Research Associate Summary Report

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Personalising the curriculum at 14–19

Common themes and unique features

Lessons learned from research in four contrasting secondary schools in the north of England

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Special series on **Personalised learning**

Introduction

Prior to the term personalisation being used within the field of education, the three authors booked a conference room at a local hotel and set about devising a new curriculum for our school. Five hours later we left with a plan to create five curriculum routes at Key Stage 4. The link between what we had achieved and the personalisation agenda as it emerged became clear. The five components of personalisation identified by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) included 'curriculum entitlement and choice', 'school organisation' and 'strong partnership beyond the school'. Each of these is located within this study.

In developing these routes ourselves, we were eager to learn from the experiences of other schools as to how they had endeavoured to personalise the curriculum; to identify common themes, which could be shared, and unique features, which should be noted.

Is personalisation a personal thing or can we extract lessons and set up a model, or at least identify learning points for leadership, which prevent the need to reinvent the wheel in other schools? Or is it the case that personalising the curriculum has to be led in a unique way in individual schools, taking into account the very specific circumstances within which they work?

Context

The schools involved

Four schools were involved. They were selected because each had designed and implemented a curriculum focused on the individual through the introduction of distinct routes and pathways in order to create a 14-19 curriculum tailored to the aptitudes, interests, abilities and learning styles of students. They were all based in the north of England and covered a range of contexts.

Methodology

The main method of enquiry involved semi-structured interviews with senior leaders in each school. Student focus groups were established as a way of including student voice in the studies. Questionnaires were also sent to a sample of parents.

Key findings

What does a 14-19 curriculum made up of different routes and pathways look and feel like to the pupils?

- Pupils were unanimous in their view that their Key Stage 4 pathway provides a positive experience.

- Provision included the opportunity for students to study in extra-curricular time, eg in one school, vocational ICT or performing arts could be studied after school. The response from pupils was highly positive. One pupil commented:

  "I am taking ICT after school. It is good because you have more control over the qualifications you get in the future."

- Pupils following vocational courses enjoyed them, saying:

  "You get more trust from the teachers and are 'more independent."

  Pupils overwhelmingly said that they enjoyed learning outside the school.

- Pupils consistently said that behaviour was better in Key Stage 4 where they followed curriculum pathways than in Key Stage 3. There were fewer exclusions across all of the schools and in two of the four, attendance had improved. One said:

  "People are more settled in lessons because they have chosen their own interests."

What did parents think of their child's curriculum routes and pathways?

- Parents of pupils following a personalised curriculum consistently felt that their children enjoyed the courses he or she followed at school.

    "The curriculum is very appropriate to my son, it enables him to pursue his interests to the full."

- Parents were confident that the curriculum route would lead to success and that there was a clear idea of where the course might lead.

    One parent said:

    "The subjects chosen give a broad basis and allow for change in direction"

    while another commented:

    "The curriculum is appropriate for my child as the subjects taken are what she later wants to proceed with."

- Parents felt well informed about the curriculum routes and pathways, and most agreed or strongly agreed that their child had received a good level of support when choosing courses.

In developing a curriculum that comprises routes and pathways, there are a number of leadership implications. Set out below are findings relating to:

- the reasons the schools studied had embarked on change

- the factors supporting change

- the barriers encountered and how leaders overcame these

Reasons why schools embarked on change

Not all of the schools stated the same reasons. However, each identified one or more of the following as catalysts for innovation:

- the drive to raise standards

- opportunity for innovation and flexibility created by the 14-19 curriculum

- formation of new partnerships

- a change in organisational circumstances

- challenges set following an Ofsted inspection

Factors supporting change

Between them, the schools identified the following as factors that supported change.

Leadership styles

- All headteachers in the survey used a distributive leadership model.

    - One or more deputies took on significant leadership of personalisation: "The deputies get on and make things happen."

    - "It is important to trust the heads of department" – there was evidence that a no-blame culture existed within all of the schools, which enabled middle leaders to innovate.

    - There were "soft line management systems to ensure shared vision and approach", which supported middle leaders in the drive to innovate. These systems were characterised as being less overtly accountability-driven than conventional line management relationships.

Breadth of leadership experience

■ The headteachers exhibited a professional confidence in leading the change.

– Each played a role at a national level beyond their school through involvement with NCSL, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) or Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). This gave them extended networks and learning opportunities.

– School leaders all unanimously showed a commitment to collaboration with partner schools, with colleges, with work experience providers and/or with the Youth Service. This was built from existing partnerships and helped the creation of new ones.

Leading and managing change

■ Leaders had adopted an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach to change, with a clear staging of the personalisation process:

"The climate for change had to be established."

This included enabling middle leaders to lead the new curriculum model through, for example:

– selling the benefits of a personalised approach

– promoting the use of visits to other schools to see alternative practice

Knowing the students

■ Listening to the student voice was evident in all schools. Pupils were involved in self-evaluation processes, which informed curriculum decisions, eg through focus groups and questionnaires.

■ Schools were confident in their use of pupil data, both quantitative and qualitative, which informed the design of personalised routes and pathways:

"We know our pupils well and were able to tailor the curriculum to match their interests, abilities and aptitudes."

Barriers encountered and how leaders overcame these

■ Leaders adopted a more flexible approach to school organisation, overcoming organisational inertia and making the most of opportunities to create alternative solutions.

– Timetables were restructured, eg the approach adopted by one school enabled students to begin a course when they were ready in terms of their learning, rather than age.

– Leaders ensured the school workforce met the demands of the new curriculum, eg through reviewing existing roles and matching these to new demands and making the most of emerging para-professional roles.

– Meeting the financial cost of the personalised routes was achieved through:

- changes in school organisation and employment of workforce

- developing strong partnerships beyond the school eg with further education (FE) colleges, which enabled pooling of skills and resources

- bids to organisations such as the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Connexions

■ Leaders recognised that no institution in isolation could deliver the extent of change that was needed. To resolve this capacity issue, they used:

– their partnerships, to develop off-site learning, eg in local youth centres and FE colleges

– a collaborative approach involving senior leaders from partner institutions developing common pathways and the use of agreed, standardised operating procedures to support them, eg the need for consistent behaviour management approaches across the partnership

■ Leaders recognised the need to change attitudes and win support in order for curriculum pathways to be a success.

- They publicly valued vocational learning and faced the challenge of establishing curriculum routes that would be perceived by pupils as equitable: "We recognise the unique qualities and learning styles of each individual and value and encourage their talents with equal esteem."

■ In the early stages, schools felt that lack of awareness on the part of parents and the perception of pupils, parents and staff to the changes provided the biggest challenge. In all cases, leaders had faced up to this challenge, in part through playing to their strengths, ie developing vocational courses linked to their specialism and/or in curriculum areas for which middle leaders were responsive to change.

■ Personalisation in these contexts did not necessarily mean freer choices for students. Leaders developed a curriculum sufficiently broad to enable each child to be guided onto a pathway for success, achieved through dialogue between parents, students and teachers: "Choice is a weak form of personalised learning."

Conclusion

The headteachers in these schools had the confidence to make wholesale change because it felt right for their school and its students.

They sought to make the school fit the child through devising a curriculum, investing in resources and the development of staff, and linking with the community. Although initially driven by the heads, the partnerships have now become increasingly self-sustaining as the benefits for all contributors have become clear.

Personalising provision has had a positive impact on standards in these schools and has enabled their leadership teams to deliver a vision in which every child matters and can succeed.

References

DfES, 2004, *A National Conversation about Personlised Learning*, London, DfES

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