



Personalised Learning – an Emperor’s Outfit?

by Martin Johnson

Research Fellow, IPPR

March 2004

Institute for Public Policy Research
30-32 Southampton Street London WC2E 7RA
tel 0207 470 6100 fax 0207 470 6111
m.johnson@ippr.org www.ippr.org
Registered Charity 800065

Personalised Learning – an Emperor’s Outfit?

by Martin Johnson
Research Fellow, IPPR

Contents

Introduction	2
The policy basis	2
Continuity or disjunction	4
Pedagogy	4
Curriculum	6
Assessment	8
Every child matters	9
Facilitating factors	10
ICT	10
Workforce reform	11
Learning from current practice: the SEN model	11
Affordable?	12
Individual and social learning	13
The language of choice	15
Conclusion	17
About the author	18
About ippr	18

Thanks to VT Education and Skills for funding the VT/ippr Education and Skills seminar series, for which this paper was prepared

Introduction

Personalised learning became a major feature of the public policy debate during the autumn of 2003. A series of speeches by the Prime Minister and David Miliband, the Minister of State at the DfES, have emphasised its status. Yet there remains a considerable lack of clarity as to the detailed policy implications of applying the principle, and there is a pressing need to debate both its content and its boundaries.

In undertaking a project on personalised learning, the ippr seeks to clarify the content and boundaries of the concept. What precisely are the Government's objectives for this agenda and how far does it represent continuity or change of policy direction? ippr also seeks to relate policies which develop personalised learning to other priorities in public policy.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce some questions which are raised by the concept of personalised learning. It is hoped that discussion will produce consensus on the range of questions which can most usefully be further considered in future seminars and work by the ippr.

The policy basis

The principle of personalised learning was launched by the Prime Minister in his speech to the Labour Party Conference on 30 September 2003:

‘At secondary school, personalised learning for every child in new specialist schools and City Academies.’

A more developed explanation was offered by the Minister of State, David Miliband, in his speech to the National College for School Leadership in October 2003:

‘The goal is clear. It is what the Prime Minister described in his party conference speech as ‘personalised learning’: an education system where assessment, curriculum, teaching style, and out of hours provision are all designed to discover and nurture the unique talents of every single pupil...

...the most effective teaching depends on really knowing the needs, strengths and weaknesses of individual pupils. So the biggest driver for change and gain is use of data on pupil achievement to design learning experiences that really stretch individual pupils...

...Student performance also depends on independent learning. It is inspiring to visit schools where pupils can speak with insight and intelligence about how they learn, about ‘mind maps’ and other strategies that help them do so, and about those teaching strategies that are also learning strategies that are giving them skills for life. This is the future. Many teachers are committed to it. But in how many schools is there set time each week dedicated for pupils to focus on learning how to learn? In how many schools is assessment for learning designed to support individual target-setting. The answer is not enough...’

The goal may have been clear, but the boundaries of the concept were not obvious:

‘You see the carpets on the floor? That’s personalised learning, too.’

Alan Steers, Headteacher, Seven Kings High School, (Guardian, 18 November 03)

However, further speeches have repeated and refined the vision. David Miliband further developed his view during the speech to the North of England Education Conference on 8 January 2004:

‘... by the age of 17 we have the fourth highest drop out rate of any country in the industrialised world. This is what we have to change. The experience of successful schools shows us how. Decisive progress in educational standards occurs where every child matters; careful attention is paid to their individual learning styles, motivations, and needs; there is rigorous use of pupil target setting linked to high quality assessment; lessons are well paced and enjoyable; and pupils are supported by partnership with others well beyond the classroom.

This is what I mean by “Personalised Learning”. High expectation of every child, given practical form by high quality teaching based on a sound knowledge and understanding of each child’s needs. It is not individualised learning where pupils sit alone at a computer. Nor is it pupils left to their own devices – which too often reinforces low aspirations. It can only be developed school by school. It cannot be imposed from above.

There are five key processes that make this possible:

- Assessment for Learning that feeds into lesson planning and teaching strategies, sets clear targets, and clearly identifies what pupils need to do to get there;
- a wide range of teaching techniques to promote a broad range of learning strategies, facilitated by high quality ICT that promotes individual and group learning as well as teaching;
- curriculum choice, particularly from the age of 14, and the development of subject specialism;
- the organisation of the school, including the structure of the day and of lessons, using workforce reform to enhance teaching and learning and to ensure consistency;
- and links to services beyond the classroom, involving the wider community and families, parents providing strong support; and the engagement of LEAs in the agenda set out in the Every Child Matters Green Paper.’

In a major speech on public services on 29 January 2004, the Prime Minister provided the political context for the personalised learning agenda. He said,

‘What are the key elements if we are really to put the public at the heart of public services? First, it means a continuous drive to increase the scope and scale of **choice** available to public service users...

Putting the public at the heart of public services also means services that fit the individual needs and preferences of each service user... a commitment to **personalised services** is beginning to reverse the decades old assumption that the task of public service delivery was to fit the user to the service... In secondary education, future reform must have as a core objective a flexible curriculum providing a distinct and personal offer to every child.

