

Case study: personalised learning



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1. 0 Introduction

Personalised learning makes up a large part of ‘current’ Government Education reforms and is the centrepiece of 1.3 billion pounds of investment on an annual basis. Implementing a personalised education puts a great deal of emphasis on giving each pupil individual attention, within and outside of the classroom.

The phrase personalised learning first became a public proposal by Tony Blair in a 2003 conference. The idea was then advocated during the same year in a speech by David Miliband, who started to introduce and develop the early goals for a personalised learning scheme. This was strongly linked to the Every Child Matters campaign (2003) which looks at the five outcomes for all children in order to help them thrive and develop. Since this time, numerous government documents and legislations have been put in place to help teachers, parents and schools to implement personalisation effectively.

2. 0 Methodology

This article has been devised to explore the value of personalised learning in extending and further developing a child’s knowledge, skills and development. It explains what is meant by the term personalised learning and ways in which it can benefit the child and their learning experience. The role of adults such as parents and teachers in personalising education are considered and how they can support, encourage and motivate pupils in their learning.

There are several research documents bursting with reference to defining the term personalised learning. However, as a trainee teacher, I believe that

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applying the concept of personalised learning directly to the classroom is a crucial element in developing my own experience, as well as enhancing each child's education.

The recent review and restructuring of the national curriculum has witnessed a new government initiative being introduced this is known as Personalised Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS). As well as looking at contrasting views on personalised learning as a whole. The effectiveness of PLTS on the pupils and the way we as practitioners address it.

It is also important to take into account the styles in which pupils are taught, as each child will have varying approaches to learning. Therefore the strategies of educating in which teachers adopt are becoming an increasingly significant factor in allowing pupils to gain the most out of their education. Another element that will be evaluated is the value of assessment in aiding planning, developing progression, and providing realistic and achievable target setting to take place.

The environment within which a pupil is presented with learning also plays a vital role in how effectively the learning process takes place. Within this research article, the flexibility and resources found within the learning environment will be carefully considered, as well as how community and parental links can play a key role in extending communication and learning opportunities. As well as concluding thoughts regarding the purpose and effectiveness of personalised learning in the classroom will be expressed, along with my personal recommendations for future teaching with a view of personalised learning.

3. 0 Literature Review

3. 1 What is Personalised Learning?

The term personalised learning is intended to provide a vision of child centred learning, whereby the individual needs of every child are met and presented as the focus of learning. It is not about attempting to fit children into an already fixed curriculum, but using pupil's as the starting blocks for developing an effective learning path.

It is defined in the 2020 Teaching and Learning report by Gilbert as: ‘ taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child’s and young person’s learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate. It means strengthening the link between learning and teaching by engaging pupils – and their parents – as partners in learning.’ (2007, p. 8). However, I would argue there to be no one fixed definition of personalised learning. This is supported by Rudduck et al (2006, p. 6) who states, ‘ the whole point is that the idea of working collaboratively with students on real issues that affect their learning has to be specific to the needs of a particular school at a particular time.’ This highlights my belief that every school will approach personalised learning in their own unique way without the constraints of a defined route to follow.

3. 2 How does Personalisation benefit the pupil?

The concept of personalisation largely deals with allowing pupils more choice in their education. This is the assumption of Underwood and Banyard (2008, p. 235) who claim, ‘ greater personalisation of learning is predicated on the assumption that choice is good but more choice is better.’

If personalisation is effectively applied to the current format of learning, pupils will be given a choice in their learning journey and an emphasis is put on how they learn. With this emphasis being upon learning rather than teaching, each child is undoubtedly provided with more opportunities to use their own initiative to progress their learning and develop new skills, as each child takes an active role in shaping their own learning experiences.

By allowing personalised learning to occur, pupils are being challenged and encouraged to take risks in their learning, giving them the chance to use mistakes as a way of developing and improving upon their learning opportunities.

By individualising learning, the idea is not to simply leave children to their own devices when learning. It is about encouraging and supporting each child, resulting in confident and competent individuals who are able to take responsibility for their own learning experiences. Giving this independence to pupils will lead to more opportunities for the one to one support where it is so critically needed.

3. 3 Effective Implementation of the curriculum and PLTS

The DfES suggests that ‘personalised learning demands a curriculum entitlement and choice that delivers a breadth of study, personal relevance and flexible learning pathways through the education system.’ (2004, p. 9). I agree strongly with this statement and believe that all pupils should have an equal entitlement to a focused skills based curriculum. By implementing a skills based curriculum which meets the wider needs of each individual, it allows a school society without limitation of culture, ethnic background, gender or disability. This therefore provides opportunities for each and every

child to develop lifelong skills as well the chance to participate, progress and thus achieve.

I agree with the views of Hastings (2004) who states, ' There's no bigger barrier to personalised learning than the age-staged curriculum.' For this reason, I suggest that the school curriculum should not be based on age alone, but the level of the child and their personal way of learning should be considered when grouping pupils together.

