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Research Associate Full report

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Resource

Student-focused strategies: supporting achievement

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Abstract

This research examines how secondary headteachers support every child to achieve their full potential through student-focused strategies. It explores what five secondary school headteachers understand by the term 'personalised learning' and what they have done to support it in their schools. The research identified common threads in the actions headteachers had taken in their schools and the innovation they had introduced. These were: curriculum innovation, including greater flexibility in the curriculum at Key Stage 4 (KS4); improvements in teaching and learning; and greater tracking, monitoring and intervention based on knowledge about students. Although the headteachers did not use the term assessment for learning (AfL), it was clear that the increased levels of monitoring both in and out of the classroom were key components of this. In that sense there was agreement with the view of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT, 2008) that AfL was a significant lever for change. This research identified three key components of practice in the schools: use of data, target-setting and curriculum innovation.

Looking to the future, there was a consensus from these headteachers that greater collaboration and creativity would move their own, and potentially other schools, further towards a more bespoke offer to students.

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Introduction

In 1897, John Dewey, the American philosopher, psychologist and educational reformer, wrote:

'I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform... through education society can formulate its own purposes, can organize its own means and resources, and thus shape itself with definiteness and economy in the direction in which it wishes to move.'

Dewey, 1897:10

Over a hundred years on since Dewey penned these words, many politicians and educationalists hold social justice and reform to be major end products of education. Margo et al (2006) see this as an increasingly important issue since social mobility seems to have stalled. But how do schools achieve this? Leadbeater (2008), writing for the Innovation Unit, stated it in these terms:

'The route to a more socially just, inclusive education system, one which engages, motivates and rewards all, is through a more personalised approach to learning.'

Leadbeater, 2008:70

The previous Labour government viewed the personalised learning agenda as a way of enabling all students to reach their full potential, which in turn would bring about greater social mobility.

The new coalition government has similarly set its education policy agenda on reducing the educational gap between the socially advantaged and disadvantaged, and on increasing social mobility, although its approaches are not centred on personalised learning in the same way. As Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, stated with reference to the academies policy in his speech at the National College's annual conference (17 June 2010):

"This policy is driven, like all our education policy, by our guiding moral purpose – the need to raise attainment for all children and close the gap between the richest and poorest."

Gove, 2010

For headteachers also, academic success is a major driving force in increasing the life chances of students. For those that serve students living in areas of high social deprivation and where students have low aspirations, this additionally holds a social mobility imperative. Headteachers are therefore constantly asking what it is that they, as school leaders, can do to raise aspirations and enable students who, for example, do not have a family history of further or higher education, to break this cycle.

Many of the changes that schools have recently managed (eg KS3 curriculum reform and one-to-one tuition) are responses to the focus on supporting all students to achieve their potential. The previous Labour government's educational policy involved significant investment in personalised learning in order to achieve this. It is therefore important to ask what lessons can be learnt from this about raising standards and meeting the needs of all students.

This research looks at how secondary headteachers support every child to achieve their full potential through student-focused strategies. It explores what five secondary headteachers understand by the term 'personalised learning', and what it has meant in practice in their schools. What strategies have made an impact? What implications might there be for enabling students to achieve higher levels of attainment?

Understanding personalised learning

In 2007 a team from Sussex and Cambridge universities and the Institute of Education investigated the personalised learning approaches of a number of schools and concluded that 'there was widespread uncertainty as to what was meant by personalised learning' (Sebba et al, 2007:18). This view was endorsed in an article by Angela Spencer in the National College's *Idr* magazine which observed that:

'While the precise definition of personalised learning may still be a matter for some debate, the certainty is that it's one of the most important issues facing schools today. International evidence shows the best way to transform good schools into great schools is to tailor teaching and learning to the needs of each child and young person.'

Spencer, 2009:25

Despite this perceived difficulty of definition, most writers on personalised learning do offer one. Leadbeater suggests:

'Personalised learning is learner-led learning, within a framework of standards. The goal is to motivate children and parents to become active investors in their own education.'

Leadbeater, 2005:9

He also suggests that the ultimate goal of personalised learning is to enable students to see themselves as active co-investors in their own education and co-creators of learning. Previous leaders of education have also offered their definition of what it means. HM Chief Inspector Christine Gilbert defined it as:

'Taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child's and young person's learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate. It means strengthening the link between learning and teaching by engaging pupils – and their parents – as partners in learning.'

