NCSL

National College for
School Leadership

Leading Personalised Learning in Schools

Helping individuals grow

Personalised learning offers a means of transforming the learning experience of every child. It will create an education system tailored to the needs, interests and aptitudes of every single pupil. As such, it is a challenge for schools, but it is also a real opportunity to make a positive impact on young people's learning and future.

This booklet aims to support headteachers wanting to learn more about and plan for personalisation.

It builds on the work of NCSL's Leadership Network and on the research the College has done in a number of schools. It offers highlights from speeches at NCSL's 2004 Leadership Network Conference and contains self-review questions to help headteachers consider the implications of personalisation for their own school, identify actions and evaluate current practice.

We are at the start of a long journey, and this booklet is an early step. It is one of a series of planned NCSL publications on the subject of personalisation, which aims to provide school leaders with examples of practical steps, imaginative practice and the latest thinking.

For our latest work, please visit www.ncsl.org.uk/research

Leading Personalised Learning in Schools

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Part One:
Perspectives on Personalisation

"We have got the knowledge to turn
personalisation into a reality."

New Beginnings

Ray Tarleton, National Co-ordinator, Leadership Network

"There is a Chinese proverb, which says that a single candle can light 20,000 other candles without diminishing itself."

So what do we mean by personalisation? Well, my bank sent me a text this morning alerting me that a sum of money had been withdrawn from my account. I know some of you are already doing something similar in your schools. It's the sort of personalised, targeted, individualised information aimed directly at the parent that people want to read. In the future children will not need photocopied information; they will be downloading knowledge electronically in whatever personalised format they wish. And in that world, which is already with us, we, as teachers, have got to find more skills to deal with that technology.

Many of you view personalisation as an
attractive concept but feel that we have
a school leadership wary of breaking the
mould and teachers who were raised in the
national curriculum era and who cannot
break out of the colouring-by-numbers style
of teaching. We need to find ways of turning
risk-taking and accountability mechanisms
into engines of change rather than barriers
to progress. School leaders are the only
people who can make this agenda happen.
We have got the operational knowledge to
turn personalisation into a reality. Supported
by NCSL, working together, we can, I believe,
as the Chinese proverb said, be the candles of
light spreading right across the system and
become brighter ourselves."

Staying with You

Stick with the debate,
make it part of your daily practice

David Miliband

"In simple terms, personalised learning is the route to raise quality and equity in our education system."

"We are at a key moment in the debate about the future of public services. The central challenge for us is how we resolve the tensions between a universal system and personal needs …between excellence and equity and between flexibility and accountability, in a way that delivers for all. I am fundamentally optimistic that, seven years into government and with the publication of a five-year strategy, we are in a position to resolve those dilemmas in a very positive way and put English education not just at the heart of a revolution in schooling, but actually at the cutting edge of the debate about the role of public services in a modern society.

"I see personalised learning not as a new policy, but as the universal application of the principles and practices that have delivered in the past for the relatively few."

"I'm optimistic about the education system, partly because the effects of the better and increased inputs going into the system are now visible: 28,000 more teachers than seven years ago; 100,000 more support staff, broadband and ICT connections; more hardware and software; and better quality of teaching. But much more encouraging is the use to which those inputs are being put and the results that are being generated across the curriculum in primary and secondary schools by teachers and pupils. Average quality is rising in our education system but with equity rising too – and that is very significant.

In simple terms, personalised learning is the route to raise quality and equity in our education system. It means something very simple for me; it means an education system tailored to the needs, interests and aptitudes of every single pupil. I see personalised learning not as a new policy, but as the universal application of the principles and practices that have delivered in the past for the relatively few.

Our three organisational foundations, which make up the personalised learning framework are:

• legal and financial flexibility for schools to deliver on an agreed set of outcomes

• a smarter accountability framework

• and collaboration with a hard edge

"This debate is THE big idea in education today. If you talk to people in this country about personalised learning and get through the jargon, they're excited by it. If you go to schools that are delivering the sort of personalised learning we're talking about it is fantastically inspiring. I plead with you to stick with this debate and relate it to your daily practice because that is where the strength of personalised learning agenda comes from, that's why the Prime Minister launched it more than a year ago and that's why it's still alive and kicking in a big way today."

"A large part of personalisation is about
self-management and self-provision."

