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Research Associate Summary Report

Derek Peaple, Headteacher, Park House School and Sports College, Newbury

Lessons in partnership

What are leaders, teachers and students learning from collaborative approaches to personalisation?

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Special series on **Personalised learning**

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■ ...and the pupil said

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Introduction

This research project chronicles a collaborative learning journey towards what may now be recognised as the partnership-based component of personalisation. However, it is a journey that began without any obvious 'gateways' (Hargreaves, 2004). This is the story of how a group of four diverse schools and a further education (FE) college in West Berkshire took practical steps to build partnerships beyond their individual classrooms. They did this in order to place learners from the same local area at the centre of a range of personalised learning programmes. The project considers the perspectives of the leaders, teachers and students who are together experiencing that journey, offering reflections on the lessons in partnership that have been learned en route.

Context

The research is based on the first 18 months of a three-year DfES Innovation Unit Leading Edge partnership comprising a specialist sports college, a specialist performing arts college, a special school, a grammar school for the deaf and a further education (FE) college. The partnership builds on an earlier sports college initiative designed to widen learning opportunities for students with special educational needs (SEN) through physical education (PE) and sport. It aims to:

- raise standards of achievement, widen opportunities and increase the life chances of students with special educational needs across the family of schools through the mainstream delivery of personalised 14-19 learning programmes
- provide a model of coherent vision in relation to the creative and joined-up delivery of locally harmonised specialist schooling

In practice this means that teaching groups comprise students from different schools and different year groups working together, within and beyond the classroom, in different locations. The process has impacted at several different levels across the partnership of schools, moving beyond issues of curriculum delivery and pathways to raise wider and deeper questions about school culture, learning and organisation.

Key questions

Using this partnership as a case study, the research explores the following key questions in relation to the development of partnership-based approaches to the delivery of personalised learning.

- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the leaders' leadership?
- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the teachers' teaching?
- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the students' learning?

Methodology

The research draws on the direct experience and record of planning and delivering the programme. However, findings are based on the following research activities carried out specifically in relation to the project:

- individual interviews with headteachers, the FE college principal, and senior leaders from the partnership schools
- a focus group interview with teachers delivering the programmes
- a focus group interview with a cross-section of students experiencing the programmes

Main findings

Lessons for leaders

- Operating within a partnership has led to a broadening of leadership vision beyond their own institutions. This has encouraged leaders to actively seek further means of building capacity within the partnership to extend and enhance its work.
- There were significant organisational developments in relation to the tracking of student progress across institutions:

“We now have new ways of looking at value-added by partnership work across the institutions. This is itself an incentive for further collaboration.”

Headteacher

- Appreciation of a wider and deeper ‘partnership dividend’ has emerged from the original aims of partnership. This had the potential to act as a platform for further innovation, including spin-off projects relating to professional development at both leadership team and departmental levels and to subject-based improvement initiatives. For example, two headteachers were now planning joint leadership team development programmes, based on their experience of the partnership.
- Different schools within a partnership will collaborate at different rates according to, for example, their perceived state of readiness. Whilst this does not reflect lack of commitment to the partnership, it does impact upon participation, eg student involvement in courses.
- Establishing a practitioners’ steering group, where teachers delivering the programme across the partnership of schools met to discuss curriculum delivery, offered an excellent organisational model for the wider dissemination of best practice in relation to teaching and learning. However, creating time for such a group to meet is essential.
- School organisational factors such as timetabling and transport provision need to be addressed if the potential for personalised provision is to be fully realised. Leaders recognised that such logistical structures should not obscure the ‘need to get on with it’ but that flexibility and forward planning were required.

Lessons for teachers

- Both mainstream and special school teachers noted significant learning gains for all the students that went beyond the course-specific elements of the programme, leading to greater self-confidence and enhanced independence.

“I thought initially that it would only involve one or two students, but it has really mushroomed and I’ve begun to see all sorts of opportunities for our students. It was then that I became determined that we were going to make it work.”

Headteacher

- The special school teachers noted a particularly wide range of benefits for students with multiple learning difficulties, in particular improvements in behaviour, levels of attendance, reading age and leadership and other related skills. These had in turn supported improved attainment in other curriculum areas.
- Mainstream teachers noted gains in terms of their use and deployment of learning support assistants and in the development of their teaching repertoire – particularly in relation to differentiation and communication of learning objectives – and their awareness of students’ preferred learning styles as part of the lesson planning and review process.

“The real benefit of this programme is that it provides real opportunities at grassroots levels to break down the barriers that exist between the teaching of those children who are ‘special’ and of those who are ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’.”

Headteacher

Lessons for students

The students also noted gains from the programme.

- The courses were more motivational than their other options choices, largely because of the variety of learning styles employed by teachers.
- Participation on the programme had increased their all-round confidence as learners.
- Relationships with both their teachers and their peers were better on these programmes than in other curriculum areas.

“I come here and I mix with the sports college students and that’s good fun – and I’m making new friends. I used to be quite shy, nervous of meeting new people and nervous of them and their opinions. And now my confidence has gone up and I want to go on to college, once I’ve finished my BTEC, and do carpentry.”

Special school student

- Increased confidence meant that they were now much more prepared to ask questions to clarify understanding in other curriculum areas.
- It was interesting and enjoyable to work with students from other schools on a regular basis, and there had been no sense of tension or resentment.
- The special school students felt that working in the mainstream school had increased their confidence and encouraged them to follow their studies further than they otherwise would have considered.

For the partnership these have been valuable lessons – lessons in partnership – that will now continue to shape the learning journeys being followed both within and across the schools involved.

Recommendations for other school leaders

For other school leaders about to embark on such a journey, there are three key learning outcomes from the partnership.

- Start with a clear focus or theme to the collaborative project, but set it within the context of a shared vision for longer-term growth.
- Allow collaboration to grow organically and move in new directions: the indirect gains of the process may be at least as significant as the original focus of the partnership.
- Develop opportunities and structures for practitioner-based dialogue and innovation exchange: this is the real dividend of partnership approaches to the delivery of personalised learning.

References

Hargreaves, D, 2004, *Personalising Learning: next steps in working laterally*, London, Specialist Schools Trust

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National College for School Leadership

Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155
F: 0115 872 2001
E: ncsl-office@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk

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