DCSF, 2008b:5

The 2020 vision (DfES, 2006a:6) supported these definitions in stating that it means taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child's and young person's learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate. The 2020 vision placed assessment for learning (AfL) at the heart of personalised learning (alongside progression) and suggested that AfL 'improves pupils' scores in national tests and examinations as well as their meta-cognitive skills, including the capacity to learn how to learn' (DfES, 2006a:16). However, what is of particular interest to schools is the triad of strategies it states will have most impact:

'We agree with the analysis of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust that a combination of assessment for learning, learning how to learn and pupil voice has the potential to contribute to developing all aspects of learning.'

DfES, 2006a:20

If this triad of interventions is significant, then clearly this has implications for schools not least because Sebba et al (2007:11) have noted that Ofsted reports at the time of their research indicated that AfL is high on schools' agendas and yet is often one of the weakest areas of their work. Ofsted's annual report for 2008/09 also highlighted that:

'Survey findings indicate, however, that the quality and use of assessment are inconsistent both within and between secondary schools. They also emerge frequently from inspections as an area for improvement.'

Ofsted, 2009:31

Perhaps, away from the definitions, it is the principle behind personalised learning that is important. For example, as summed up in the words of John West-Burnham (2008:7), 'Personalising learning is perhaps the most effective way of translating the rhetoric of the learning-centred school into the actual reality of every learner's experience.'

Methodology

This research sought to capture views of how secondary headteachers support every child to achieve their full potential through student-focused strategies. Views on personalised learning were explored using a small sample of five secondary school headteachers. This was an opportunity sample drawn from those either known to the researcher through professional contacts or National College relationships. All except one had been in post for more than five years. All the schools were specialist schools but the specialisms differed. The sample does not claim to be representative of the wider secondary school population but offers a small-scale perspective on the strategies deployed within a group of schools.

Before the visit to their schools, headteachers were sent a pre-interview questionnaire comprising two sections. The first required headteachers to identify, from a list, the strategies for raising attainment that had been used within their school. The second section required headteachers to rank these strategies from those that had most impact in raising standards to those that had the least. This questionnaire formed the basis for the latter part of the interview with each headteacher.

Visits to all five schools were undertaken over a period of three months in 2009. All the interviews followed the same pattern of being semi-structured and addressing the same questions. The interviews focused on what the interviewees understood by the term 'personalised learning' and what that meant for them in the schools they led. This led predominantly to an explanation of how the curriculum had been structured and the specific interventions planned for certain cohorts. All the interviews were transcribed and analysed. For the purposes of this study, headteachers are referred to as head 1, head 2 etc.

Findings

The findings have been divided into two sections. The first focuses on what the headteachers understood by personalised learning and what supporting student-focused strategies meant for their school. The second section is concerned with the strategies headteachers had found useful in raising attainment and supporting every child to achieve their full potential within their school.

Section 1: What do school leaders understand by the term 'personalised learning'?

"I think personalised learning is one of these things that comes and goes. It's a bit of jargon."

Head 1

Did the five headteachers interviewed agree with the view expressed by Angela Spencer (2009) that the 'precise definition of personalised learning may still be a matter of debate?' Or to put it another way, did they have a common understanding of what it means?

The interviews showed that most of the headteachers did not recognise a single agreed national definition of the term 'personalised learning'. They felt that no such clear definition existed and moved very quickly in the interviews from offering a definition to explaining what personalised learning looked like in their schools based on their own understanding. The response of head 1 typifies this:

"I'm not sure what personalised learning is, if I'm honest. So all I can say is what I think it is and what it means to us. I think personalised learning is the whole view of the child as an individual, seeing them as an individual when they come into the school and ensuring whatever pathway they take within school is as individually tailored to their needs as it can be."

Head 1

The difficulty headteachers found in defining personalised learning was in large part due to the fact that one of the strategies they had already deployed to raise standards was adapting the curriculum or making curriculum choices that would lead to a greater level of academic success or engagement. This was particularly true for the headteachers who had been in post for a significant length of time and who were sufficiently confident in their headship to do what they believed to be right for their school. In other words, these headteachers had already been endeavouring to personalise the curriculum.

Other heads interviewed reinforced the view that there is a lack of clarity in the definition:

"I don't think anyone has got the answer to what personalised learning is."

Head 2

Head 2 was clear that the introduction of a national curriculum in 1989 with the suggestion that all students could fit within it was never going to meet their individual needs. This head saw this as putting students in boxes and, therefore, looked to the needs of each child meeting them through designing appropriate curriculum.

It became clear that although some previous government ministers and educationalists had offered definitions of personalised learning, the headteachers in this study did not share these in a way that suggested there was any agreed definition. Head 4 was very explicit about the lack of clear government guidance:

“I don’t know that I have a definition of what personalised learning is because I don’t think I’ve ever seen, read or heard anything that describes to me exactly what personalised learning is.”