Focusing on the Big Things

Changing relationships between learner and provider

Charles Leadbeater

"Personalisation is about understanding and taking the time and consideration to learn about what it is that the people we serve in public services really want. At its root personalisation is about education, about morality, human social goals, connecting with the internal motivations that we need to unlock for people to really learn; it's about moving from seeing education as meeting and imposing external standards to meet external yardsticks, to working on internal motivation and aspiration.

Why is it important that an education system like ours should have that goal? Too often when we think of management and leadership we think in terms of propulsion. If your job is to get a rock from point A to B it's very easy. You pick up a rock and throw it. When we think of management we have the rock throwing mentality.

Now, imagine you're trying to get a *bird* from point A to B. If you've spent too much time with the wrong management consultant you would know that you take the bird, strap a rock to its wings and throw it at point B.

Now, imagine you're trying to get a *flock of birds* from point A to B – the only way to do this is to set the goal that attracts them to point B. If you want to run complex systems in an effective way you have to have simple and exciting goals.

Personalisation is about the whole child, about building the capacity and appetite for learning across society. By bringing together children's services, education and health, we could create the foundations for a mass education system of a kind we haven't really had. It's difficult to get personalisation unless you have elements of choice but choice needs to be handled carefully, choice can be exploited by the most advantaged first and it isn't the be all and end all – too much choice leads to anxiety, bewilderment and confusion.

All the evidence in the public sector suggests that choice works when it's well designed and not just left to the whims of the market. We also have to ask ourselves whether or not the ambition of personalisation causes us to re-think what the basic unit of education should be. Is it a single school or group of schools, cross-phase or within phase and possibly linked in with children's services?

A large part of the personalisation agenda in education and wider society is about self-management and self-provision.

For instance, the average diabetic spends three hours a year with doctors but spends thousands of hours a year self-managing their condition. Public service reform programmes around choice of GP or booked appointments would change what happens in that three hours, but it would be much much more important to change what happens in the thousands of hours that diabetics self-manage by giving them self-support, linking them up peer-to-peer, giving them better tools, better advice and diet. If we believe that much of learning takes place beyond the classroom in communities and in families then actually encouraging self-management rather than choice within a provider or two providers may be as important as these other agendas.

Having spent a year or two going round various parts of the education system, I think there's a real opportunity. There's a coming together in more enlightened thinking at the centre, more imaginative and more thoughtful. If you add up: personalised learning, which should change the relationship between the learner and the provider; foundation partnerships, which should change the relationship between schools; children services, which should change relationships between schools and other services affecting children; the New Relationship with Schools, which should change the relationship between schools and the wider system – you've got all the key elements of the system being changed at the same time.

It's possible to imagine that in the year 2010 you could have an education system that is much more bottom-up, which is driven by self-evaluation, where inspection is designed around improvement rather than enforcement, where collaboration is taken for granted as an essential tool for improvement and where the focus is on encouraging the whole child to learn towards standards with their own aspirations and motivations rather than same school approach.

But I suppose my worry is not with you but with the Department for Education. Our capacity to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory is so high. By taking this trip towards this new system we're still capable of taking it into different directions. The tendency to pull back to old systems and old ways of doing things is still incredibly strong. One of the most important things we should do is to tell the centre what it should stop doing to make this system a reality and focus on the big things that they can tell you to do which help you to do your job better."

Growing into it

Personalised learning is an idea for our time

Dean Fink, Educational Consultant

"Its been an absolute revelation to see the
change that has taken place in the last decade."

"Personalised learning is an idea for our time. It's a recognition of human uniqueness."

"I've been coming to this country for the last 10 years and it's been an absolute revelation to see the change that has taken place in the last decade from the 'good ol' days' of naming, blaming and shaming. Anyone with an ounce of sense knows that you can't build winners by calling them losers. Now though, we see a totally different type of emphasis when we're talking about personalised learning and, frankly, that's exciting for me because I've been talking about it for the last 30 years."

Dean contrasts traditional public administration with new public management and attacks the structure of the average secondary school, a structure in which Henry Ford would feel comfortable because of its hierarchy, bureaucracy and assembly line mentality focused on process more than product.

"Leaders of the 21st century are like the three-legged man, like Jake the Peg. They have one leg in traditional public administration, since most still work in hierarchical bureaucracy; one leg in new public management as they struggle with regular standardised tests and site-placed management; and a third leg in learning communities as they work to refocus their schools and communities on students' learning. The challenge for leaders and education is to learn how to balance all three legs – simultaneously – without falling flat on your face."