Through choice and personalization our aim is ambitious and progressive; ‘services fair for all, personal to each’. Public services that harness the drive of competition, and the power of choice to the public sector ethic of altruism and equity.’

Further references are made in most speeches by David Miliband. These lengthy quotations have been reproduced because the concept has been introduced almost entirely by ministers. It has not been generated by a line of academic research, by practitioners explaining new practice – although it has been picked up and used by some – or through a programme of policy development. In that sense, the task is to understand what is in the mind of ministers, and to work out how their new thinking can be applied on the ground.

It must be said here that the prior question for some in the education community, and not only those classroom infantry often considered unduly cynical, is whether ‘personalised learning’ has any real meaning at all. The emperor’s fashion requirements have been mentioned. One way of coming to a conclusion about this is to consider the extent to which the ideas reproduced above represent a continuity or disjunction in education policy, and the novel or the commonplace in the current practice of schools.

Continuity or disjunction?

What are the objectives of personalised learning? While these speeches show differences of emphasis, it could be argued that it is a development of the standards agenda which has underpinned all education policy since 1997. To maximise national attainment levels it is necessary to focus on the individual pupil. Their attainment will be maximised by a curriculum offer, a style of learning and teaching, and a level of support all appropriate to their needs, abilities and aptitudes. It also requires continuous formative assessment in order to ensure progression. There may be some disjunction but many continuities between this idea and previous initiatives aimed at raising attainment.

Pedagogy

The continuity lies in stress on the classroom as the key site and the teaching and learning method as the key agent for raising attainment. The disjunction seems to lie within changing concepts of the pedagogical relationship. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies consisted in part of the largest programme of retraining in teaching method ever attempted in a major education system. This created a rigid orthodoxy of interactive whole class teaching in primary schools, replacing the previous mixture featuring much individual and small group work with an emphasis on differentiation in task as well as outcome. Its claimed authority derived from research on effective classrooms. Few primary teachers would ignore the imperative to ‘deliver’ the three part lesson. It is worth remembering that ever since the publication of the Plowden Report in 1967 primary pedagogy has been subject to the more or less forced adoption in turn of a series of orthodoxies. The difference in this particular turn of the wheel was the effectiveness with which less than satisfactory teaching in the primary school was reduced by the adoption of a sound method. Its drawback was the inhibition felt by more skilled teachers in going beyond the standard.

A salient feature of a ‘strategies lesson’ is indeed its interactive nature. The plenary part of the lesson involves a conversation which is unambiguously led by the teacher, but in which all are expected to take part. The skilled teacher ensures that during the course of a lesson a contribution is drawn from each pupil in a variety of ways, at a variety of levels, according to each pupil’s capacity.

If this is a fair description of a better than satisfactory lesson, it could be interpreted in a number of ways. On the one hand, the teacher is responding to the individual pupils, by relating the demands made on them to their individual circumstances. In one sense, this is indeed personalised learning, it is already simply good practice and an emphasis on personalised learning is merely to ensure the greatest spread of good practice.

On the other hand, a class lesson is intrinsically a collective activity. For say 30 pupils, there is a single theme, necessarily selected by the teacher, and although there may be a variety of activity during the middle part of the lesson, the first and last parts are shared by the whole class. It could be argued that however skilled the teacher, the teaching is not sufficiently directed at each child. For example, is it capable of responding to the growing body of knowledge about the variety of learning styles and learning power suited to different people? So another interpretation of the personalised learning agenda is to signal an end to the class lesson as we know it, because of its inability to respond to the individual learning needs of pupils to the degree now demanded to motivate and maximise the attainment of all our children.

Class teaching is an almost universal feature of state schooling systems. Whatever the pedagogical arguments, the basic driver for this form of organisation is economic. Schools are only (could only be?) funded to permit one adult to supervise the learning of a large number of pupils. The substantial increase in real terms per pupil funding over a short period in recent years is at first glance quite insufficient to permit the demise of the class. One attractive (to some) feature of private schools in England is the small classes their resources permit. Yet these schools also organise and teach on the basis of classes, even while advertising 'individual attention' as a selling point.

Internationally, the class is the norm in societies whose school systems appear to have quite different aims, or at least different kinds of outcomes. Some emphasise equality of outcome and the purpose of education to equip everyone with a certain (higher or lower) level of knowledge and capability. These societies have a low range of attainment. Others, including particularly the UK, emphasise inequality of outcome and the purpose to qualify differentially young people, sorting them on behalf of the labour market and higher education. These societies have a high range of attainment. From the point of view of social justice, clearly it would be important to adopt the former emphasis when thinking about a number of schooling issues. The point for the present discussion, however, is that whichever of these aims predominates, a pedagogy centred around a class, generally of between 25 and 80 pupils, is virtually universal.

Yet it could be argued that a combination of factors explored in greater detail below could produce the first truly radical large scale change in the organisation of learning in the history of state education. If we put together the ICT revolution and the workforce reform agenda, we might conceive of learning taking place in a fluid mix of individual self-organised research, small group projects, and large group instruction. An investigation of the concept of personalised learning might reveal whether this is possible, and whether it is desirable.

