how this links to pupils' targets in five secondary schools.

Lessons in partnership focuses on a Leading Edge partnership, including a special school, and how cross-institutional provision creates new opportunities to personalise learning.

Personalising the curriculum at 14–19 explores how a number of schools have developed curriculum choice by offering routes and pathways to pupils at age 14–19.

Shape-shifters explores an alternative approach to learning through the curriculum at Key Stages 3 and 4. It is based on the adoption by four schools of the International Baccalaureate Organisation (IBO) Middle Years Programme and its link to effective learning.

And the pupil said… explores how pupils from a group of primary schools perceive their learning experience and the lessons for leadership that emerge from this.

Hey, what about me? has a cross-phase emphasis as it looks at how vulnerable pupils at risk of disengagement from education have their needs met through multi-agency approaches.

What did the researchers look at?

The project brief established the view that, if as a group the research associates were to explore what personalised learning looked like in practice, they should endeavour to do the following:

- Find out what *pupils* thought about the practices aimed at personalising their experience

- Find out what *teachers* thought about employing such practices; their rationale, perceived impact and implementation

- Find out what role *school leaders* and, in particular, headteachers took in ensuring these practices were implemented and developed

- Examine the leadership implications of developing personalised practices

What emerges within the summary reports is a series of snapshots of current practice; real, lived experience. These snapshots do not claim to represent exemplary practice, but rather exemplification from which the reader can:

- draw parallels with the practice in their own schools, to inform current and future steps towards developing similar practices

- identify what approaches schools have taken towards achieving such practices and consider how these resonate with, or inform, their own actions as a leader

What have the research associates learnt?

A simple response would be to say, a great deal. Not just about those areas of focus identified in the preceding section, but also the importance of gaining a range of stakeholder perspectives to inform the debate, itself a key message of school self-evaluation.

One key theme to emerge is the need to authentically explore pupil voice. All those pupils who contributed statements substantially aided the development of a composite picture as to what personalisation meant to them. Their statements, however, resonate beyond practices to what many would see as the key to the development of personalised learning, the school culture that underpins what people actually do.

From the interviews with headteachers, the findings suggest that personalised learning was a conceptual confirmation of the following fundamental beliefs:

- Every child certainly does matter

- A pupil's learning experience should be pupil-centred

- Professionals and para-professionals should use their accumulated skills alongside available data to provide pupil-focused learning

- Education is about the whole child

- Learning is a shared responsibility and as such should engage partners in constructing the experience that best meets individual needs

- Learning is relational, ie deeper themes such as respect, trust and belief are at the heart of what schools and their partners should offer

The findings have been synthesised to uncover the main themes arising from:

- the pupil voice

- interviews with teachers

- interviews with headteachers

Each provides a distinct, yet complementary, perspective on what personalised practices meant in their schools. Each also informs the implications for leading personalised learning.

Findings from the pupil voice

Pupils' thoughts about their learning experience can be grouped under three main headings, although these are interrelated:

- learning relationships

- learning approaches

- learning organisations

Learning relationships

Pupils identified nurturing, caring relationships as those that contributed to their sense of self-worth as a learner. There was recognition that this was both a cultural dimension – the way a school was – as well as an individual dimension – that certain adults demonstrated this through particular actions. Relationships that engendered this sense of personal value succeeded in contributing to pupils' motivation to engage in their own learning.

Trust and mutual respect were essential ingredients of those relationships perceived to be successful, and pupils were able to distinguish those relationships with their teachers where this was apparent as easily as those where it was not.

The schools' development of approaches in which pupils found themselves as learning partners – with staff (eg through mentoring) and other pupils (eg through peer-assessment) – promoted a strong sense of personal agency. The valuing of their contribution through dialogue, whether verbal or written, engaged them in their learning journey and heightened expectations of personal responsibility and self-investment.

Learning approaches

Pupils found it motivational to move away from passivity towards being active participants in their own learning. Approaches that placed the onus upon the pupil to take responsibility for his or her learning, with considered and informed teacher guidance, promoted independence and autonomy, as did opportunities for making informed choices (eg in the curriculum).

Pupils were eager to engage in learning opportunities that invited them to contribute to their construction and/or development, ie that they were not prescribed and closed but open to influence within parameters. For pupils in some schools, such opportunities were limited.

Pupils were also keen to see the connection between their learning and the world in which they live, and the skills they would need to develop in the future, both as a learner and as a future worker.

Learning organisations

Pupils in secondary schools wanted their learning needs known across the school and were frustrated when information-sharing practices did not support this. Schools need to think about how they manage knowledge about pupils intelligently, eg in communicating pupil data relating to personal targets so that all are aware and the pupil does not have to repeat information to different teachers.

Findings from the interviews with teachers

The common themes to emerge from the interviews with teachers can be grouped under three main headings:

- teacher as learner

- teacher autonomy vs accountability

- teacher as practitioner

Teacher as learner

Teachers universally identified effective professional development as a significant contributor to developing personalised learning approaches. These included:

- external expert training, but only if accompanied by internal follow-up to secure school-based implementation

- internal development opportunities, including peer observation, dialogue and reflection around practice, both informal and formal (eg within staff meetings, year meetings)

- cross-school development – learning from colleagues within partner institutions through the opportunities highlighted above, eg extending skills repertoire through teaching pupils from a special school in a mainstream setting

Teachers identified that they could learn much from listening to, and engaging in, dialogue with pupils, and that this was fundamental to developing personalised approaches aimed at meeting individuals' needs. Establishing means through which pupil voice was not only encouraged but used, so that self-evaluation could inform practice, as well as developing dialogic practices such as assessment for learning, were essential.

