

You would be hard-pressed to disagree with Charles Clarke's comment that 'in this changing world we know that education has to put the learner at the centre'. The debate now is about how we can do this. Personalising learning is presented in this pamphlet as a powerful solution. It is a way of reforming the system to ensure that the learner is at the heart of it. Ultimately, personalisation cannot be seen as a stand-alone initiative. It needs to be understood as a characteristic and a culture of a whole learning system.

Charles Leadbeater is an author, consultant and government advisor.

He is a Senior Research Associate with Demos and has written reports and pamphlets on social entrepreneurship, civic entrepreneurship in the public sector, and the rise of knowledge entrepreneurs.

Copies of this publication can be obtained from:

DfES Publications
PO Box 5050
Sherwood Park
Annesley
Nottingham NG15 0DJ

Tel: 0845 6022260
Fax: 0845 6033360
Textphone: 0845 6055560
Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com

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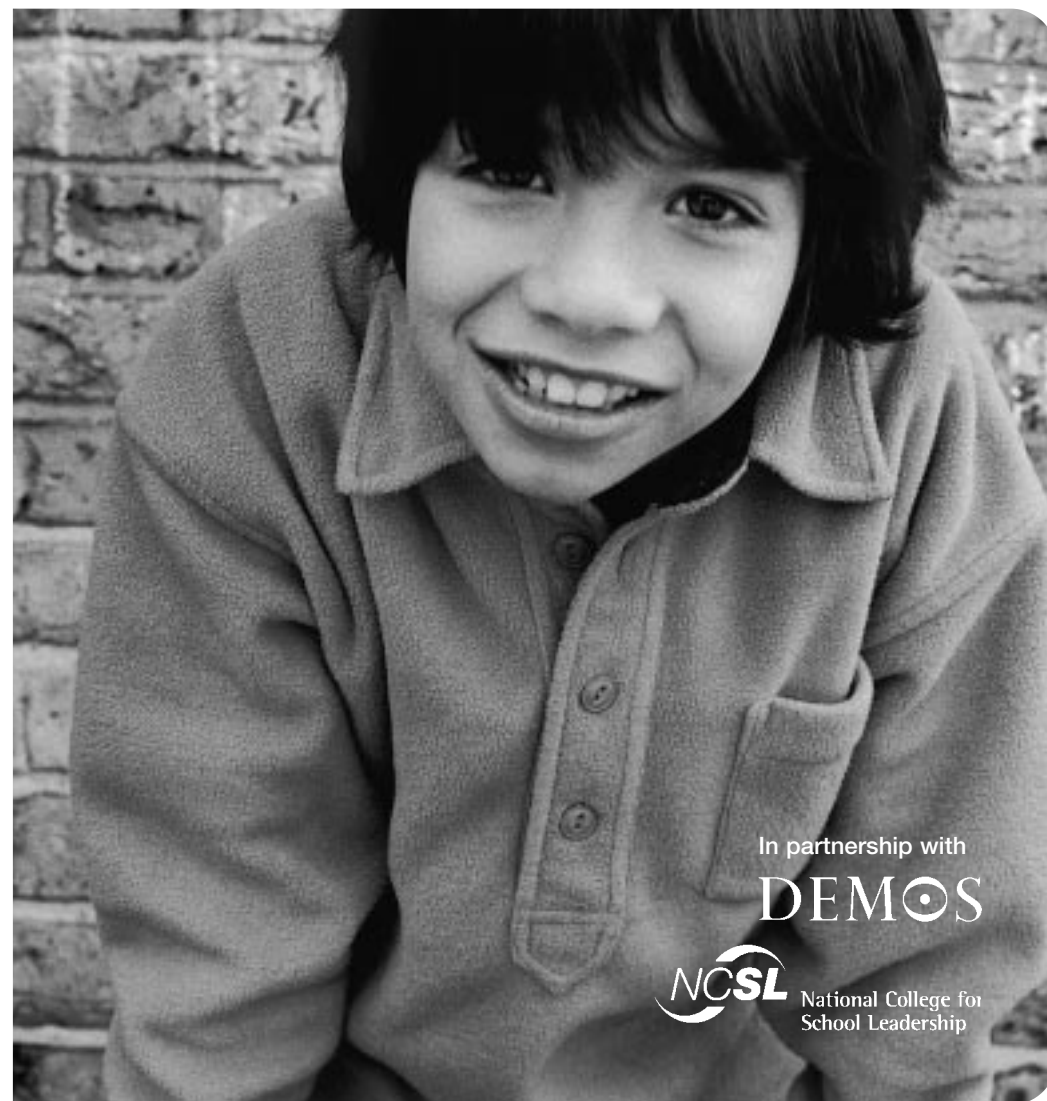
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innovation