The interim report of the working group on 14-19 reform appeared to be primarily about assessment but there are very strong underlying assumptions about pedagogy. An aim of this reform is to encompass the two emphases of education systems described above. It attempts to increase yet simplify qualification differentiation, while attempting to reduce the range of attainment by improving the engagement of the less successful half of young people, or as the minister would describe it, the 45th to 75th percentiles. An assumption running through the debate on Tomlinson is that current lack of engagement is due to an inappropriate curriculum, the solution being a more vocational curriculum at 14+.

This assumption, while plausible, is untested. It is based on the attitudes of young people undertaking vocational learning, which are often reported to be more positive. For some, however, an alternative assumption seems more likely. It is not so much the content of learning (curriculum) in vocational courses which is attractive, but the *method of learning (pedagogy)*. Typically, vocational courses for the average ability student in schools and colleges are characterised by active, often collaborative, learning styles, involving independent research and a variety of methods of presenting knowledge. The teacher becomes a facilitator and collaborator. Importantly, typical group sizes are considerably lower than school class sizes. There is no necessary connection between this kind of pedagogy and the content, although of course there is a very strong connection with the required assessment method.

This assertion, that pupils are engaged more by pedagogical style than content, brings us close to the paradox within the concept of personalised learning as applied to pedagogy. On the one hand, we are discovering more about the different ways in which different people learn, and incidentally about the need to teach 'learnacy'. Yet there are not an infinite number of ways; learning styles can be categorised. Hence, it may be argued that we do not need an infinite variety of pedagogies, but simply an awareness amongst teachers and assessors that there is a variety.

At the same time, with apologies to the few auto-didacts, learning is almost always a social activity involving at least one other, the teacher. In many group learning projects, scope is given for members of the group to learn the way which suits them best. This is clearly recognised in the denial that personalised learning is the same thing as individualised learning. Perhaps a personalised pedagogy is no more but no less than a policy of encouraging teachers to incorporate into lessons a variety of learning opportunities.

Curriculum

In a way, the same issues appear when the term 'personalised curriculum' is considered. Is every child unique in their makeup of interests and abilities? Every mother would say so, but in the context of mass schooling it is more realistic to say that these can be categorised. Indeed, ministerial pronouncements suggest a choice rather than an individualised curriculum. This can be seen as a development of a rethink of the national curriculum. At both key stages two and four, greater flexibility has been introduced, and further development is expected from the review of 14-19. Reflecting the Government's greater interest in the secondary phase, the Tomlinson report is generating debate about the secondary curriculum but this is not seen to impinge on primary schools. Nevertheless, this is the first moment since the imposition of the national curriculum that widespread discussion on the question of what children should learn has been encouraged.

It will be interesting to see to what extent practitioners involve themselves in the debate. An important aspect of the de-skilling of teachers was the replacement of their power to innovate by a curriculum which is static and state-imposed. Will the contemporary culture of teaching include a willingness to engage again in debate about curriculum development?

With or without teacher engagement, the Tomlinson review and rhetoric on personalisation are lifting a lid on timeless debates. It is worth revisiting the processes which led England and Wales to a centralised curriculum. The drivers were both standards and equity. It was believed that the absence of a national curriculum allowed far too much variation in the curriculum offer, with too many pupils experiencing a lack of breadth. Thus a virtue of a state curriculum was that it could offer a minimum standard of entitlement for every child in the country. In the event the minimum became a maximum also with the heavily overloaded product which emerged.

On the other hand, the outcome was a deeply conservative version of curriculum. As was frequently observed, it was scarcely distinguishable from that introduced by the Balfour Act in 1902, itself a copy of a diet considered suitable for a colonial administrative elite over fifty years previously. Although the one size fits all approach was seen as equitable in 1988, it could be argued that the one size actually fitted hardly anyone, because very few pupils are engaged by a series of disconnected academic disciplines. Is a fair description of the current situation that some pupils underachieve because the curriculum has no relevance for them? Or is it that some pupils achieve despite a curriculum which has no relevance for them, other than a purely instrumental one?

Whatever the judgement, space has been created for a new round of radical proposals about curriculum. The organisation of knowledge into disciplines, the relative utility of knowledge and skills as organising principles – and universal or individual access, the key question around a personalised curriculum – will all be debated, in terms which must go far beyond the assumptions behind the Tomlinson review. This treats ‘vocational education’ as an unproblematic concept and accepts a bilateralism at key stage four which adopts the language of choice but has the dangers of the mechanisms of selection.

The traditional (pre-national curriculum) practice in secondary schools was the provision of a timetable involving manual work for those whose literacy skills were insufficient for them to succeed in the academic curriculum. In making the academic curriculum the default, the mental/manual labour hierarchy, and consequently the sense of failure and alienation from education amongst the lowest achievers, was reinforced. David Miliband clearly identifies this group as potential beneficiaries of a personalised curriculum by emphasising the reduction of drop-out. The problem is to avoid the status differential between types of curriculum.

The diploma attempts to do this, but the problems of equivalence remain to be resolved. The exhortations of ministers may carry little weight against the conditions which give rise to the academic/vocational divide. It could be argued that this exists because the respective qualifications give rise to differential life-chances, and will reduce as and when the advantages accruing to the middle classes are shared by the working classes.