Head 4

Despite this, head 4 went on to talk about personalised learning in terms of every child reaching their potential and having an appropriate course of study that allows for progress. It may be that more of the previous government’s definition had been assimilated than this headteacher was aware.

This headteacher’s suggestion that personalised learning had, at its root, the idea that schools offer an appropriate course to students leading to academic success was also mentioned by head 3. This headteacher believed personalised learning to be the course best suited to the student and studied at the time best suited to him or her, but went on to say that, in this headteacher’s view, it was utopian:

“So why is it Utopia? Can we allow it to be that if we are setting all our hopes on personalised learning bringing equality of opportunity and achievement?”

Head 3

Another headteacher who was able to provide a definition closely akin to that proffered by government sources confirmed what other interviewees had said in defining it in terms of students ‘receiving a learning package’ that is appropriate to where the student is in terms of specific needs and enabling the student to progress to where he or she needs to be. In using the term ‘receiving’, this headteacher acknowledged that there was still significant work to be done if they were to realise the spirit of personalised learning as something that is done with rather than to the student.

We can see, therefore, that there was common agreement between the heads interviewed that they could not easily define personalised learning. However, all were able to move from defining it to talking about what it looked like in their schools. All the headteachers were comfortable in suggesting that they had adapted the personalised learning agenda in ways that would meet the needs of their students. This adaptation had similar characteristics across the schools. The common themes found, each of which is explored further below, were:

- curriculum innovation (particularly in relation to greater flexibility in option choices at KS4)
- impact on teaching and learning
- increased knowledge of students resulting from use of tracking systems

Personalised learning and the curriculum

“It’s principally about curriculum at this school at the moment; it’s not principally about teaching style.”

Head 5

“The two things that have made the difference are: quality of teaching and learning – if you get that right and the curriculum you’ll make sure that the needs of young people are met.”

Head 2

After seeking a definition from the headteachers, the research sought to explore what personalised learning (as they understood it) looked like in their schools. All the headteachers, for example, saw it as a way of addressing previous curriculum inflexibility that resulted from the introduction of the original national curriculum.

It became clear from these interviews that the headteachers increasingly saw the national curriculum, as originally introduced, as a barrier to offering a curriculum that would meet the needs of individuals and specific cohorts. Long before the language of personalised learning evolved, some of these headteachers were looking for ways to change the curriculum to meet the needs of their students. Head 2, for example said:

“In the year 2000 we saw that the curriculum wasn’t meeting the needs of our children and we had... a vocational access programme, which [was for] students who found it really difficult to interact in mainstream schools. The vocational programme was this school’s first most significant attempt to change the curriculum to ensure it had relevance for a number of disengaged students.”

Head 2

Head 3 makes a similar claim in stating that personalised learning allowed the school ‘a total [over]haul of the curriculum’. This was facilitated when the school moved from being a middle to a secondary school. It became clear that the traditional curriculum inherited from the historical secondary organisation was highly unfamiliar to, and perceived as inappropriate for the needs of, its students. As a result teachers who could teach traditional subjects in a vocational way were recruited and the curriculum content and the way it was delivered began to meet the needs of its students.

What we have seen so far is headteachers looking at the needs of their students and matching the curriculum to them. For head 3, this came as a result of the local authority moving to a two-tier system. For head 1, going into special measures was the catalyst for change:

“When I came here we were in special measures: 14 per cent [of students gained] 5 GCSEs at grades] A*-C and if we hadn’t personalised the curriculum we would still be sitting at 14 per cent of 5 A*-C [grades], I suspect.”

Head 1

Again this involved moving away from traditional GCSE subjects and looking for change that best met the needs of each child.

Head 4 had initiated curriculum change at KS4 and had begun to look at changes in KS3. This for some students would involve curriculum design aimed at improving levels of literacy and numeracy:

“As a consequence of changing the curriculum and thinking about the way we do things I think I’ve, inadvertently, come across a way of personalising the curriculum more but I’ve done nothing deliberately about personalising the curriculum [in reference to its then policy agenda status] and I don’t intend to.”

Head 4

At the heart of the change for head 5 was curriculum innovation. This new curriculum meant more accessible courses that were more engaging. As a result students were more motivated, enjoyed school more and attendance improved.

Moving from a rigid curriculum may take time but these schools had made significant progress in doing so. The 2020 vision (DfES, 2006a: 19) statement suggests that schools need ‘to realise the curriculum’s full potential [and] some schools will need to understand what flexibilities look like in practice and how barriers to innovation may be lifted’. The headteachers I spoke to had received this message. What is more, many had been waiting for some time for the opportunity to be free of what they saw as the restrictions that the entitlement to a national curriculum brought.