Teacher autonomy vs accountability

Teachers identified the autonomy vs accountability debate as centring on meeting the school's pupil performance targets against a backdrop of wanting to develop innovative practices. There was a belief that innovation based upon the personalisation of learning would lead to higher standards of achievement. However, this would only be achieved if school leaders adopted a no-blame culture which encouraged risk-taking.

Teacher as practitioner

Teachers found the concept of personalised learning culturally appealing as it centred upon an inclusive ideal in which each individual pupil's needs could be met. The perceived move from teaching as knowledge transference to learner guidance was welcomed.

Teachers recognised that more effective use of pupil data could inform their teaching practice. This did not just include performance data but that accrued from attitudinal surveys, mentoring-based discussions and that relating to learning style preferences.

Teachers saw the importance of modelling their own processes of learning to pupils, including self- and peer-assessment. This established a class culture of 'We are all learners together' and that 'It's ok not to know'.

Findings from the interviews with headteachers

Again, three themes emerged from the interviews. These were:

- drivers – reasons for embarking on a journey towards personalised learning
- barriers encountered
- levers used to overcome the barriers

Drivers - reasons for embarking on a journey towards personalised learning

A number of drivers emerged, some of which were values-oriented and some relating to the development of opportunities. These included:

- dissatisfaction with the status quo, eg existing curriculum structure and provision
- opportunities such as a Leading Edge partnership
- policy developments such as the 14-19 review and Every Child Matters
- availability of funding streams
- networking with colleagues
- competition between schools

Underpinning all of the above drivers, however, was the professional desire to attune provision more closely to individual needs and to realise a vision predicated on this. The moral imperative to place the individual at the heart of the educational offer was a recurring theme.

Barriers encountered

Barriers identified by headteachers included:

- staff questioning of, or resistance to, change
- staff questions relating to accountability vs innovation
- issues of complexity in:
  - developing and establishing new teaching and learning approaches
  - developing new ways of working, eg with para-professionals
- pragmatic organisational issues such as timetabling and transport
- developing sustainability

All these bullet points, few as they are, represent layers of complexity, and the message from headteachers was that developing more personalised provision was not about quick fixes, but a staged journey. The path towards personalising a pupil's experience was not unproblematic, but the potential gains were considered substantial.

Levers used to overcome the barriers

A number of levers to overcome the barriers listed previously were cited by headteachers, and these included the following.

Challenging the status quo

This included:

- selling the vision of what could be achieved to change attitudes and win support

- creatively reorganising to allow new systems to emerge and flourish, and not accepting that existing structures cannot be changed

- developing new roles for more personalised provision, eg using learning mentors

- reinforcing cultural expectations as well as practice by modelling, eg changing the language of 'work' to one of 'learning'

Developing capacity

This included:

- directly leading developments in their initial stages to gather momentum and establish their importance

- distributing leadership to establish and embed practice, build capacity and aid sustainability

- creating cross-partner institution groups to distribute leadership across organisations and grow leadership skills suited to this mode of working

- providing professional learning and development opportunities, including professional dialogue, and innovation exchange across a partnership

- seeing partnership as a creative vehicle for further innovation

- fostering bottom-up development to enable innovation to take hold, championing acceptable risk and supporting the exploration of alternative approaches

- seeing change as gradual and taking place in stages

- learning from networks and enabling others to do this to inform their professional confidence

- engaging with professionals and para-professionals who contribute to pupils' learning development to inform strategy and provision

- exploiting the managerial potential of ICT, eg for the effective use and transference of data

Self-evaluating

This included:

- using pupil voice to inform how personalised practices were and how they could become more so, and moving beyond 'permission to speak' to greater partnership

- using data, including attitudinal data, effectively to inform provision

- establishing rigorous monitoring and evaluation systems

What are the implications for leading personalised learning?

The points highlighted in the previous sections are not only findings. They are, in themselves, implications for the approaches that other leaders may need to adopt in developing more personalised provision. But are these leadership themes anything new or are they what is required of any leader in instigating change and exploring new directions?

As one would expect, there is much that is common with other leadership practices. However, the following might be determined as aspects not always located in such work:

■ a strong focus on using pupil voice and data representative of this to shape provision

■ engagement with a wider range of partners, eg other institutions, professionals and para-professionals, including those in health

■ reconfiguration of organisational aspects of institutions to enable more creative and innovative provision to emerge

Indeed, in terms of personlising learning, this list would appear to make sense. If pupils' learning is going to be more personalised, we can acknowledge the following corollaries:

■ The pupil becomes not only an active learner but also a partner in their own learning.

■ A range of professionals and para-professionals is engaged in supporting a learning process matched to individual needs.

■ The institution evolves and reconfigures to allow for more flexible and adaptive learning-centred provision.

Claims that this is already the case in schools could and probably should be challenged if personalisation is to achieve purchase and move beyond rhetoric. As a starting point, schools might ask themselves: 'To what extent do we currently encourage, provide for, and enable …?' in relation to the bullet points. This would enable them to establish a contextualised foothold.

The schools in these studies have engaged in the conversation about what personalised learning looks like in practice to them. Most, if not all, would admit that they are on a journey which is far from complete but that they consider to be worth the effort if it means that pupils receive an education matched to their needs, and which improves their life chances.

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4 more schools to be added here by printers

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