Another difficulty with the concept of curriculum choice in the secondary school is that the subtle operation of ‘option-choice’ procedures is at least partially a selection by the school. The evidence is that new curriculum offers become incorporated into the dominant ideology which links attainment and the academic/vocational divide. The new GCSEs, even re-labelled ‘specialist’ to avoid the v word, have not attracted a mixed ability intake, and are unattractive to high-status schools. They also suffer from an academic type of assessment which does not suit many of the lower-achieving pupils who have ‘chosen’ them. If increased choice is to consist of vocational and academic options, they might be described as pathways but would really be streams.

There is another question about vocational courses at 14-16. In what sense are they vocational? There is no labour market analysis to provide a basis for decisions on curriculum content at this level. Contemporary concepts of employability include, on the one hand, basic skills as well as more job-specific skills and knowledge, but on the other hand key skills, values and attitudes which are generic, such as team working, interpersonal skills and adaptability. There are close similarities between such personal competences and the outcomes sought in other education developments such as personal and social education and citizenship, but current incentives for schools lead to the relegation of these areas.

To conclude this discussion of personalised curriculum, it is worth asking the question why choice becomes an issue at the age of 14, since that is the thrust of ministerial talk. It might be that this is the age at which individual interests and aptitudes become apparent; if so, why are specialist and grammar schools permitted to select at age 11? Perhaps it is more plausible that the rhetoric of personalised curriculum fits neatly into the Tomlinson rhetoric. However, the case has not yet been made for a significant departure from the principle of universal entitlement underpinning a national curriculum, a principle which would lead to Tomlinson’s core occupying the bulk of every pupil’s programme. Perhaps what is missing from the current key stage four curriculum is not diversity and choice, but a curriculum model suitable for any youngster which includes a wide range of knowledge and skills, including, but not only, employability skills.

One further issue is important in the context of the spending review. Any working model of a more diverse provision at key stage four is a considerably more expensive model than present provision. Pupils would be taught in smaller groups, or if institutions collaborate there would be transport and administration costs. It is likely that the spending review will result in limited further increases in resources for education proportionate to GDP, and there are strong arguments for the priorities to be elsewhere than secondary schools, specifically the early years and the learning and skills sector. We would need a strong analysis of the outcome benefits of a personalised curriculum before committing the necessary funding.

Assessment

There is clear continuity in the perception of assessment for learning as an important tool for improving attainment. England’s secondary schools are now endowed with a substantial array of formative data. It is interesting that the national key stage two tests are not generally seen as the most useful of these. Schools widely use CATs, YELLIS, ALIS, LEA and DfES data

comparing themselves with similar and all schools locally and nationally. Schools compare predictions with current performance for individuals and cohorts. The data is likely to be used for managerial purposes. It may show that particular departments or certain groups of pupils are underperforming, and provoke remedial action. This is likely to result in changes to the teaching and/or learning of individual pupils.

However, the kind of formative assessment used by individual teachers is unlikely to be based on such statistics. Instead, it is a continuous process of monitoring each pupil's performance, noting strengths and weaknesses, and planning future lessons in the light of them. If every pupil is taken into account in the planning, then this process can only be described as personalised assessment. The virtues of continuous formative assessment have been promulgated for some time. It may be that teaching of this quality is not as widespread as is to be hoped, but certainly in year 11 the continual comparison of current performance with target GCSE grade is commonplace. The personalised learning agenda might be a lever to further generalise this good practice.

The more problematic implication of personalised assessment is at the summative or final stage. The Tomlinson review raises the possibility of diplomas being taken on a 'just-in-time' basis, so that each pupil would be tested individually when ready at any given level. As in so many aspects of personalised learning, a weak interpretation of this principle already operates, a strong interpretation raises a number of issues. Although 16+ is the standard age for taking GCSE, many pupils take some subjects at 15+ and 17+. However, while classes remain the teaching unit, entries will tend to be on a whole class basis.

A radical extension of this would make organisational sense only if there was a large range of readiness amongst a pupil population. This is likely to be the case in an individualised teaching scenario, or when the assessment is entirely modular without a terminal exam, but less likely otherwise. Individualised assessment could be incompatible with terminal exams, because of the impossibility of the continual production of different papers, although the development of on-screen testing might resolve that difficulty. Although some in the exam industry are very confident about the potential for on-screen testing, a curriculum which was defined in terms of skills rather than knowledge might not be amenable to that kind of assessment.

Another complication would arise in the treatment of attainment statistics nationally. Although in the present arrangement exams taken 'early' are counted for the purposes of league tables, exams taken 'late' are not. A strong version of individualised assessment suggests an end to the 16+ exams as understood currently. If the total achievement at a given diploma level of a cohort was to become the object of attention, publication of data would be considerably later, perhaps eight years after the cohort entered secondary education. The data would be interesting for researchers, but would it fulfil the market information aim of league tables?

