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Research Associate Summary Report

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“Are you learnin’ us today, Miss?”

Developing assessment for learning as personalised practice

Spring 2006

Special series on **Personalised learning**

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■ Personalising the curriculum at 14–19

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■ ...and the pupil said

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■ Mentoring: from data to people

Michael Stewart, *Headteacher, Westlands School and Technology College, Torquay*

■ Does it help to know?

Viv Wakeham, *Headteacher, West Horndon Primary School, Essex*

Introduction

I went to school in Kirkby, just outside Liverpool. It was common for my class to have different teachers during the week. On corridors and playgrounds, we would often try to capture our favourite one by asking imploringly:

“Are you learnin’ us today, Miss?”

Fifty years later I wonder if any teacher can be effective without ‘learning’ their pupils. When David Miliband (2004) invited us to join a conversation about personalisation, I was struck by a tension between opposing views on the topic. Was personalisation the latest in a long list of bright new ideas soon to be cast on the scrap heap of time? Or was this the big idea that could transform education in the 21st century?

Working with three schools attempting to move away from uniformity and standardised approaches, I looked particularly at the relationship between assessment for learning (AfL) and teaching and learning.

“Assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting data for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there.”

Assessment Reform Group, 2002

I hoped to find schools like those described by Charles Leadbetter (2005):

“...personalising learning schools equip children to become more active engaged learners able to reflect on what they learn, on how they learn, on what they find hard or difficult and how they best express themselves.”

I was not disappointed.

Methods

Four primary schools were involved in this study. The headteachers were members of the Leadership Network, and each was considered to be either excellent or outstanding in their school’s latest Ofsted inspection.

Following an initial meeting to discuss the process with headteachers and establish with them a sense of why they were choosing to focus on personalisation, I returned to each school to complete the steps below:

- a meeting with teachers to repeat the introduction to our project
- a first informal meeting with a small group of pupils
- semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers across the 4 schools
- a focus group interview with the pupils identified by each school
- a learning-focused tour conducted by pupils in their schools
- mind maps on ‘how I learn best’ drawn by pupils
- a final interview with the headteacher to check accuracy and to explore the unfolding story further

The school leaders shared relevant school documents and also exchanged emails to clarify specific issues as appropriate.

Findings

“The challenge with pupils is considering the extent to which they are genuinely involved in understanding their learning and able to make decisions and choices about it.”

Tarleton, 2004

How far was the pupils’ experience of learning personalised?

“You don’t make friends just with children. You make friends with teachers and other adults too.”

The children cited friendship as the one thing they valued most about their schools. They shared a strong sense of being valued as individuals. This promoted self-esteem and motivation. They preferred to work with others rather than working alone.

“The teachers try to challenge us and make it fun ... they don’t give you too much, just enough to make you feel comfortable and challenged.”

Embedded in this comment is a sense that teachers need to know about pupils both academically and as individuals in a wider but related sense. Other comments pupils made linked positively to key aspects of AfL, such as the sensitive use of feedback, setting goals collaboratively and receiving constructive guidance.

“We look at each other’s work to see how we might improve.”

Pupils were engaged in partnerships for learning at a number of levels. Helping others learn through sharing understandings and providing constructive criticism was common practice. Pupils were actively engaged in progressing their own learning through self-evaluation within a standards framework; for example, peer marking was commonly referenced to a set of criteria agreed in partnership with teachers and classmates.

What strategies were teachers employing to personalise learning?

“We model involvement and taking responsibility for learning.”

“Learning in my classroom? The root of that is my relationship with the children (and) creating an environment where we are trying to work together to make the improvements we need to make.”

A conscious effort had been made in each school to create environments in which learners gain the confidence to engage in learning.

For example, one teacher spoke of modelling self-assessment in relation to their own efforts at a class task. In this way they placed themselves as a co-learner with the pupils:

“I can do that better, I can develop that idea.”

Children were at the heart of the schools’ endeavours, and the importance of showing mutual respect underpinned the pervading culture.

“We want the children to develop questions, quite probing questions really, to assess their own learning and where they want to take this to.”

Teachers had employed a range of strategies to draw pupils further into the process of evaluating outcomes and planning for progress. Many were drawn from Primary Strategy materials or guidance from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (see Leadbetter, 2005). Some had evolved from experimentation into established whole-school practice:

“the way we do things around here.”

“There are things we are still not happy with, like being driven towards very fixed and unavoidable tests, but we know personalising learning is effective as the children are happier and the (SAT) scores are still high.”

Teachers were aware of a tension between accountability, in terms of SATs outcomes for example, and the flexibility needed to respond to an individual’s needs. All the schools used a broad range of data-gathering mechanisms and analysis to inform practice. All were keen to maintain high standards and provide a personalised learning experience. AfL was being used as a strategy for balancing these two imperatives.

How did leaders enable the development of AfL as part of a personalisation agenda?

“Leaders do not impose goals on others, but work with them to create a shared sense of purpose and direction.”

Leithwood and Riehl, 2003

“As a leader you want people to work from a set of principles.”

The headteachers had built person-centred cultures within their schools. They were passionate advocates of placing the child’s needs at the heart of all the school did. They encouraged staff to value each child as an individual worthy of respect. In doing so, they provided a compass by which to judge any change in direction in school practice.

Headteachers had focused school improvement plans on AfL in recent years. This had evolved from a personal conviction that its practice would benefit children's learning. They had secured commitment to the vision through involvement, discussion and guidance. For example, in one school an initial self-audit of practice acted as the springboard for professional development and the subsequent compilation of a staff handbook on AfL. Subsequent training and development opportunities had built capacity in their schools. Key teachers had proven effective in driving the agenda forward in roles specifically designed for this purpose.

"We are encouraged to be innovative ... making choices is important to us and we are supported in that process ... it keeps your teaching alive."

The headteachers understood how staff can be constrained by a perceived need to succeed – to get things right. To overcome this, they were active in supporting innovation and experimentation and protecting staff from undue anxiety. In this way staff were empowered to act in the interests of the individual child. All the heads belonged to networks and modelled shared enterprise and learning as a consequence. A corresponding learning culture was evident in the conversations with teaching staff.

Conclusion

In an article on personalising learning, Charles Leadbetter (2005) spoke of finding 'grey-haired revolutionaries, practitioners whose experience gives them the self-confidence to lead others to radical innovation.'

However, in the project schools there was a mixture of inexperienced and experienced teachers actively and, based on what was observed, effectively personalising education by developing practice in AfL.

The common factor was not experience but self-confidence. In turn, this confidence could be seen as a function of what these schools valued most: the person.

When attempting to personalise learning, leaders might consider:

- how it might benefit pupil learning
- whether the culture of the school is sufficiently learner-centred to sustain change over time
- how far core values support personalisation
- how best to build the capacity to engage in personalisation
- how to empower pupil voice so that it is influential in securing changes in teaching and learning
- how available resources might be redirected to provide time and space to evaluate individual need effectively

Change need not be revolutionary to be radical.

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