Dean describes three dimensions of educational reform and suggests questions that must be asked of a reform:

- *Does it have depth and can it change important rather than superficial aspects of students' learning?*

- *Does it have length, is it sustainable over long periods of time?*

- *Does it have breadth, can it be extended beyond a few school networks?*

Dean describes a 'greater hunger' not just to prepare kids to make a living but preparing kids for life, preparing them to function in a civil society.

"I think personalised learning is an idea for our time. It's a recognition of human uniqueness – we are not just trying to turn out assembly-line children. It means redesigning our schools to fit the pupils rather than what we do now, which is to take the kids and force them to fit into the existing structures. It means a focus on learning, deep learning, learning for understanding, learning for meaning and giving people time."

"There will be pitfalls and problems and not everything about personalised learning is going to work well. I urge you not to rush into personalised learning and encourage you to problem-seek rather than problem-solve, to develop something which will change important things and be sustainable."

"The necessary changes are not going
to happen overnight… they are not going
to happen at all unless we grab hold of
the agenda."

Shaping the Future

Dame Pat Collarbone, Director, National Remodelling Team

"The biggest question for me is how we get change in the system that works and that can be sustained? We live in a time of paradox but I think the issue is that we're moving from a system of national prescription, where for many years we've been told what to do, to one of you leading reform and we have to manage that transition such that there are as few casualties as possible along the route.

The challenge for schools in the face of reform is the building and sustaining of learning communities with the real focus on learning. And that requires partnership and collaboration. It means working together to meet the challenges of change. It's about having patience and commitment to school reform and remodelling and schools leading reform.

The Leadership Network has a vital role. It has a really great opportunity to make a real difference debating a dialogue between key thinkers and ministers. The necessary changes are not going to happen overnight but they are not going to happen at all unless we grab hold of the agenda.

Colleagues, it is a time of great change and challenge but it is a time of real opportunity to make a difference, to take the agenda and shape the future to ensure every child is in a well-led school and every leader is a learner."

Part Two:
# Personalisation and
Learning-centred Leadership

Overview

Personalised learning features strongly in most discussions about current education policy and developments and is an underpinning concept in the government's five-year strategy for children and learners.

It aims to provide an integrated model for schools to attend to the widely differing needs of pupils whilst striving for excellence for all and is seen as a vehicle for transforming the experience of disadvantaged children, as suggested in *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), as well as enriching the learning of the most gifted and talented.

The informing principles are perhaps illustrated by the following words from David Miliband when speaking in October 2004 to the NCSL Leadership Network Annual Conference:

"The central challenge for us is how we resolve the tensions between a universal system and personal needs, between excellence and equity…(personalisation) means something very simple for me; it means an education system tailored to the needs, interests and aptitudes of every single pupil."

Some have characterised the move away from non-differentiated wide-scale provision to a more tailored approach as simply a response to a more demanding and vociferous consumer body (in the case of education, pupils and their parents). However, the aspiration does signal an important shift in mindset towards a focus on learners rather than providers, and human entitlements rather than deployment of resources. Nonetheless, tailoring public services, be they education or other services, to individual need, is no mean challenge when we have traditionally been organised as universal providers.
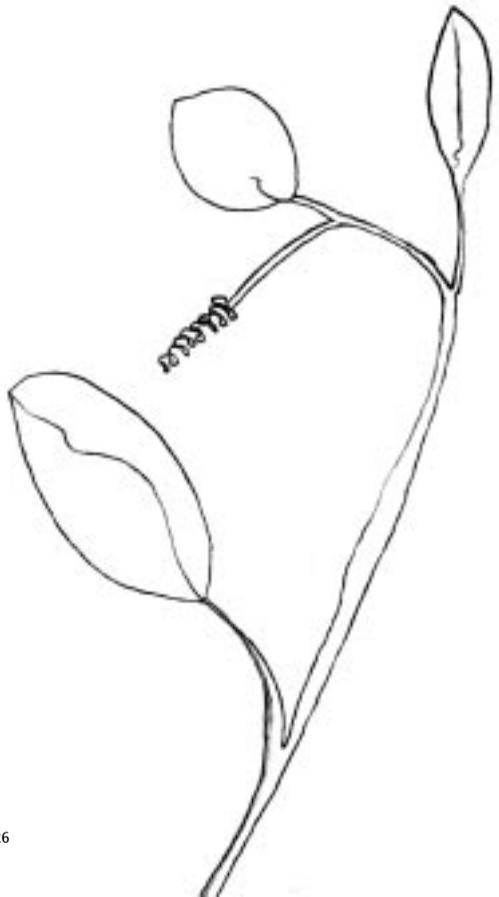
The Core Components