Every Child Matters

The last of the continuities lies in making the individual child the centre of policy making. With the publication of 'Every Child Matters' and the assumption by the DfES of new responsibilities for children, the relationship between classroom performance and the needs of

the child outside the classroom are emphasised. The work of a range of professionals from mentors to social workers can be seen as directed at removing barriers to learning.

The DfES as an organisation may be experiencing some difficulty in absorbing the Children's Unit, in both bureaucratic and ideological senses. A strong focus on the individual learner within the department's mission may assist.

Facilitating factors

ICT

David Miliband has made clear that he does not conceive of personalised learning as sitting in front of a computer all day. Nevertheless, opportunities for learning are being transformed by the very rapid spread of ICT through our schools. With £439 million spent on schools ICT in 2003, almost every secondary school has a broadband connection, and computers are being used in every curriculum area. Secondary pupils routinely use a variety of applications for researching and presenting their work. However, ICT awareness amongst teachers remains very patchy. A programme funded by the New Opportunities Fund aimed at providing at least basic competence was uneven in quality.

Schools have been encouraged to buy interactive whiteboards. These are an aid to the currently orthodox pedagogy of interactive whole class teaching, where the teacher is clearly driving the lesson. The whiteboard gives technical assistance to the teacher, enabling a high standard of presentation aimed at engaging the audience (class), but does not propose a new pedagogy. Yet very soon all schools will be equipped for individual pupil computer access on demand. Does this not permit a different pedagogy?

Programs teaching and reinforcing basic skills have been used successfully for many years. There is no reason why these could not be developed and become standard. The whole world wide web (less blocked sites) is available as resource material. As mentioned above, exam authorities are developing on-line assessment. As all of these develop, they could be incorporated into a class teaching model, but they could allow a totally different model, and with it a different model of school organisation. Pupils could spend much of their time on individual research and skills development. Schools could become more like libraries, with individuals learning at their own pace on their own interests.

Many library users sometimes wish for guidance through the available material and how to retrieve it. Pupils, of course, need much more guidance. They need support and reassurance, they need human feedback, they need help in selecting material. Since most websites are designed for adults, staff are needed to catalogue and develop material to fill gaps.

The rejection of ICT driven models of teaching and learning is informed by a fear of an individualised and dehumanised experience in which the pupil relates only to the machine, but as the computer game addict shows this fear is misplaced because that relationship does not lend itself to progressive learning. As discussed above, learning requires a teacher. What ICT

might achieve is a resolution to the problem of limited resources for state schools preventing one to one teacher-learner relationships.

Another criticism of this approach is that schooling should be a social experience not only in terms of a teacher-learner relationship, but in terms of interaction with a range of other people: the secondary socialisation function of education. This is why a pedagogy based on individual study should never be the exclusive process. However, within a personalised learning framework, more collective activity could be organised more fluidly than the present class/weekly timetable arrangement. For example, pupils could advertise presentations of their research to be attended by other interested pupils without age barriers. Interest groups could meet at regular times. Staff would organise sessions on core curriculum areas which might not be covered in individual study.

Workforce reform

The kind of radically different school organisation suggested above would seem to be difficult to implement partly because of staffing issues. Engagement and retraining of a million school staff would be a challenge to dwarf the previous strategies. However, there are elements within the current policy of workforce reform which could facilitate movement in this direction.

At one level, the reform programme is stalling because it requires additional staff which schools on real terms level budgets cannot afford. The transfer of administrative and supervisory jobs from teachers to admin and supervisory staff is proceeding unevenly, but pathfinder schools have needed additional funding to achieve significant change. On the other hand, in many schools debates have started about the components of the role of the teacher. This has been driven largely by the forthcoming contractual limitation on the duty of teachers to invigilate exams and cover for colleagues, and the consideration of the difference between supervision and teaching.

In a radically personalised school, teachers would rarely 'deliver' lessons. Would they be redundant? No, they would focus on other aspects of their role. Tutoring and mentoring pupils would become more important, so that their learning was balanced and fulfilled a core curriculum. Selection and organisation of learning materials would become crucial. There is room for thinking through the skill sets and qualifications required for each of these specific roles, but there is no room for the current tendency to transfer this kind of work to untrained and unqualified staff. The thinking space has been created by the workforce reform agenda, but a considerably enhanced professional development capacity will be needed if schools are to move beyond a simple job transfer model.

Learning from current practice: the SEN model

For a long time, special schools have been under threat. Yet good special schools provide a lesson in workforce reform, and the treatment of Special Educational Needs in general has some characteristics of personalised learning. Both positive and negative lessons may be learnt from this example.

In contrast to other schools, teachers are a minority of the staff of a special school. A large range of other staff support pupils, their disciplines varying with the specific needs of the individual pupils. Various kinds of nurse, therapist, and assistant are on hand sessionally or permanently. All work together within teams in classrooms to meet the educational and care needs of each pupil, with different but complementary roles. Special school teachers, like many early years teachers who long ago learned to work with nursery nurses, are confident in the particular skills and knowledge they bring to work with children and relaxed about staff with other skills making complementary contributions in the classroom. Mainstream teachers may have good reasons to be suspicious of the motives of some adherents of workforce reform, but must learn to share the confidence of their special school colleagues.