Hastings also believes that ' a key principle of personalised learning is that children should be able to work at their own pace.' (2004). I consider this to play a vital part in implementing effective personalised learning in each and every school. I strongly believe we should not label pupils special needs just because their learning stage differs to a fellow class member. Equally so, why should a pupil be held back when they are ready to progress further? Personalised learning is about delivering a balance between allowing pupils to work at a pace that suits the individual, whilst facilitating more able pupils to allow for continuing progression.

PLTS are promoted by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCA). Ever since the introduction of PLTS in September 2009 it has become a fundamental part of the national curriculum.

Within the PLTS strategy is 6 sub sections. These generic skills, together with the functional skills of English, mathematics and ICT, are essential to success in life, learning and work.

They are embedded within the new Diploma qualification so that they form an integral part of teaching and learning.

Independent enquirers – are the pupils that evaluate as they go along, so they are prepared about how to take the next stage that comes to them,

Team workers – are the learners who work best in a team. Those pupils who are willing to consider the people working with them and group together to achieve the best outcome they can. The feedback that they provide is relevant to themselves and others.

Effective participants – these learners are those who deliberate different ideas and look for a solution not only for themselves but others around them

Self-managers – these young people react to changes better than others, through organising work and prioritising things. These learners are also work towards an overall goal or finishing line and persevere until they do so.

Reflective learners – achieve by assessing themselves and taking feedback from their superiors and their peers. Instead of getting downbeat under criticism they will flourish and use that in an attempt to do better.

Creative thinkers – are stated by the QCA as ‘ Young people who think creatively by generating and exploring ideas and making original connections. They try different ways to tackle a problem, working with others to find imaginative solutions and outcomes that are of value.’

3. 4 The role of the teaching workforce

An effective teaching workforce is invaluable in the personalisation of learning. Vygotsky (2008) stated that learning is a social process whereby children learn with and through imitation of significant others. For this reason, I believe it to be vital that we make use of the correct professionals to support individuals, such as teachers, teaching assistants and extra support workers.

Teachers need to use a range of teaching techniques designed to interest each and every learner with opportunities for participation, thus allowing progress to continue through a range of challenging, yet enjoyable experiences. Generic teaching skills such as questioning need to be expanded upon. Posing questions which allow pupils to think creatively, strategically, logically and opportunities to develop thinking skills will improve pupils' investigative nature. Teaching should be based around pupil centred learning objectives, which excite and intrigue pupils to want to construct their own learning.

In order to actively engage pupils, it is key to strike a balance between planned work and spontaneous elements of teaching. This strategic method of teaching will help pupils to identify, explore and experiment successfully.

I am of the opinion that in order for pupils to want to learn, they need to be given the chance to experience authentic and practical learning which they feel is enhancing their development, thus cultivating positive attitudes towards learning. This is supported by Hargreaves (2009) who stresses that linking learning to real life problems is the way children learn and that by

giving pupils material to ‘learn by heart’ will only be detrimental towards their attitudes to learning.

The daily communication between pupils and their teachers is fundamental in enhancing how pupils learn and develop as individuals. To create successful learners, we must not as teachers simply do the learning for them. They will merely become another statistic who is not equipped with the experience or knowledge to progress in this ever changing, diverse society. The emphasis should be on strengthening the relationship between teachers and their pupils, working in a close partnership both individually and as part of a group to develop learning for all. I am of the belief that teachers play a crucial role in enthusing, supporting and encouraging each and every learner in order for them to reach their full learning potential. This is supported by Stewart who suggests, ‘ Dialogue and collaboration between teachers and pupils should encourage them to explore their ideas, listen, and both ask and answer questions...there should be judicious use of whole-class teaching, as well as one-to-one, paired and group.’ (2007, p. 7).

Knowing and understanding the needs of individuals in your class is central to personalisation, as the term ‘ one size does not fit all’ is more applicable now than ever. A greater understanding of the wider needs of the pupils can allow the teacher to sensitively target objectives and questions to a range of levels within the class.

It is an unreasonable expectation that teachers are present to provide pupils with all the subject knowledge they will ever need during their life. It is for this reason essential that we teach children the skills they need to develop as a person, creating life – long learners.

I strongly suggest that personalised learning needs to provide teachers with opportunities to learn themselves in order to provide successful teaching for

their pupils. Teachers can often feel out of depth when presented with constant reforms and it is important they are given time to reflect.

Developing ideas, taking risks in their teaching and having an open minded perspective to the school life and curriculum will provide real quality teachers.