GCSE pathways

The starting-point for most headteachers I interviewed was the KS4 curriculum. The most obvious explanation for this was the manner in which schools were measured at the time of this research: the number of pupils achieving five grades A*-C at GCSE, and more recently five A*-C grades to include English and mathematics. When addressing the issue of curriculum innovation, most heads had in their minds the pathways offered at KS4. The more pathways they were able to offer, as opposed to what they perceived as the traditional, one-size-fits-all GCSE entitlement, the more headteachers felt they were personalising the curriculum for their students. The most significant part of the interview was headteachers describing in detail what this KS4 pathway curriculum had meant for them in their schools. For all the headteachers, students being able to choose from a number of pathways at KS4 enabled personalised learning and constituted a significant part of the engagement of these heads with the personalised learning agenda:

“It is also about the pathways we follow... we do personalised pathways for every child and we make a curriculum offer to children.”

Head 1

For this school the information held on students was crucial in determining the kind of curriculum offered at KS4. This information, gleaned from academic performance data, along with the views of staff and students, resulted in the student being made a curriculum offer. The head hinted that this high level of guidance (ie, the concept of making a curriculum offer that is rarely challenged by student or parents) may be at odds with the spirit of personalised learning.

Headteachers drew attention to the pathway programmes they offered students at KS4 and common themes emerged. Many felt that moving away from traditional GCSE courses towards vocational programmes enabled their students to enjoy a greater degree of success. These courses evolved primarily around BTEC programmes. In addition some schools offered traditional GCSE courses over a shorter period of time (for example a year), largely because the pace was fast and students could see the end in sight, a factor perceived as particularly beneficial to boys.

The outcome headteachers considered, based on attainment data, was academic success:

“For me personalised learning means, although I don’t like it, that every child gets the five A*-C [grades]. Personalised learning for me means that the students can achieve the five A*-C [grades] whichever pathway they’re on.”

Head 4

This is not to say that head 4 did not value academic success, but rather did not believe that the measure of getting five A*-C grades was the only measure of success or the motivating factor for changing the curriculum.

Head 5 concurred with this:

“We made significant changes to the curriculum 3 years ago and the first real impact of that was seen this year when the 5 A*-C [grades] figure went up from 37 per cent to 47 per cent and we attribute the majority of that improvement to the changes in curriculum driven by the personalised learning agenda.”

Head 5

Other headteachers were able to see curriculum change initiated by the personalised learning agenda because it enabled the headteacher to focus on key values. Head 3 for example recognised that examination success resulted from curriculum innovation. This headteacher believed that curriculum innovation was successful because it made the curriculum more relevant. Relevance was one of this headteacher’s core values.

Although curriculum change was primarily driven by the need for greater academic success, as we have seen there were other benefits. Head 5 saw personalised learning as not only a means to change the curriculum but, inadvertently, a means of changing the expectations of both teachers and students:

“The other trick is that as well as changing the curriculum [is] we’re changing expectations. So the personalised learning agenda is also the vehicle for changing people’s expectations.”

Head 5

This would endorse the view expressed in the 2020 vision that:

“Embedding the concept of progression in personalising learning means instilling in all children and young people the belief that they can succeed through identifying achievable – but challenging – steps towards clear, shared goals.”

DfES, 2006a:37

Teaching and learning

All the headteachers interviewed spoke of curriculum innovation, particularly at KS4, as their key strand of personalised learning. In addition to this, three of the five related personalised learning to an improvement in the quality of classroom teaching:

“Personalised learning is also about the way the focus in lessons has changed from teaching to learning, and learning has to focus on where they are and where they’re going and what their background is and what their attainment is and it should be about individual children making progress.”

Head 1

This change in emphasis was a result of leadership decisions and lay at the heart of the school’s improvement plan. Head 1 was trying to focus on teaching and learning and looking to find ways of transferring the responsibility for learning to children so that they did not think learning was something done to them but something they did in partnership.

Head 2 also recognised the value of improving teaching. When talking about the strategies that had brought about significant school improvement, this headteacher said:

“I think we look at what’s happening in the classroom – a big focus in the school is on teaching and learning... and if you’re getting it right in the classroom in terms of teaching and learning, you are by the very nature of the fact, personalising learning for young people.”

Head 2

Specifically this school had focused on AfL and implementing the types of questions in the classroom that led to a deeper level of understanding.