SEN practice is also interesting as a model of personalised learning. The individual education plan, and the statement of SEN, are formal expressions of a personalised approach. A problem of the Code of Practice is the obligation of the local authority to provide whatever resource is considered appropriate to the needs of the individual pupil regardless of the real world need to balance priorities within finite resources. LEAs' SEN budgets are very difficult to control.

It may be the case that whether pupils with ordinary or special educational needs are being considered, an approach which builds resource allocation on an independent professional judgement of need is not sustainable because it does not relate to the resources realistically available. The same difficulty has been found by a number of LEAs which have attempted needs-led funding exercises. Starting from apparently reasonable assumptions about the resources needed by schools, the resulting sums always exceed by a considerable margin the available resources.

Pupils subject to the SEN Code of Practice are entitled to some resources specified in a document. The allocation of the resource, and the educational progress of the pupil, is monitored in a rigorous but bureaucratic manner. It is clear that in a school where pupils are all following individual programmes, either in terms of curriculum choices or rates of progress, there will be an enhanced need for monitoring of the whole pupil (as opposed to progress in specific subjects). The formal kinds of procedure required for pupils with SEN could not be replicated across a school because of the time required, so it will be necessary to devise systems which are both efficient and effective, again facilitated by an ICT-supported admin system. The individual learning plans being piloted in pathfinder schools may provide a guide, but they have been facilitated by additional resources which could not be generalised. Perhaps closer attention to the provision for pupils with SEN could provide additional insights into the possibilities and problems of a personalised learning approach.

Affordable?

Some of the possible resource implications of the development of personalised learning have been mentioned above. It is known that at secondary school level more curriculum choice requires higher staffing levels. Vocational courses are more staff intensive also, and will require higher expenditure on equipment, particularly for schools moving beyond Business and ICT subjects.

What is not clear is the likely cost of a more radical version such as outlined above. If an organisation centred on teaching classes were replaced by a more fluid system of individual study, group work, and an individualised curriculum, what kinds of staff would be needed, and to what levels? The example of SEN provision suggests a very much increased load of monitoring and mentoring, but this would be offset against a very much reduced load of instruction to classes. An educated guess might be that a personalised pedagogy and curriculum would require much more staff time, since by definition conversations are being held one to one rather than 30 to one. If the concept of personalised learning is really intended to generate debate about change this radical, it may be that there is an urgent requirement for a modelling exercise to test whether such an organisation could be affordable within any likely budgetary constraints.

As suggested above, the budgetary constraints on schools are likely to be substantial for a period of years. Decisions taken in previous spending reviews have resulted in major increases in spending on education, relative not only to GDP but also to the European average spend as a proportion of GDP. In 2000 spending on education in the UK had already reached that European average of 5.3%. In the March 2004 Budget, the Chancellor pre-empted the 2004 spending review by announcing modest increases in line with previous estimates, so that education spending will stabilise at about 5.6% of GDP. Further, as argued above, if there is any more in the education pot, there are more deserving cases for priority than the schools which have done so well from the last five years. As staffing costs continue to rise and pupil numbers fall, there is unlikely to be room for further substantial growth.

In that climate, moves towards any radical change in the organisation of learning must be grounded in clear evidence that it will be at worst cost neutral.

It might be argued that the policy of collaboration within diverse provision could lead to an economically efficient form of organisation with a more personalised approach. Where a group of schools and colleges within a locality co-operate on a curriculum offer, a wider choice without diseconomy of scale could result. This is generally expected to operate at 14-19 rather than at other key stages. The comparative cost benefits of such arrangements as contrasted with remote teaching techniques needs to be studied.

At the same time, the obstacles to these kinds of arrangements must be faced. There are costs involved in the transport of pupils between institutions, and staff time if supervision is required. There is some administrative time needed to account for the transactions between schools. The less motivated post-16 pupils find it difficult to maintain reliable attendance when expected to travel between institutions on their own initiative.

At a deeper level, whereas many institutions are embracing the collaboration agenda, others are less enthusiastic. These are likely to be schools which have responded most enthusiastically to the autonomy granted to them over the last decade. Those which are comfortable with concepts of the education market, and have been seeking market advantage against local 'rivals', will be less inclined to select reverse gear. When a single school can appropriate from others millions of pounds for materials which only a few years earlier would have been regarded as 'share-ware', open collaboration as an attitude must struggle to become the norm.

The current pattern of levers and incentives on school activity does not favour collaboration. The league table culture, for example, may inhibit cross-institutional provision. Which school gets the league table credit for a pupil registered at one school who takes one subject at another. Which school deserves the credit? Ultimately, of course, that question has no answer, and would have no importance were it not for the league tables. If personalised learning is to be pursued partly by further encouragement towards institutional collaboration, ways of overcoming the counter-pressures of institutional autonomy and the quasi-market must be found.

Individual and Social Learning

In previous sections, the discussion has attempted to address questions of what schools might look like if personalised learning were their organising principle. Here, the desirability of such development is considered.

When the state spends £30 billion on a service, it has stated and unstated expectations of the value of that expenditure. These may or may not coincide with benefits gained from sociological and economic points of view. Various groups within society have their own emphases on the utility of schools. Within these different and at times competing perspectives, one thing is clear: schools have a number of aims.

