

Personalised learning: how can we help every child do even better?

David Hopkins, Chief Adviser to Ministers on School Standards, DfES



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Personalised learning is an idea that is capturing the imagination of teachers, children and young people across the country. It is an idea that has

its roots in the best practices of the teaching profession, and it has the potential to make every young person's learning experience stretching, creative, fun and successful. We believe personalised learning can help us all answer enduring questions about:

- how can we help every child do even better?
- what teaching practices should we employ to do so?
- how together can we solve the specific challenges faced in each school?

Personalisation is a very simple concept. It is about putting citizens at the heart of public services and enabling them to have a say in the design and improvement of the organisations that serve them.

In education this can be understood as personalised learning – the drive to tailor education to individual need, interest and aptitude so as to fulfil every young person's potential. David Miliband, in his 2004 speech to the North of England Conference, described this as:

'high expectations of every child, given practical form by high quality teaching based on a sound knowledge and understanding of each child's needs. It is not individualised learning where pupils sit alone. Nor is it pupils left to their own devices – which too often reinforces low aspirations. It means shaping teaching around the way different youngsters learn; it means taking the care to nurture the unique talents of every pupil.'

Personalised learning is not a new DfES initiative. Many schools and teachers have

tailored curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of children and young people with great success for many years. What is new is our drive to make the best practices universal. We want to help all schools and teachers establish their own approaches to personalised learning, so that across the education system the learning needs and talents of young people are used to guide decision making.

To build a successful system of personalised learning we must begin by acknowledging that giving every single child the chance to be the best they can be, whatever their talent or background, is not the betrayal of excellence – it is the fulfilment of it. Personalised learning means high quality teaching that is responsive to the different ways students achieve their best. There is a clear moral and educational case for pursuing this approach. A system that responds to individual pupils by creating an education path that takes account of their needs, interests and aspirations will not only generate excellence, it will also make a strong contribution to equity and social justice.

This leads directly to the principles that can help guide our day-to-day practices.

- **For children and young people** it means clear learning pathways through the education system and the motivation to become independent, e-literate, fulfilled, lifelong learners.
- **For schools** it means a professional ethos that accepts and assumes every child comes to the classroom with a different knowledge base and skill set, as well as varying aptitudes and aspirations; and that, as a result, there is a determination for every young person's needs to be assessed and their talents developed through diverse teaching strategies.
- **For school governors** it means promoting high standards of educational achievement and well-being for every pupil, ensuring that all aspects of organising and running the school work

together to get the best for all pupils.

- **For the DfES and local authorities** it means a responsibility to create the conditions in which teachers and schools have the flexibility and capability to personalise the learning experience of all their pupils, combined with a system of intelligent accountability so that central intervention is in inverse proportion to success.
- **For the system as a whole** it means the shared goals of high quality and high equity.

The rationale of these principles is clear: to raise standards by focusing teaching and learning on the aptitudes and interests of pupils and by removing any barriers to learning. The key question is how collectively we build this offer for every pupil and every parent.

Our starting point for delivering personalised learning is the expertise and professionalism of the whole school team. We know headteachers, teachers and support staff already do much to fulfil the potential of every pupil. Our belief is that there are five key components that can help to deepen and extend this personalisation of education.

Assessment for learning

A personalised offer depends on really knowing the strengths and weaknesses of individual children and young people. We believe a key means of doing so is assessment for learning and the use of evidence and dialogue to identify every pupil's learning needs.

Effective teaching and learning strategies

Personalised learning demands teaching and learning strategies that develop the competence and confidence of every learner by actively engaging and

stretching them. For teachers it means a focus on their repertoire of teaching skills, their subject specialisms and their management of the learning experience. Personalised learning requires a range of whole class, group and individual teaching, learning and ICT strategies to transmit knowledge, to instil key learning skills and to accommodate different paces of learning. For pupils this means a focus on their learning skills and their capability to take forward their own learning.

Curriculum entitlement and choice

Personalised learning demands a curriculum entitlement and choice that delivers a breadth of study, personal relevance and flexible learning pathways through the education system. The national curriculum is a vital foundation for all 5- to 14-year-olds. New GCSEs in subjects like engineering, information and communication technology, health and social care broaden the offer, and the Tomlinson working group holds the potential for wider reform at 14–19. But it is teachers and schools who have the capacity to harness the enquiry and enthusiasm of students. In primary schools this means teachers using the flexibilities that already exist to ally high standards in the basics with opportunities for enrichment and creativity. In the early secondary years it means students are actively engaged by exciting curricula and specialist subject enquiry. At 14–19 it means schools working together to extend curriculum choice.

School organisation

Personalised learning demands that school leaders and teachers think creatively about school organisation, so as to best support high quality teaching and learning and to ensure that pupil performance and pupil welfare are mutually supportive.

Strong partnership beyond the school

Personalised learning demands strong partnership beyond the school to drive forward progress in the classroom, to remove barriers to learning and to support pupil well-being. This means a strong partnership with parents and carers, so that they become more closely involved in their child's learning and help improve behaviour and attendance. It means strong partnerships with local institutions to extend the learning opportunities of young people and broaden their horizons. It means using the opportunities of the green paper *Every child matters* to integrate children's services by bringing family support, social care and health services together with education to help support all children and in particular those with additional needs.

These are the five key components of personalised learning. We believe they offer a framework for implementation: a set of tools for schools and teachers to employ contextually so as to respond to the challenges they face. We believe that these are shared principles. But we

understand that practices will look different in different schools.

The DfES is running a national conversation about how personalisation can be used to drive success in every school. You might wish to visit www.dfes.standards.gov.uk/personalised-learning/ to find out more. Building an offer of personalised learning is a significant challenge for teachers, schools and local and national government. But it is an offer that is massively in the interests of young people.

David Hopkins writes here in a personal capacity: the views expressed in this paper do not necessarily represent a policy position on the part of the Department for Education and Skills.

Further reading

Hopkins, D, *School Improvement for real*, London: Routledge/Falmer, 2001.

This document can also be viewed or downloaded in PDF format from the website www.qca.org.uk/futures/.