Head 4 also recognised that teaching and learning are at the heart of personalised learning. For this headteacher, the two key elements of personalised learning were the quality of teaching and learning, and a curriculum that allowed young people to embark on learning when they were ready. In other words, learning was not determined by the age of the student:

“I think for me teaching and learning in the classroom [are] fundamental. I’ve always believed if you get your lessons right the rest follows and you can’t get your lessons right unless you know the students in front of you. You’ve got to know where they’re coming from and where they should be going.”

Head 4

For head 4, the key elements were planning and the use of data, and the quality of teaching and learning, which was set in a personalised learning framework. The headteacher required teachers to reflect on their lessons in the belief that teachers are more often clearer about what they have taught than they are about what students have learnt.

Head 5 also recognised the centrality of work within the classroom to personalised learning. This headteacher recognised that the school still had work to do on differentiation because for some teachers, differentiation meant planning a lesson to the level that the majority of students in the class had reached.

Knowledge of students

What we have seen so far is that the majority of headteachers interviewed saw curriculum innovation and improvements in the quality of classroom teaching as central elements of personalised learning. Further to this was the use of data and tracking student achievement, although the interviews reflect that this was driven more by the headteachers' commitment to school improvement rather than by the personalised learning agenda.

Head 1 confirms this in suggesting that student tracking is at the heart of school improvement. This headteacher suggested that this was not only because, leading a church school, the senior leadership team is committed to gospel values and the respect of individual students, but because student tracking brought about improvements. This headteacher acknowledged that at the school, tracking students, in particular key students in Year 11, and the process of putting in place appropriate interventions, is both relentless and rigorous:

“We do it in a way...we're humorous with it... so the kids will find us on the door in a morning with a big list, [this list would consist of any concerns teachers might have, most recent test results, attitude to learning assessments etc] chatting about it as they come into school, chasing them round, running. Intervention is that we have an idea what you have to do to do better...and do it...it's not really an option, never mind personalised learning.”

Head 1

This headteacher emphasised that this rigorous pursuit of students may be at odds with the personalised learning agenda in some ways, although this interpretation was not a common theme with other headteachers, who did not view such strategies as mutually exclusive but instead closely linked.

Other headteachers recognised the importance of using knowledge about the students in the classroom and considered assessment that informed teacher planning to be personalised because there was an understanding of where the student was and where he or she needed to be.

Headteachers valued the improved quality of internal tracking data and applied it to monitor students' progress, and to plan appropriate interventions. One headteacher identified target-setting as significant not only because it changed the mindset of teachers but because it had a huge impact on student achievement too. For this headteacher, students were more aware of their targets and more willing to question them if they thought they were not sufficiently challenging. Inadvertently the headteacher had found a way to raise student expectations since before this emphasis was placed on target-setting, students were not as motivated to achieve nor indeed to challenge the appropriateness of targets based on their self-assessments.

Head 5 believed that improved tracking data had enriched the learning conversations between teachers and students. This headteacher was keen to move on this target-setting agenda, hoping to reach a place where students were able to set their own targets. In essence this would involve students taking the lead from the teacher, but there was an expectation that students would take more responsibility and decide where to go next in their learning. Head 5 also found that improved academic data enabled greater effectiveness as a headteacher because it empowered this head to ask questions about individual students:

“So first it allows us to ask questions that provoke people to do the right things but also because that allows us to do that with students as well.”

Head 5

Section 2: Effective strategies

What is clear from the headteachers interviewed is that curriculum innovation (as expressed in terms of greater curriculum flexibility, shorter KS3, increased number of KS4 pathways etc), changes in teaching and learning and greater monitoring of student progress were at the heart of personalised learning as they understood it in their schools and that these were having a significant impact on standards and achievement.

In order to identify the strategies headteachers valued and find common trends, before the school visits each headteacher completed a questionnaire to determine which strategies had been deployed in their schools and which they considered to be the most effective.

The strategies were identified from the making good progress project (DfES, 2006b). This was used because within the project there emerges a clear strategy: there is a need for accurate assessment that is communicated to students and parents and that also enables teachers to respond quickly to students who need support with a range of strategies. These strategies include: differentiation; learning dialogues; group work; open-ended tasks; developing student engagement with learning; curriculum innovation; attention to curriculum resources; focus on literacy and numeracy; target-setting and task-based feedback; focus on learning to learn (principles of learning and teaching, known as PLTs); study support; self and peer assessment etc. Providing the interviewees with a range of personalised strategies would enable them to identify those that they had deployed in their schools.

We have already seen that responses in the interviews identified curriculum flexibility to be the most significant, coupled with changes in teaching and learning and tracking students. Did the questionnaires support this?