Learning about personalisation: how can we put the learner at the heart of the education system?

Charles Leadbeater

teachers transforming teaching



In partnership with

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National College for
School Leadership



Foreword

Mike Gibbons – Lead Director, Innovation Unit

This pamphlet is part of a conversation with teachers and other practitioners in education about the implications of the emerging theme of personalisation. It is an adaptation of a Demos publication, *Personalisation through Participation*, which was published earlier this year, and is the second in a series of short 'thinkpiece' publications that the Innovation Unit at DfES are producing in collaboration with Demos and the National College for School Leadership. It is not a statement of government policy; it is a way of broadening the debates around current issues.

As professionals you are no doubt doing your best to provide personalised learning for all of your students. But it is challenging to provide such a personalised experience in a system which still exhibits features of its 19th century origins. Education today could also be said to echo the Fordist principles of standardised mass production. This means that personalised learning is delivered in a culture of public service which traditionally fits the individual to the system – not the other way round.

You would be hard-pressed to disagree with Charles Clarke's comment that 'in this changing world we know that education has to put the learner at the centre'.

The debate now is about *how* we can do this. Personalising learning is presented in this pamphlet as a powerful solution. It is a way of reforming the system to ensure that the learner is at the heart of it. Ultimately, personalisation cannot be seen as a stand-alone initiative. It needs to be understood as a characteristic and a culture of a whole learning system.

But there is still a long way to go to understand how this culture might be brought about. You will find this pamphlet peppered with questions and challenges for those working with young people on a daily basis. You can join in the debate about the ideas raised as a member of the online Innovation Community at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit. You are in the driving seat. So tell us what you think.

We will publish a follow-up pamphlet later this year that captures and presents the richness of your ideas. We already know that personalisation is not an initiative that can be 'delivered'. I hope that this pamphlet gives you an opportunity to develop and shape current thinking.

“In this changing world we know that education has to put the learner at the centre.”

The starting point: how can public service reform be shaped?

The fact that James is in school today is a testament to our public services. James was born a heroin addict, and 15 years on he is still dealing with the consequences of this early addiction. He grew up in an area with high unemployment: any cash came from drug dealing or crime. Both his father and brother spent most of James' childhood in and out of prison. His mother, also a heroin addict, was not able to support him in the ways he needed. Learning was pretty much at the bottom of his pile of things to worry about. He attended school intermittently and never felt able to engage with what was going on there. His teachers wanted to help but found it hard to know where to begin when James was so rarely in attendance.

James' situation – and the frustration felt by his teachers at their own powerlessness to help – sums up an asymmetry at the heart of public services: users are asked to fit into the frameworks of services,

rather than being empowered to shape them to meet their needs.

So the question for us here is, how would the various proposals currently on offer for improving public services have helped James?

One argument is that public services simply need more money and staff. James just needed a better school, with more teachers and perhaps a more inviting environment. But James was starting from the view that school wasn't for him, that he would never fit in there. It's doubtful whether or not greater investment in the same services would have done anything to help him.