Current political discourse concentrates very largely on just one of them, the achievement of individual pupils as measured by a narrow range of exams. Nothing which follows attempts to deny the importance of this aim. For individuals, certain levels of achievement are necessary to gain access to employment or further qualifications, with consequent major implications for their life chances. The economy needs a qualified, if differentially qualified, workforce. Since Callaghan's Ruskin College speech in 1976, governments' perennial concern with the standards of individual achievement has in Britain become an ever increasing preoccupation. With the implementation of the quasi-market in the 1990s, the position has been reached where it is taken for granted that a school's performance should be measured *entirely* by the qualifications obtained by its pupils. As argued above, the concept of personalised learning can be seen as a further development of this focus on individual achievement narrowly defined. This approach has the virtue of simplicity and, of particular importance with respect to choice and accountability, it is easily measured.

None of the other aims of schools have that clarity. This does not mean that they are unimportant. Whereas the achievement aim is largely individual, other aims are largely collective, concerned with pupils as members of society. Schools are important agents of social order. In this respect, they are very effective; it is well known that petty crime rates soar when school is out, suggesting that when school is in some very strong social controls operate to ensure largely non-deviant behaviour. Governments make this point explicitly when attempting to reduce truancy. However little educationists and policy makers like to dwell on this work, it makes a significant contribution to the value for money of expenditure on schools. Their success is connected with effective supervision, and this needs to be a consideration when schools policy is being developed.

As sociologists say, schools are also important agents of secondary socialisation. Whereas children learn social behaviour, norms and attitudes, rights and responsibilities, from their homes, the state expects schools to overlay it, reinforcing or undermining what is learnt at home. Many of our children can find stability, security, respect, and justice nowhere in their lives except in their school. Much of their important experience derives not from formal teaching, but from the hidden curriculum, the lessons implicit in school organisation and routines. Of course, the curriculum is also used for this kind of learning, and has been increasingly formalised as personal, social and health education and, latterly, citizenship. One of the valued outcomes is social cohesion. Where pupils learn tolerance and respect for the other, despite diversity, where they learn shared values, society benefits.

Increasingly the importance of learning specific social skills is also being emphasised. As argued above, employability is increasingly defined in terms of social skills including interpersonal communication and teamwork.

The importance of social learning cannot be overestimated, but it cannot be achieved by means of a learner's relationship with a machine or a teacher. It demands group interaction and reflection on the interaction. School is intrinsically a social experience, and not merely a series of relationships between individual learners and their teachers. As long as a school is a place in which a large number of young people gather every day, this will be not only desirable but inevitable. The task for policy makers is to facilitate the desired kinds of social learning.

Perhaps it is a caricature of the intentions of the proponents of personalised learning to suggest that they want to focus only on the individual and neglect the social. It could be that they just consider that there needs to be a shift in the balance. Others would argue that if anything the shift needs to be in the other direction, because schools need to increase their explicit attention to social skills, and norms and attitudes, and that pupils should be working more, not less, collectively.

The language of choice

Ministers are arguing strongly that personalised public services would be both a good thing and a necessary thing. The corollary is that consumers of public services both have different needs of those services and different wants that they should express through choice. Examining these contentions with respect to schools produces some difficulty.

The first, as argued above, is that schools do not only provide services for individual consumers, or consumers' children depending on the view taken of who the customer might be. In a society where other agents of control and socialisation are in decline, the social functions of schooling are becoming more important, and the 'customer' for this service can be none other than society as a whole.

Secondly, it is by no means clear that school pupils need or want different kinds of service. There does not seem to be any move towards personalising early years education, or indeed key stages one to three. A standard curriculum based on universal entitlement is deemed to be appropriate, particularly if teachers learn to structure lessons to support a variety of learning styles. The organisation of classrooms needs to be flexible enough to permit individual enthusiasms to be given their head, but it seems to be assumed that primary schools do not need a major reform, and that parents of primary children do not need more choice than they currently enjoy with respect to school attended or curriculum offered.

A common curriculum for all is in itself a cohesive force in schools. It also reflects the case that every child has the same need to acquire a common body of knowledge and skills. This need reduces as the child becomes adult and education slips into training, but the common need for social skills and knowledge becomes stronger during adolescence. The question then arises, what is different about 14-19 provision which requires more differentiation and choice? It was argued above that the case for creating academic and vocational streams at 14+ may be based on false premises. If the Government wishes to see 16+ and 17+ abandoned as de facto leaving ages, there is a strong case for a common curriculum at least until the end of key stage four.

There is no strong body of evidence of a demand for choice in education. The option choice process within secondary schools usually attracts parent involvement, but it is by no means clear that it is an enthusiastic involvement, and as pointed out normally results in selection by the school in any case. The main site for the apparent exercise of choice is of course in the school to be attended. There is evidence of dissatisfaction, much of which centres round the inevitable reality that parents cannot choose, but only express a preference. Perhaps many of the parents who are successful in getting their preferred school at 11+ would prefer even more not to have to go through the procedure of choice. There is a distinction to be made between taking part with vigour in a procedure which exists and supporting its existence. An essence of the current admissions procedure is that it sponsors a competition between parents; as long as the competition remains, they feel obliged to take part, but many would be content perhaps if there were no competitors and no competition.