3. 5 Assessment For Learning

Assessment is a vital tool in allowing the teacher to evaluate the needs of each individual in order to improve their learning outcomes and tailor their personal learning needs. Assessment establishes what stage pupils are at in their current learning, thus identifying targets for the pupils to develop their learning. It is then the responsibility of the child to actively work upon these targets with the motivation and support of the teacher. This is supported by the Assessment for Learning strategy (DCSF, 2008) which stresses the importance of assessment not only for the child to progress, but to allow parents and carers to gain a knowledge of how their children are doing and what support they can offer to further progression. This highlights the need for regular parent interaction to minimise isolation for the school personalisation system.

Assessment should not be about labelling or testing a child but used as a way of informing a child's future learning. It should demonstrate a clear understanding of each pupil's previous and current knowledge and therefore will act as a stimulus for the developing of personalised learning. This allows ambitious targets to be planned into each child's learning process. However, it is crucial that an on-going assessment process is evident to ensure a consistent form of evaluation is taking place.

It should be noted however, that assessment does not have to always take place in the form of written assessments. Wall (2006) suggests that care should be taken to assess verbal comments made by the child, drawings, as well as gestures they use when undertaking work.

In my opinion, target setting is a very influential and important form of personalised learning. Not only does it provide the pupils with a spur of motivation to carry forward within their work, it also helps them understand where they are succeeding, as well as any areas for development. I believe this process should be carried out collaboratively between the pupil and the teacher in order to allow both individuals to understand how to move forward.

Personal reflection is vital for all pupils to allow them to review their own learning as well as assessing their fellow peers. Throughout their learning, children should be given numerous opportunities to reflect and question their work, to allow them to build upon their prior knowledge.

To successfully narrow attainment gaps and raise achievement, it is vital that teacher assessments and individual goals are accurate. Targets pitched at a level below the child's natural capabilities will indisputably result in poor progress.

3. 6 The Learning Styles

Although it is important to try and provide pupils with the chance to develop new ways of learning, not all pupils will take in information in the same way. The success of personalised learning is highly dependent on the ways in which activities are presented to a pupil. If the sole purpose of learning is to make it easy and accessible, it is important to consider pupils preferred learning styles in order to effectively personalise their learning. In support of this are Hall and Moseley (2005, p. 248) who propose that teachers ‘ should pay closer attention to students’ learning styles’ and that following this approach ‘ would have a considerable motivational effect both on students, who feel valued, and on teachers, who feel that they are engaging directly with learners’ needs rather than delivering a prescribed curriculum.’

3. 7 The environment we learn in

The learning environment of the child contributes largely to how successfully the learning takes place. Farmer stresses that, ‘ for children to learn they need to be cognitively and physically comfortable – the setting needs to address their basic needs.’ (2009 p. 37). By creating an environment that is more relevant to the learner, it gives children the opportunity to become balanced individuals and preparing them as lifelong learners. Thus it is central to the personalised vision that pupils are provided with classrooms that are stimulating, challenging and fun, with accessible resources which support the learning for all. Examples of such are interactive displays, which will help to capture pupils’ interest as well as providing a stimulus for further learning.

It is imperative that we do not simply think of learning as having to take place in the confines of the classroom. The outdoor environment needs to be built into teaching and used as a key resource in providing a diverse range of activities and experiences for pupils. This is ever more a necessity within Design and Technology.

In order for personalised learning to truly be applied to schools, I consider the flexibility of the learning environment to be a key factor. If we as teachers are to deliver a personalised curriculum, the environment needs to accommodate the vast range of teaching and learning strategies that will undoubtedly take place.

The space also needs to be utilised effectively in order to provide adequate space for whole class teaching, as well as small grouping systems or one to one working where the need arises. This involved accurate planning of time, space and resources.

4. 0 Conclusion

To conclude, I would argue that by implementing the concept of personalised learning, pupils are being empowered with the skills, creativity and open mindedness to walk through their future doors with confidence. We, as parents and teachers want to allow them to mature into active and individuals, as Dean suggests, ‘ the creative person will have an approach to life that finds solutions to problems of everyday living.’ (2006, p. 2). This highlights the need for personalised learning in providing a stable platform for dealing with real life experiences in later life.

My literature review has demonstrated overwhelming support for the view of personalised learning and I would argue that personalising pupils' education is undoubtedly a valuable initiative. This view is ever more enhanced with government initiatives like PLTS being introduced to account for all pupils and the personalisation of their own learning. Nonetheless, personalisation is a controversial subject, which is evident in some of the following viewpoints. Hartley (2007) suggests that it is in fact not a new initiative and regardless of the enhanced application of ICT and with 'workforce re-modelling', personalised learning will be more costly than previous traditional curriculums. However, I firmly believe that the benefits of personalised learning to a child's education and development far outweigh the negative aspects that have been highlighted above.

Finally, I would suggest that the idea of personalised learning must be applied and enforced consistently throughout the school, taking into account the vital role played by parents, teachers, the environment in which pupils are learning and other factors discussed in this article. This will ensure all schools turn the vision of personalisation into reality.