A second argument is that James should have been set free as a consumer, with the funds to enable him to buy the services he needed. Producers of those services would need to respond to his demand. Yet James suffered from a total poverty of aspiration. He is bright but lacked belief in his own abilities, and in his early years there were few role models for him to admire. Liberating James as a consumer would take far more than giving him a wad of money and the freedom to spend it.

A third argument is that James should be seen as a citizen. The key feature of public services is that they are collectively funded, with priorities set by democratic decision making. James' school-based education might have been changed if he had a voice in its governance. A seat on the student council might have allowed James to reshape the services on offer. But James is wary of committees and he doesn't want to have a voice in the whole school. He just wants to be able to influence what he experiences in a direct and immediate way. 'Citizenship' is too vague and woolly as a term to mean anything to James about the power he has to shape his education experience.

None of these proposals for reorganising public services – reinvestment in existing services, consumer choice, citizenship and voice – would have made much of a difference to James. So how is it that he's now back in full-time school?

When James was 13 his older brother died of an overdose. This was a crucial turning point in James' life: he realised he didn't want to go the same way. Unable to turn to his mother, or his peer group (who were all friends he'd made through his addiction), he spoke to a teacher. This teacher put him in touch with a local Drugs Action Team. They worked hard with James to understand his addiction and devise a personal programme that would help him reduce his dependency on the heroin. At the same time they put him in touch with a voluntary organisation for children who, for whatever reason, found themselves excluded from mainstream education.

This organisation gave James the opportunity to participate in the design and delivery of the service he received. At this organisation James was allowed to do the activities he liked – sports and cooking. He was encouraged and supported in gaining his first ever qualification. This gave him the confidence to begin, with the organisation's support, to access short courses at his local college.

“Public service reform should be user centred. It should be organised to deliver better solutions for the people who use the services.”

Just recently, he has started going to school again. It's a new school that was first introduced to James via the voluntary organisation. They employ a 'learning manager' whose job was to work with James and find out what he wanted to do. This learning manager worked closely with other people – in the Drugs Action Team and the voluntary organisation, as well as James' mother – to think about what kind of education would best suit James. He participated in decisions about what he studied, and the sorts of targets he might aim for. Once a week, James goes back to the voluntary organisation where he can continue to do the things he loves.

James' life has been transformed. He's gradually lowering his methadone dosage, he's developing a non-using peer group and making new friends, he's got a sense of purpose and even his relationship with his mother is better than it was.

This transformation only happened because a group of professionals – both within and beyond the school – took the time to help James articulate the intricacy of his needs. He was given enough choice to voice his aspirations, and was put in touch with the right network of support staff and others to create a solution that no school alone could have delivered.

“We need a new framework to show how personal needs can be taken into account within universal equity and excellence in education.”

What’s really important about this is that James was an active, informed participant in this process: the solution was personalised through participation. As a result James felt far more committed to his education than he had when it was delivered to him as a passive, dependent young man.

Public service reform should be user centred. It should be organised to deliver better solutions for the people who use the services. But it must also, in the process, deliver better outcomes for society as a whole: effective collective provision to meet the need for education, health, transport, community safety and care for vulnerable people. The challenge is to build these two sources of value – for the individual users and the wider society – together. The combination creates public value. Treating users as atomised consumers ignores the wider social influences on the choices they make and the wider consequences, for

example, over which school to choose for their children. Treating people as citizens, who can reshape services through formal political debate, is worthy but abstract. Only policy wonks think people will be turned on by asking them to attend more meetings. Users want direct attention to their needs.

That is why we need a new framework to show how personal needs can be taken into account within universal equity and excellence in education. Of course everyone wants an education system that is both equitable and excellent. In recent years the policy agenda has grown to recognise the fact that in the context of greater diversity we can only understand these terms by putting the needs and wants of individual learners at the heart of the system. As teachers, you will know that there are many ways of responding to the needs and wants of each student in your classrooms. But what if we could join up all these responses in such a way that the whole education system we are operating in is reshaped? In other words, how can effective collective solutions be built up from millions of personal decisions?