Table 1 sets out the responses to the question, 'which strategies have affected school improvement?' Headteachers were asked to measure the importance with 1 being 'a small impact' and 5 being 'significant impact'. 'N/A' accounts for strategies not employed by the school. Table 2 shows how headteachers themselves ranked the different strategies.

Table 1: Strategies as rated by interviewees

School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5						
○	○	●	●	○						
	n/a	1	2	3	4	5				Overall rank
Assessment for Learning (AfL)/ assessing pupils' progress (APP)				○	●●●	●				5
Curriculum innovation					●●	●●●				3
Focus on teaching and learning				●	○	●●●				4
Focus on literacy/numeracy			●●	●●●						12
Pre-examination interventions		●			○	●●●				5
Review days	●●		●	○	○					9
Student mentoring			●	○	●●●					7
Student tracking						●●●●●				1
Student voice			●	●●●●						8
Target-setting					●●	●●●				3
Use of data					○	●●●●				2
Teaching learning skills		●	○	●●●						10
Embedding PLTs in curriculum	○	●●	○			●				12
Use of rewards for students			●●●	●		●				8
Differentiation			●	○	○	●●				6
Engagement with parents		●	●●	●●						11
Targeting attendance	○		○	●	○	●				8
Engaging students in learning dialogues	○	●		●	○					13
Out-of-class study support				●●	●●	●				6
Using new technologies			○	●●	●	●				14
Self and peer assessment		●	●	●●	●●					14
Summer schools	●●●	○								15

Table 2: Ranking of responses

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Assessment for Learning (AfL)/ assessing pupils' progress (APP)	4	2	1		
Curriculum innovation	2	2	1	3	4
Focus on teaching and learning	3	1	1		5
Focus on literacy/numeracy	10	3	3		
Pre-examination interventions		1	1		6
Review days	9	2			
Student mentoring	5	3	2		7
Student tracking	1	1	1	1	1
Student voice		3	3		
Target-setting	2	1	1	4	2
Use of data	2	1	1	2	3
Teaching learning skills		3			
Embedding PLTs in curriculum		4	1		
Use of rewards for students		4	1		
Differentiation	8	1	1		
Engagement with parents	7	4			
Targeting attendance		2	1		
Engaging students in learning dialogues		2			
Out-of-class study support	6	2	1		
Using new technologies		4	1	5	
Self and peer assessment		2			
Summer schools		n/a			

What is clear both from the ranking in the questionnaire and the responses from the interviews – whatever language headteachers used – is that they all placed student tracking as the most significant strategy. Within the interviews they rarely talked about AfL/APP but ranked it as the fifth most significant strategy in the questionnaire. Heads also valued target-setting but few clarified what that meant to them. They also made reference to the value of data as a means of holding conversations with colleagues about student progress and enabling them to hold others accountable. The triad of strategies determined, as previously stated (SSAT, 2008), were AfL, student voice and learning to learn. Each of these is discussed in turn with reference to the findings above.

Assessment for learning

Assessment for learning (AfL) has been defined as:

‘We know what a difference it makes to pupils’ learning, when they and their teachers have a really good understanding of where pupils are in their learning, where they need to go next and how to get there – which is what assessment for learning is all about.’

DCSF, 2008a:1

Without doubt the headteachers interviewed unanimously identified student tracking, a significant strand of AfL, as the single most effective strategy deployed by them in delivering the personalised learning agenda and facilitating greater academic success. This has already been noted in detail. It was also interesting to note that, despite the significance of AfL, very few headteachers used the language of AfL. Despite this, they collectively ranked AfL as being the fifth most significant intervention.

Head 1 never used the phrase, ‘assessment for learning’, but recognised that student tracking was crucial. When asked why this was the single most effective strategy, the response was:

“I didn’t know before we started that that one would make the difference. I knew we had to do a lot of different things. If you’d have asked me I’d have thought the curriculum innovation and focus on teaching and learning would have made the difference. So I didn’t know what would make the difference.”

Head 1

Unlike head 1, head 2 did use the language of AfL:

“It’s about assessment for learning, questioning of the students, making sure they’ve got an understanding.”

Head 2

For this headteacher, questioning students, assessing them and then using this assessment to inform planning ensured that planning was more ‘personalised’ and gave the teacher a greater sense of where the students’ learning was and the progress they needed to make.

Student voice

Although identified as a significant strategy for improvement by the SSAT, this was not seen as significant by the headteachers interviewed. Collectively student voice was ranked eighth, behind student tracking; use of data; target-setting and curriculum innovation (joint third); focus on teaching and learning; AfL and pre-examination interventions (joint fifth); differentiation and out-of-class study support (joint sixth) and student mentoring.