Markets are constructed through the exercise of choice, but schools can never become a true market. Not only is supply almost completely inelastic, but there is no price mechanism to balance demand with supply. In other words, choice of state school may not be necessary from an economic point of view. Quality assurance can be provided by other accountability mechanisms.

The language of choice in public services may not reach deep-seated needs, but it has other ideological effects. As argued above, schools meet both individual and social needs. The agenda of personalisation emphasises the former as against the latter. More, school is to be seen not just as a service to the individual, but as a service with choices.

The role of governments of the left and centre-left is to emphasise and support the collective in social life as a balance against the individualistic. They should resist the advance of individualism, which is closely related to consumerism. They need to guard against the commodification of every life experience. British governments of the past two decades have

shown no propensity to undertake this role, but to use the language of choice and the principle of personalisation in public services is to extend commodification. It seriously underplays the importance of schools as binding constituents of society, as agents for stability, security, and collective consciousness. The more schools are described as agents of individual academic success, the less they will be perceived as community assets. The more schools are encouraged to develop unique selling points, the less they will be minded to meet the needs of all local children.

Conclusion

Despite speeches of clarification, it remains difficult to be certain what the Government means by personalised learning. The difficulty is not eased by the clear differences of emphasis between Downing Street and the DfES. At one level, it could well be a box for a number of items of good practice which are found already in schools but need to be generalised across the system. One of these would be a varied teaching style to engage pupils who have a variety of learning styles. If current best professional practice already succeeds because of its attention to the individual pupil, how can this best practice be generalised?

However, it could be an attempt to move towards a much more radical revision of school organisation and pedagogy. As the new ICT hardware settles in, and workforce reform creates new thinking about staff roles, more fluid kinds of school organisation might emerge in which individual research has a much larger place than at present. This scenario, however, has a number of problems; will resources permit that kind of restructuring; and probably just as important, schools would have to continue to meet more social learning aims.

If personalised learning suggests an individualised curriculum, that gives rise to a number of problems. A substantial increase in curriculum options would raise issues of universal entitlement, the principle behind the national curriculum, and the implied suggestion that the current 14+ curriculum is unsuitable for some may be based on a misunderstanding of the situation. If the Government intends to increase option choice through collaboration between institutions, it will have to recognise the costs involved and the inhibitions produced by their autonomous status and the quasi-market.

The Government must also recognise the negative impact of a further stress on individual academic attainment as the purpose of schools. There is always a need to balance this against the social purposes of schools, in terms both of pupils learning social skills and also of their wider aims such as the inculcation of values and the promotion of social cohesion. Talk of personalised learning increases the perception of schooling as a commodity, but centre-left governments should stress its vital contribution to society as a whole.

About the Author

Martin Johnson is Research Fellow in Education at the ippr. He had over thirty years experience as a teacher, mainly in inner London, specialising in working with secondary pupils with behaviour difficulties. He is the author of 'Failing School, Failing City', an account of teaching in the most difficult secondary schools. He was also President of the NASUWT in 2000. At ippr he collaborated with Joe Hallgarten on the project 'The Future of the Teaching Profession', and then undertook a study of Schooling in London, and supported the London Development Agency's Business and Education Advisory Group.

Martin has particular interests in workforce issues and the education of the disadvantaged, school admissions, and school funding. As well as investigating personalised learning he is currently working on the teacher market, with the aim of improving the staffing of schools serving the disadvantaged. He can be contacted at m.johnson@ippr.org

About ippr

The Institute for Public Policy Research is an independent charity whose purpose is to contribute to public understanding of social, economic and political questions through research, discussion and publication. It was established in 1988 by leading figures in the academic, business and trade-union communities to provide an alternative to the free market think tanks.

ippr's research agenda reflects the challenges facing Britain and Europe. Current programmes cover the areas of economic and industrial policy, Europe, governmental reform, human rights, defence, social policy, the environment and media issues. ippr has a strong track record of innovation in education and training policy. Recent publications include:

Johnson M and Hallgarten J (Eds) (2002) *From Victims of Change to Agents of Change: The Future of the Teaching Profession*

Piatt W and Robinson P (2001) *Opportunity for Whom ? Options for the funding and structure of FE and HE*

Hartley-Brewer E *Learning to Trust and Trusting to Learn : How schools can affect children's mental health*

Hallgarten J et al (eds) (2001) *ICTeachers*

Hallgarten J et al (eds) (2001) *A Digitally Driven Curriculum*

Hallgarten J (2000) *Parents Exist OK ! Issues and Visions for Parent-School Relationships*

Pearce N & Hallgarten J (eds) (2000) *Tomorrow's Citizens : Critical Debates in Citizenship and Education*

Millns T & Piatt W (eds) *Paying for Learning*

Mager C, Robinson P et al (2000,IPPR/FEDA) *The New Learning Market*

For information on ippr's current education projects, visit our website at www.ippr.org/education