The DfES has identified five closely related components for the model. Whilst the philosophy of personalisation is still in its developmental stages and there is much to do in identifying ways in which school leaders can most successfully achieve the aspirations of personalised learning, these five elements are seen as central. They are:

Assessment for learning and the use of evidence and dialogue to identify every pupil's learning needs and the steps they need to take

Teaching and learning strategies that actively engage and challenge learners and develop their ability to focus on their learning skills and their capability to take ownership of their own progress

Curriculum entitlement and choice that allows for breadth of study, personal relevance and flexible curriculum pathways

Creative approaches to school organisation, to enable a student-centred approach which integrates performance with wellbeing and inclusive approaches with attainment

Strong partnerships beyond the classroom, both to enrich learning and support care of pupils in the wider sense through, for example, home-school links, inter-agency work, or community partnerships

The first three of these components focus on pedagogy and curriculum, whilst the final two relate to the ways in which schools can create a culture and environment which removes barriers to learning and enables the involvement and achievement of all.

It is important to note that the five components are viewed as an integrated whole, not as a set of discrete activities which can be 'ticked off'.

David Hargreaves, working with the Secondary Heads' Association and the Specialist Schools Trust, has identified nine 'gateways' which in some ways amplify the five key components of the DfES model. His nine gateways are:

• Assessment for learning
• Learning to learn
• Student voice
• New technologies
• Curriculum
• Advice and guidance
• Mentoring
• Workforce
• Organisation

It is easy to see how these gateways relate to the five key components in the DfES model and provide an emphasis on certain aspects within them.

"Personalising the school experience is a complex and longer-term professional process, not a finished product to be delivered." (Hargreaves, 2004)

Indeed there are profound implications for teaching and learning, and the leadership of learning, if the aspirations are to be achieved.

So how does personalisation relate to learning-centred leadership?

The shift towards learners and learning is reflected in another characteristic of personalisation, namely an emphasis on the use of what we know from research about learning to promote learning autonomy and develop learners' capabilities.

There is a challenge here too. With an emphasis on autonomy, or on learners 'owning' their learning, it may be tempting to think of personalisation as individualisation, but that is clearly not the case. The components of personalised learning, as set out by the DfES, clearly draw on the work of constructivist and social constructivist research, which pay attention to the processes of learning, including social interaction, as the learner makes sense of their experiences, linking them with past experiences and moving forward to further learning.

Some of the insights offered by these fields of research include:

Learning is both an individual and a social process, which relates to both understanding and behaviour

Prior learning and environmental factors are important dimensions in learning and need to be taken into account

Learning requires the active engagement of the learner and the ability to monitor, review and reflect on learning

Learning ability is not fixed, but capable of development with the support of others

Dialogue which promotes critical thinking and an active engagement by the learner is a key component of effective learning processes

In the first pack of learning-centred leadership materials a number of writers, such as Conner, Pollard, Watkins and William (2004) discuss these ideas more fully and provide helpful pointers to the implications for school leaders. The second pack offers a number of such texts. What is clear is that the theme of personalised learning, or the personalisation of the school experience, offers a model for learning-centred leaders to build on the now considerable body of evidence about learning to focus on critical aspects of teaching and learning.

The leadership of learning relates to more than teaching and learning processes, however, as discussed in the introductory article to the first learning-centred leadership materials by Geoff Southworth (2004). He draws attention to the need for systems and processes in school which complement and enhance the quality of learning. Personalisation has brought this into even sharper focus. The requirement for curriculum designs which are more flexible and responsive to the emerging needs of 21st century citizens; for school organisation which provides opportunities for learners to be more self-directed; and for arrangements which draw on resources beyond the classroom to enhance the experiences and opportunities of all learners, whatever their prior experience or context, has profound implications for school leaders.

If, as Charles Leadbeater said when speaking to the Leadership Network annual conference in October 2004, "a large part of the personalisation agenda in education and wider society is about self-management and self-provision" and "about moving from seeing education as meeting external yardsticks, to working on internal motivation and aspiration", it would be a mistake to think of personalisation as a checklist of five strands which can be parcelled up and ticked off. On the contrary, school leaders who are attracted to the notion of working on motivation and aspiration will recognise the increased need for them to be learning-centred as relationships between learners and providers of learning change, and as the complex process of personalising the school experience unfolds.