For many people, the idea of teaching every learner as an individual is both powerful and attractive. But they find it hard to see how such an approach could be organised at large scale, providing support or services to dozens or hundreds of people all at the same time, as schools do. A first step to understanding how this might be possible is to think of public services like education as scripts.

Services as scripts

All public services are delivered according to a script, which directs the parts played by the actors involved. The script for having a meal in a restaurant is: reserve table; arrive at restaurant and be shown to table; examine menu; place order with waiter; food delivered to table; eat; ask for bill; pay; leave. Service innovation comes from rewriting scripts like this so that action unfolds in a different way. So for example, a fast-food restaurant runs on a different script: read menu; place order for food; pay; take food to table yourself; eat; clear away your debris; leave. In a full-service restaurant you eat and then pay, and do very little else. In a fast food restaurant you pay and then eat, and contribute some of your labour by taking the food to the table and clearing away your mess.

Many of the scripts followed by public services – such as schooling – have not changed for decades: choose what to study from a pre-defined and delineated set of options; sit with 20-30 other learners; learn from your teacher, who has to deliver set amounts of content often in a particular style; sit some exams; have your learning assessed by an examiner; get your results; move on to the next stage; do it all again. The scripts for user engagement with education – and indeed the police, health services and libraries – are largely written by professionals, producers and regulators, not by users. The users are expected to fit into the roles given to them by the script handed down from on high.

Often, radical innovation involves bringing together ideas from quite different scripts. The telephone service script (used in banking) and health care knowledge, when brought together created a new script for accessing health advice in the form of NHS Direct. The old script was: phone GP; make appointment; visit surgery. Now there is a new script, which starts with a phone call to NHS Direct asking for help.

So, service innovation comes from re-writing scripts so that the action unfolds in a different way. The new 14-19 curriculum has the potential to be an important service innovation in the context of the education system. Here, learners re-write scripts through conducting their learning across a range of sites, that include the school, but could also include a workplace. Students will be allowed to move along their pathways at a pace that suits their abilities and circumstances.

The 14-19 reforms that are already underway give us a further clue about service innovation. It increasingly comes from producers and users simultaneously adopting a new script, playing out new and complementary roles in the story. It is very difficult for service producers to innovate unless the users also adopt the new roles in the script. In other words, service innovation is invariably a joint production combining producers and consumers.

So, if education is a script, how can it be re-written so that the service is more responsive to the user? Lately, the government has been arguing that personalisation is precisely the way

in which services can become more responsive. The question is whether they see this as a radical solution or not. To what extent is personalisation a re-writing of the script – and therefore roles of users and producers – of education? In *Personalisation through Participation*, I argued that personalisation has the potential to reorganise the way we create public goods and deliver public services – but that to unlock that potential, the idea needs to be taken much further than current government thinking seems to allow.

In this pamphlet I highlight the possible ‘levels’ of personalisation, ranging from incremental service improvement, to a more radical vision that I call personalisation through participation. Ultimately, it is my view that the aim of public service reform in the 21st century should not be to sustain existing, often outmoded forms of provision. The aim instead should be to disrupt these models and find new, more adaptive solutions.

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Better basics

At its most basic level, personalisation is about re-writing the education script to make it simpler, more efficient and responsive. Most people want reliable, timely services. They want better basics – it’s not rocket science. Barnardos found this out when they consulted young people on the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* in 2003. When asked to imagine the ideal school, children wanted little more than the absence of various features of schools that blighted their everyday experiences of them. Roofs should not leak, rules should be clear and children ought to be listened to and treated with respect. This isn’t about doing anything radically different; it’s about doing what you’re supposed to be doing better. Ultimately, personalisation could mean providing people with a more customer friendly interface with existing services.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the education system was seen rather like a machine. Productivity gains came from working that machine harder, reprogramming more often from the top, tightening specifications and quality standards, and setting ambitious targets. This is no doubt a powerful way of reforming public services. But there are limits to its impact. These improvements to the basics do mean doing the same things just a bit faster, with better equipment. And, given the way that much of the public sector still works, enacting such basic reforms to make it easier for people to get access to the services they want, when they want them, would make a significant difference.