All the headteachers interviewed shared a deep concern for their students and a willingness to listen to them. Further investigation might be needed to fully explore why, given this level of commitment, little value appeared to be placed on student voice. Of the headteachers I interviewed, head 5 articulated a clear vision that the personalised learning agenda required more listening, allowing students to take responsibility for their own target-setting and resulting in students making their own learning plans.

Learning to learn

Learning to learn or teaching learning skills as it was termed in the questionnaire was ranked collectively by the headteachers in tenth place. Only the use of review days separated it from student voice. Ranked even lower was embedding principles of learning and teaching (PLTs) into the curriculum. PLTs, resulting from the modification of the KS3 curriculum, are closely akin to learning to learn as they enable KS3 students to learn six clearly defined learning skills. Although relatively new at the time of writing, nonetheless it is surprising that PLTs are, alongside learning to learn, rated low because they can be used by schools to address the learning skills young people need in order to succeed.

There is clearly some variance between this small sample and the view of the SSAT that the triad of AfL, student voice and learning to learn can make a significant difference. It was evident from these interviews and responses to the questionnaires that headteachers valued other strategies above student voice and learning to learn.

Future thoughts

Despite the headteachers interviewed being, for the most part, unable to offer a definition of personalised learning, all traced significant changes in their schools such as curriculum innovation, improvements in teaching and learning and the tracking of students to the personalised learning agenda.

When looking to the future of personalised or student-focused learning, the headteachers had a range of opinions which were often influenced by their local circumstances. These included:

- one headteacher considering the need for more support for emotional health provision within the school
- a need for future educational policy to span both primary and secondary schools so that there was a curriculum continuum that allowed the school to plan for and meet the needs of the students
- the need for future school-building programmes to account for the specific contextual needs of schools in providing student-focused accommodation and resources

However the two strongest, and most reiterated views expressed regarding the future of personalised learning can be summarised as:

- collaboration, including on vocational education and diplomas
- total personalisation

These are expanded upon below.

Collaboration

At the heart of the improvement in these schools was a more flexible curriculum, particularly at KS4. This comprised a range of pathways offering a mixture of traditional GCSE and vocational courses. Schools had, to varying degrees, made the journey away from what were perceived to be traditional GCSE, one-size-fits-all courses. The extent of curriculum innovation was a combination of the headteachers' visions, their understanding of their school and the needs of its students and, for some, the school's specialism.

Two of the headteachers interviewed would like to see greater choice in vocational courses but did not see vocational diplomas as the answer to this need.

Head 4 was concerned that because of the school's rural situation the key to making vocational diplomas work, collaboration was difficult to acquire. Moreover, schools that had built up a tradition of success on the traditional GCSE plus A-level route were not particularly willing to embrace the new courses except for students who were challenging in terms of behaviour. In other words, it was considered that a school viewed by parents as successful and focused on traditional measures such as GCSEs is less inclined to seek collaborative approaches or push forward with a personalised learning agenda.

Head 4 remarked:

“I haven’t talked about collaboration with other schools and that aspect of personalised learning because I feel really unhappy about the time and money and energy that’s been spent on the diplomas. In this area we’re not at all committed to them.”

Head 4

Despite the problems of collaboration, head 4 recognised that it was an issue to be resolved because the future of effective curriculum delivery lay with different providers working together.

Head 3 also had concerns about diplomas. This was the school that had invested substantial time in curriculum innovation, driven in part because of its business specialism and because its reform from a middle school allowed it to take an alternative look at the curriculum offer. This head also recognised the value of collaboration, particularly with business partners. However the perceived imposition of diplomas meant that some of the courses that were well established in the school were being phased out. Speaking of the former Labour government’s plans, this head observed that:

“The government intends to make [diplomas] work, [and] as a result two of our important courses have been withdrawn which means our continuum of education has been ‘siloe’d.’”

Head 3

This headteacher was looking for greater flexibility. There was a sense that not only had diplomas meant the withdrawal of an area of success for this school, but that the freedom schools needed to continue to fuel curriculum innovation had not gone far enough. This headteacher was a supporter of vocational programmes who wanted any review of the current courses on offer to build on courses that were already successfully delivering for students.

The motive for the introduction of a national curriculum, according to Chitty (2004), was to ensure that there was a national standard of education, and that students, wherever they were geographically, received the same education, which would also address the concern at the time that students were ill-prepared for the world of work. This came, says Chitty (2004), at a cost. One of those costs was the perceived restriction on headteachers to create a curriculum that met the needs of their students, given their knowledge of their schools and their students. The headteachers in this research were looking for that freedom because it allowed them to design courses that had relevance and raised aspiration, leading to success.