However, complex as the process might be, there is an encouragingly rich spread of information already available. The Innovation Unit of the DfES has gathered a number of school case studies on its website; NCSL's Leadership Network is sponsoring 10 research associates to research a range of successful strategies, and is using its regional networks for heads to exchange their ideas and practice; SHA and the Specialist Schools Trust are working together around the nine 'gateways' identified by David Hargreaves; and the NCSL's *Learning-centred Leadership* (II) pack provides relevant material, including information on assessment for learning.

Self–review for Schools

Some questions for debate and consideration

The following questions may help discussion and debate around the ways in which your school or group of schools is putting the learner at the centre of your provision, and the steps you can take to further personalise learning.
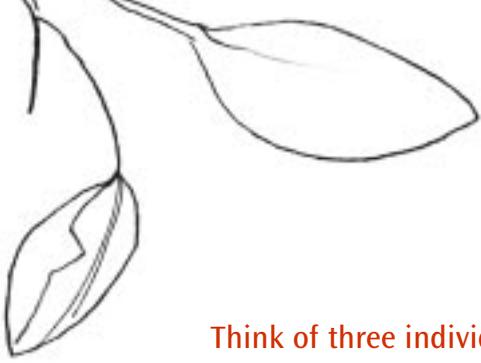
Think of three individual pupils in different parts of the school. What do we currently do well for each of those in relation to the aspirations and component parts of personalisation?

Use the white space to fill in your opinions, thoughts or comments

In relation to those same three individuals, what else could we/should we do now to personalise their learning and school experience?
What would be the first priority?
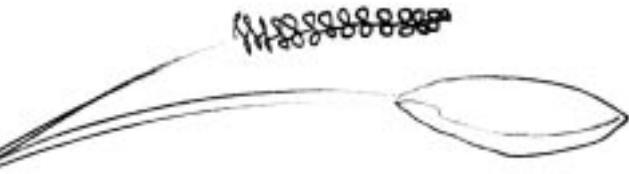
Is personalisation about giving students a choice
of what they learn or how they learn?
Does the answer to the question depend on what
key stage the students are?

Use the white space to fill in your opinions, thoughts or comments

In a personalised system, what might count as learning?
How can we recognise the kinds of learning that go beyond
the classroom?

What opportunities do we provide to talk about learning and develop our understanding and language about learning?
Do we have an agreed learning policy?

How secure are
we that we have
embedded assessment
for learning practices
in all our classrooms?
How have we enabled
staff to learn about
and develop their
skills in assessment
for learning?
How do we monitor
assessment practices?

What is the place of 'social learning' in our
school and how can we develop it?
Do we have a system which ensures collaborative
and group learning?
Do we have mentoring/coaching in place for all?
For certain groups or individuals?
How are we developing questioning and listening skills?
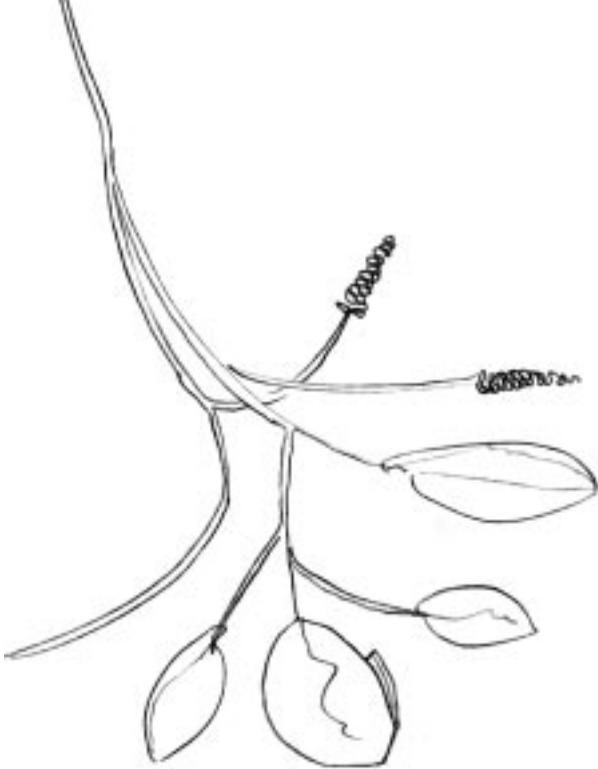
What strategies do we use, or could we introduce, to develop the confidence and capability of our pupils and their parents in expressing choices about learning? How do we provide information and when? How do we involve them in decision-making? How do we provide opportunities for negotiation?