Choice: users as consumers

Another level of personalisation would not only improve access to existing services, but it would give users more choice about the services they used. Providing users with greater choice would shake up the public sector. As Andrew Turnbull, the Cabinet Secretary, put it in a recent speech: “choice is a very big and revolutionary concept for us... when you get a choice, all of a sudden you are reporting to the people you’re serving”.

One way of understanding choice is to see it as a way of giving users more say in navigating their way through services once they have got access to them. Thus, in secondary education, children will have more choice over their ‘learning pathway’, and the pace and style at which they learn. Public service professionals, in this level of personalisation, should take more account of users in the way that they deliver the service to them, keeping them informed and giving them ample opportunities to choose between different courses of action.

There are other ways in which the user could be empowered to choose. Personalisation could mean giving users more direct say over how money is spent. In education, this could be the “schools passports” that were recently proposed by the Conservative Party. Here, it is the families who are put in charge of how resources are allocated in the system. The idea behind the passports is that parents are given some financial muscle

in choosing their children’s schools through making them paying customers. Public service professionals would have to respond to consumer demand. Rather than determining resource allocation, their role would be to inform users about available choices.

What this hints at is the scale of change we are talking about in consumerising services. It is not only the financial flows in education that would need to change if our goal is to make a reality of choice. In this scale of change we can see some of the challenges that arise from trying to turn users into consumers:

- To make an informed choice the learner would need much better information, down to the performance of individual teachers. Consumerism works when consumers have good information about service performance. But in the public sector, most information, and the ability to interpret it, lies with the professionals and staff. Users can rarely access all the information they need to make a fully informed decision.
- The qualities of a good education are not easy to package and price – the value of learning is fuzzy and hard to pin down. Yet consumerism relies on this neat packaging and separation of goods in order to enable the consumer to make their decisions.
- Models of consumer choice fail to take account of social and environmental factors in the decisions people make. Consumerism is based, at least in theory, on individual preferences.

But in public services it is often difficult to separate one individual's preferences from another's. Parents choose schools based in part on what other parents do.

- We tend to assume that if choice is good, more choice is better. But as choice expands, so the costs of searching across competing offers rises. An American professor, Barry Schwartz, has recently argued that sometimes people just want the experts to advise them on what to do, rather than carrying the weight and expectation of the decision making themselves.

Let's return to my opening question: how can the education script be re-written so that it is more responsive to its users? Users of public services want to be treated well, as customers, but that does not necessarily mean they want to become consumers, shopping around for the best deal or even threatening to do so. We need to find a way to personalise services without turning the public sector into a shopping mall. We need a way for users to be treated with respect and consideration when they cannot exercise the sanction of taking their business elsewhere.

What kinds of choice should we be thinking about?

Perhaps we need to be thinking about choice from a different perspective. Young people are far more avid and aware consumers than they used to be. This culture is bound to have an effect on how they view education. Many secondary school age children now have mobile phones for which they can get 24/7 telephone support, different price plans, equipment and service packages. They are used to a world in which they can search for, download and share digital music on the internet.

Perhaps the choice we need to consider is less about choice between institutions, and more about choice in what students learn and how they learn it.

Students choosing how they learn

Many schools are now picking up the 'learning to learn' agenda that enables students to be more involved in making decisions about the way in which they learn. One head teacher commented, 'for me, personalised learning is about enabling pupils to achieve the best that they can through working in a way that suits them best.'