Total personalisation

We have already seen that one headteacher believed that the personalised learning agenda hadn’t gone far enough and needed to be set free from the perceived restrictions of the original national curriculum. Another headteacher drew from some research he had done on a school in Texas in which students, supported by a strong pastoral system, set their own targets and decided which courses to attend over a two-week programme. Based on what they knew of themselves, students would plan to attend certain lessons. They might use their personal knowledge to revisit a class or a programme of study.

Of this study, head 5 said:

“Clearly there were parameters but the students felt they had huge freedom. I’d like to get to the point where the students were determining more of what they were choosing. At what age could you begin to give students more freedom within parameters?”

Head 5

The headteacher understood that this school in Texas was small and in challenging circumstances. But, despite this, head 5 felt it offered a pointer to the future.

Conclusions

Each of the headteachers was able to discuss the personalised practices that their schools had been developing with clear emphases on the key strategies as they saw them of better use of student academic performance data, changes to teaching and learning and curriculum reform. In combination, these were seen as the developments that had most influenced the schools' direction and impacted on students' progress and the quality of the offer to them. These did not accord with the triad identified by the SSAT, and this is potentially attributable to the small sample size used in this study.

It was evident that, in many cases, these headteachers had been leading their schools in embedding these practices before the advent of personalised learning as an initiative by the former government. This was because these were already effective strategies for school improvement (ie their development was not necessarily prompted by a desire to introduce personalised learning per se). However, personalised learning may have served as a lever for improvement since it gave permission for innovation and aided some headteachers in their efforts to create change, and to challenge barriers to improvement, such as staff expectations of student achievement.

In a similar way, the principles underpinning personalised learning, for example its emphasis on social mobility and reducing the attainment gap, aligned with headteachers' personal moral imperatives which lay behind their leadership of school improvement.

For at least one headteacher, however, the agenda was a driver of change and in this case was directly attributed to the success of curriculum changes, which led to an increase from 37 per cent to 47 per cent of students achieving 5 A*-C grades at GCSE. Other benefits of curriculum change were cited by headteachers as greater student enjoyment of and engagement in their learning, and improved attendance. Similarly it was a driver for changes in teaching and learning for some, with the emphasis in their schools moving from the former to the latter, with an enhanced focus on knowing where a student is in terms of attainment and where they need to be.

Linked to this were effective AfL classroom practices such as questioning to elicit deeper understanding, and improved target-setting procedures and awareness of student needs, on behalf of both teachers and students. For example, in one school students were more able to challenge their targets based on their self-assessment of their own progress. The effective use of academic progress and performance data was highly valued on a number of levels, most significantly in driving up standards by improving planning for progress, informing intervention strategies and enabling informed discussions between the headteachers and their staff and students on progress.

Tensions were raised in relation to the underlying concepts of personalised learning, especially that of education done with the student rather than done to. Whilst there were clear areas of improvement (as cited above), others presented ongoing questions. For example, one headteacher recognised that a particular curriculum pathway offered, which was readily accepted and not challenged, felt more like done to than done with the student.

Whether the headteachers used the personalised learning initiative as a driver of change, a lever for change or resisted using the mantle but developed the practices associated with it independently, all of them focused their decision-making on the best strategies to invest in based on their school's context and needs at a certain point. Those that adopted it as a driver or lever did so in order to inform developments as well as lend what could be termed political weight to their adoption.

Implications

The main implications for leadership from this study, whilst acknowledging the small sample size and inappropriateness of generalising to a wider school population from this, are as follows:

School leaders need to consider policy developments in terms of how they will inform change and developments that are right for their school, given its context and phase of development, and use the aspects that are likely have most impact.

Policy initiatives can lend significant weight and credence to developments and these may serve to mitigate barriers such as staff resistance.

School leaders might consider how effectively the strategies that underpin personalised or student-focused learning are deployed within their school and where there is scope for further improvement. For example, headteachers in this study were able to highlight areas such as differentiation in planning and greater consultation with students (student voice) and their parents on curriculum pathways as requiring further improvement.

The headteachers recognised that although there had been improvements, there was still work to be done in further developing personalised practices within their schools. In turn, although based on a small sample, this could potentially be said of a wider sample of schools. Initiatives and developments have taken hold within these schools that have drawn upon or are closely linked to the personalised learning agenda and suggestions have been offered as to future developments that could aid greater embedding of these. So, the journey has begun but if personalised or student-focused learning is to be at the heart of social justice, then it is a work in progress.

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