Use the white space to fill in your opinions, thoughts or comments

What do we mean by entitlement?
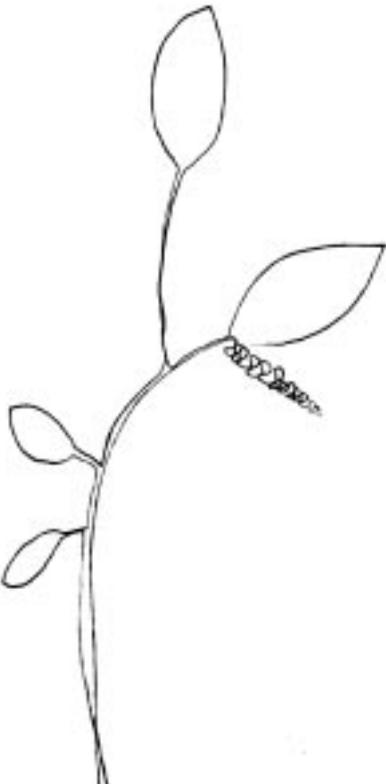
Where can we find examples of schools that have successfully tackled the practicalities of curriculum choice and how can we best learn from them?
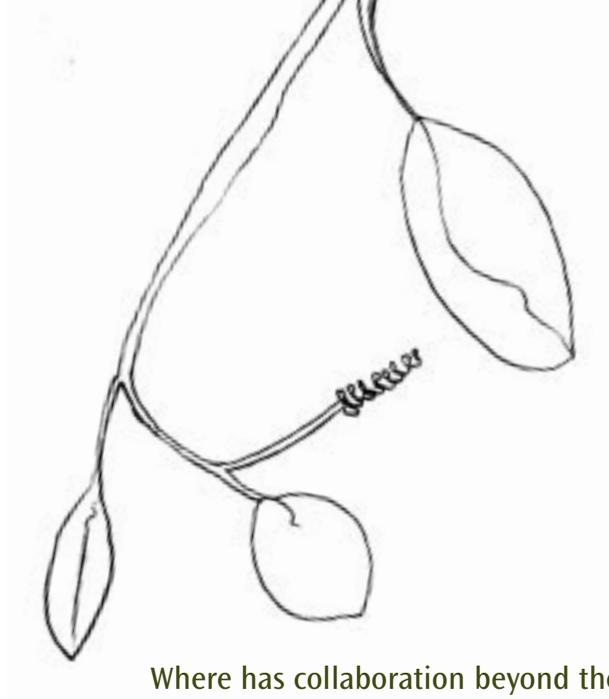
Where has collaboration beyond the school already made a difference to our curriculum provision?
How can we build on the benefits and learn from the challenges?

What are we doing already to enable students to participate
in the construction and delivery of their education?
What else can we do?

Do all students have the opportunity to participate to the same degree or does it depend on certain factors (eg level of attainment, special educational needs etc)? Can we build on our existing work with pupil voice?

In how many ways do we recognise and draw on children's cultural, social and emotional biographies in our school? What other strategies can we use?