Students choosing what they learn

In a personalised system, students might be able to choose to study whatever options or modules appealed to them. They could construct their curriculum from a range of choices, both academic and vocational. The challenge here would be to reduce the risk attached to any one choice – in other words, the learning pathways of students would become far more flexible than they are currently. Learners could make choices right along the pathway, rather than simply at the gateway, as happens now.

Students choosing how they are assessed

'When preparing students for a test, we don't just ask them to revise. We get them to do things like produce their own revision booklet, or design their own test. This is highly effective as it helps students to engage with a clear task, and it helps teachers to spot exactly where the gaps in knowledge are.' Assessment for learning means that learners can be actively involved in setting the pace and purpose of their learning.

'Our school's results have gone up since allowing students more choice and autonomy in both the curriculum and the ways they are assessed.'

So, is personalisation about giving students choice about *what* they learn, or *how* they learn? Does the answer to this question depend on whether the student is studying, for example, at Key Stage 3, or 14-19?

How much flexibility is there in the current system?

Is there a 'bottom line' – a minimum curriculum – to ensure that all students reach a certain standard? What would this framework look like?

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Voice: users as citizens and co-designers of services

So far we have considered personalisation at the levels of improving the user's access to the services they seek and improving the choices on offer. These may both be desirable shifts, but they are not examples of re-writing the script. Professionals are still providing the solutions for dependent users, albeit in a more personalised fashion. What would happen if we started to imagine personalisation at a 'deeper' level, whereby users began to take on some of the role of the producers in the actual design and shaping of the education system?

Here, we can imagine users not only having a choice between pre-defined services or packages or services, but also having a voice in what those services looked like in the first place.

So, how might we make this idea of a user voice real? The way that this government currently conceives of such a voice is through the notion of citizenship, conferred through formal participation – for example on governing bodies or student councils – which cannot, on its own, provide a good guide to how public services should be organised day by day. Users of public services do not want a "voice" in their management or periodic opportunities to have a say on how public funds should be spent. They want a good service which is efficient, responsive to their needs and which treats them with respect.

Voice for users – the more direct, informal, and immediate the better – is a vital component in public service reform. But citizenship – formal democratic representation – cannot be the sole organising principle for public service reform. Instead, we need an approach which gives people a direct voice through the way in which everyday services are actually developed and delivered.

“What would happen if we started to imagine personalisation at a ‘deeper’ level, whereby users began to take on some of the role of the producers in the actual design and shaping of the education system?”

The concept of user voice is a critical one, but in order to create personalised services we are going to need new ways of hearing this voice above and beyond the formal democratic structures that exist. At its most radical, personalisation would need not only to make users consumers and commissioners, but ultimately co-producers and co-designers.

At this level, the script would need to be re-written to turn users into active participants in the shaping, development and delivery of education. I have called this ‘personalisation through participation’.

The concept of citizen voice in education

‘Student voice’ is an issue of growing importance. Some schools are now working hard to get beyond the traditional student council level of representation for their pupils. For example, Hastingsbury Upper School in Bedford uses its students as researchers. Archbishop Michael Ramsey School in London involves its students in the shaping of the new staff induction programme.

Parents are also being given more of a voice in many schools – not so much through their involvement as parent-governors, but getting more involved in the day-to-day teaching and learning provided. At Our Lady Star of the Sea Primary School in Sefton, staff are using the flexibility they have created through workforce reform to engage parents in the educating of their pupils. The school began by coaxing community members in, inviting them at first as by-standers, then as volunteers, then as learners, and ultimately as staff who are paid for their work. The school says that they are beginning to see the effects of this feed back into the learning of the children. In addition, the school has created an invaluable cohort of involved and enthusiastic adults, many of whom are now finding work elsewhere.

Whose voice matters in your school? How do you enable students and parents – and others – to play a role in shaping the services you offer through giving them a voice?