Use the white space to fill in your opinions, thoughts or comments

What are our ICT priorities
in supporting personalised
learning – providing
'continuous' learning?
Supporting self and
peer assessment?
Developing problem-solving,
analysis and creativity?
Building networks of learners?
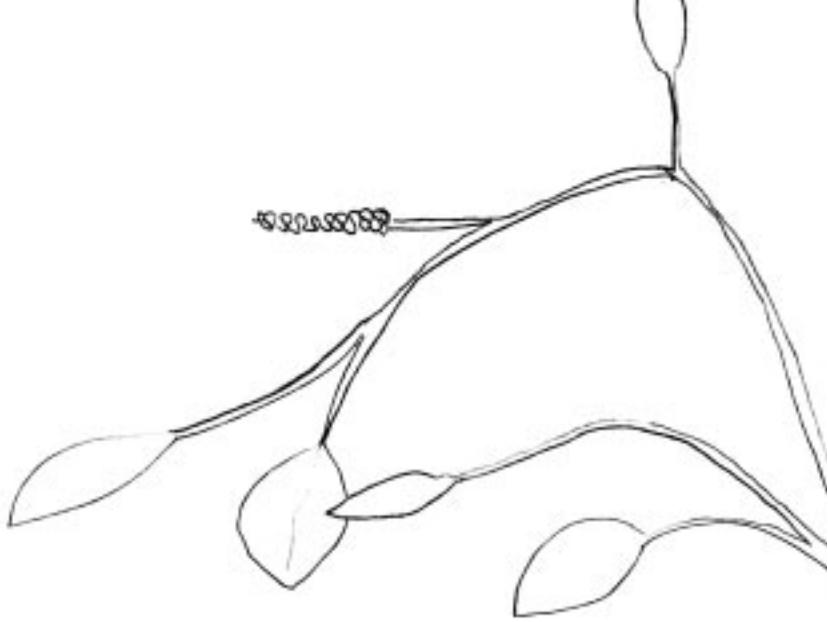
What does personalisation mean for the traditional hierarchies and silos within schools? How might our school organisation need to change in a personalised system?

What are the main risks in moving towards a system of personalisation, and how can these best be managed?

What are the main barriers and how might these be overcome?
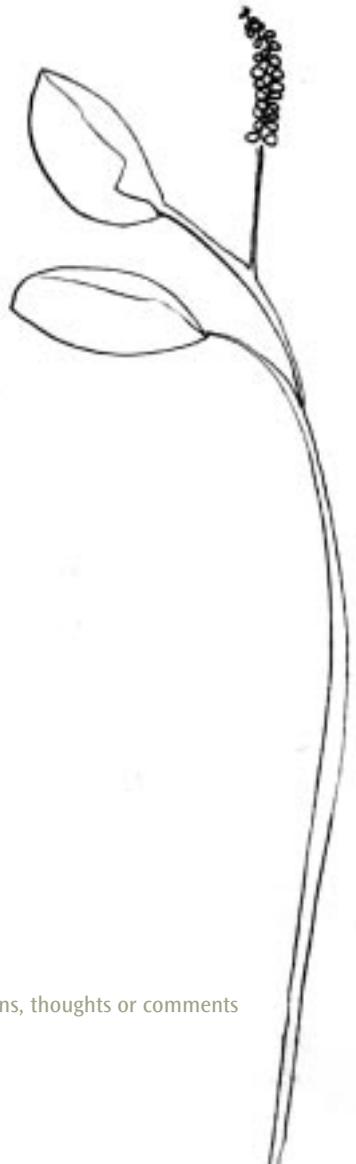
Use the white space to fill in your opinions, thoughts or comments

Where should we start if we
want to take this issue seriously?

Who else can we work with?
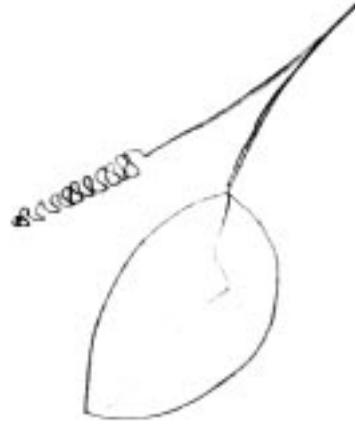
Finally, there are questions relating to major legislation:

How do we relate the implications of personalisation to our work on remodelling the roles of teachers and other staff and our responses to the Children's Act, including our relationships with other agencies?

However complex the implementation
of personalisation, its expression of
commitment to individuals' needs,
and its aspirational messages, have captured
widespread enthusiasm amongst school
leaders, many of whom are already leading
learning-centred schools and wish to
move towards personalised provision.
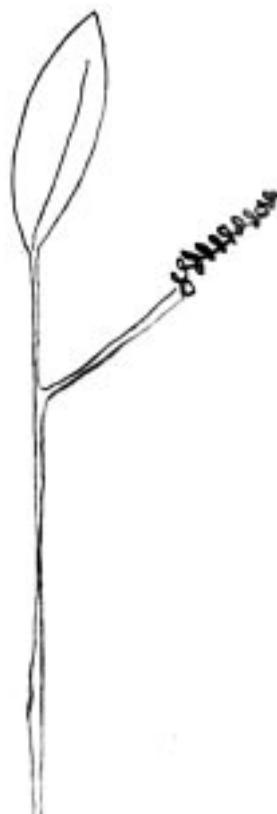
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