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Personalisation through participation

Personalisation through participation makes the connection between the individual and the collective by allowing users a more direct, informed and creative say in rewriting the script by which the service they use is designed, planned, delivered and evaluated. This isn't about the producers providing the same service, only better. It isn't about turning users into full-blown consumers of public services, empowered through exercising choice. And it isn't about creating further cumbersome structures for users to formally participate in civic society, empowered through exercising voice.

In the case of James and other emerging examples of participative services, personalisation is potentially far more profound than any of these possibilities. It represents a system whereby learners are 'co-producers', involved not only in decisions about the way in which education is supplied, but ultimately in the creation of the public value of education.

In short, personalisation is about enabling producers and users to work together to create the services in the first place. What characteristics might a personalised public service have?

- **Intimate consultation:** professionals working with users to help unlock their needs, preferences and aspirations, through an extended dialogue.
- **Expanded choice:** giving users greater choice over the mix of ways in which their needs might be met to assemble solutions around the needs of the user, rather than limiting provision to what the individual school can offer.
- **Enhanced voice:** expanded choice should help further to unlock the user's voice. Making comparisons between alternatives helps people to articulate their preferences. This is very difficult to do from a blank sheet of paper. Choice helps to unlock voice.
- **Partnership provision:** it is only possible to assemble solutions personalised to individual need if services work in partnership. An institution – for example a secondary school – should be a gateway to a range of learning offers provided not just by the school but by other local schools, companies, colleges and distance learning programmes. Institutions should be gateways to networks of public provision.
- **Advocacy:** professionals should act as advocates for users, helping them to navigate their way through the system. That means clients having a continuing relationship with professionals who take an interest in their case, rather than users engaging in a series of disconnected transactions with disconnected services.

- **Co-production:** users who are more involved in shaping the service they receive should be expected to become more active and responsible in helping to deliver the service: involved patients are more likely to attend clinics, students to do homework. Personalisation should create more involved, responsible users.
- **Funding:** should follow the choices that users make and in some cases – direct payments to disabled people to assemble their own care packages – funding should be put in the hands of users themselves to buy services with the advice of professionals.

Users should not be utterly dependent upon the judgements of professionals; they can question, challenge and deliberate with them. Nor are users mere consumers, choosing between different packages offered to them; they should be more intimately involved in shaping and even co-producing the service they want. Through participation users have greater voice in shaping the service but this is exercised where it counts, where services are designed and delivered.

Service users can only change their role in the service script, however, if professionals alter theirs. Professionals have to become advisers, advocates, solutions assemblers, brokers. The role of professionals in participative services is often not to provide solutions directly, but to help clients find the best way to solve their problems themselves.

Can personalisation provide an organising principle for education reform?

"Personalisation through participation" in education means learners having a far greater say in writing the scripts for how their education should be delivered, so that they have some say about the order in which things happen, how the story might branch, take different routes and end. As a result, the learners are more involved but also more committed and more likely to take their share of responsibility for ensuring success. At the same time, professionals are able to apply expert knowledge or evidence in far more flexible, or differentiated ways – by combining different elements of a package according to the needs and preferences of the learner, which are much clearer and more explicit as a result of their involvement in the process.

At the core there would still be a common script – the basic curriculum – but that script could branch out in many different ways, to have many different styles and endings.

Personalised learning would provide children with a greater repertoire of possible scripts for how their education could unfold. At the core there would still be a common script – the basic curriculum – but that script could branch out in many different ways, to have many different styles and endings.

The foundation of a personalised education system would be to encourage children, from an early age and across all backgrounds, to become more involved in making decisions about what they would like to learn and how. The more aware people are of what makes them learn, the more effective their learning is likely to be.

Equity cannot be handed down from on high in a society with a democratic culture in which people want a say in shaping their lives. Comprehensives promoted equity through common standards. “Personalised learning” allows individual interpretations of the goals and value of education. At the end, the child should be able to tell their own story of what they have learned, how and why, as well as being able to reel off their qualifications. Their personal involvement in making choices about what they learn and how, and what targets they set for themselves, would turn them into more active learners.

Personalised learning does not apply market thinking to education. It is not designed to turn children and parents into consumers of education. The aim is to promote personal development through self-realisation, self-enhancement and self-development. The child/learner should be seen as active, responsible and self-motivated: a co-author of the script which determines how education is delivered.

The traditional script, largely written by producers and regulators, is that education proceeds through a series of stages, which set the rhythm for how people learn, at what pace and to what end. In many ways

the standards agenda of the 1980s has made these scripts more uniform – the literacy and numeracy hours in primary schools – for example.

The script of a system characterised by personalised learning is rather different. It would start from the premise that the learner should be actively, continually engaged in setting their own targets, devising their own learning plans and goals, choosing from a range of different ways to learn. Experiments with pupil self-assessment and target-setting, for instance at Ninestiles School in Birmingham, show that pupils do not set themselves targets that are easy to reach. They tend to set realistic but stretching targets.

So, personalised learning would only work if students were engaged in continual, self-critical assessment of their talents, performance, learning strategies and goals, in order that they could adjust and adapt their learning strategies. This focus underlines the fact that, in a personalised system, the focus shifts away from a single school as the sole institution for learning. By making learning the guiding principle of the system, personalisation challenges some of the current divides and boundaries that exist – for example, between formal and informal learning; between vocational and academic learning; and between different ages or types of learners.

Personalised learning would allow and encourage learning to take place in holidays and outside normal schools hours.

It would make opportunities to learn available whenever the learner wanted

All students as co-producers of the education script?

The school system already recognises that some children have “special” needs and so require personalised kinds of learning environments and teaching styles. But, up to now, the system as a whole has been unable to deliver this flexibility consistently for all those who need it: as one teacher has put it, personalised approaches are provided only to students at “the extremes of the scale”. A personalised system would extend this principle, already implicit in schools to some extent, to all children.

What are you doing already to enable students to participate in the construction and delivery of their education? Do all students have the opportunity to participate to the same degree or does it depend on certain factors (e.g. level of attainment, special educational needs)?

To what level can all students be involved in the shaping of their education within the current system? In other words, what strategies might you use to ‘scale up’ the personalised learning that some of your students already receive? Is it possible to scale up personalised approaches in the current system? What might need to change to enable you to do so?

Do your students have the capacity to make informed choices about what and how they learn? Do they all have equal capacity to make choices about their education? How can student capacity in decision-making be developed?

Can students be involved in all decisions? Are there some issues that should not be resolved through their involvement? What are they?

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to take them up. Children would be able to take time out for other activities that might add to their learning: voluntary work, drama and sports. This flexibility might be based on the principle of “earned autonomy”: children who clearly do well and are self-motivated become more self-regulating. Students should have a choice – under earned autonomy – about where learning

takes place: at home; at an individual school; moving among a network of schools; virtually through ICT in school; in a third space such as a library; in situ at a workplace or voluntary group.

Inevitably, as we are shifting the role of the user, this implies far-reaching changes in the role of professionals and schools.

Schools would become solutions assemblers, helping children get access to the mix and range of learning resources they need, both virtual and face-to-face. Schools would have to form networks and federations which shared resources and centres of excellence. An individual school in the network would become a gateway to these shared resources.

Just as the role of the school might shift in a system characterised by personalised learning, so we might see a real shift in the role of teachers. Their key role would be less about standing at the front ‘delivering’, and more about working with students to facilitate their learning. Ultimately, teachers will need to help students make the best possible choices – and that will involve new skills such as brokering, advocacy and advice.

This shift hints at a broader point about the workforce in a personalised system. The recent workforce reforms have helped many schools to look again at their own structures and hierarchies. Many are now recognising that posts need to be built around learning, not bureaucracy. There are countless examples of schools that have created posts such as ‘Learning Managers’, ‘Teaching and Learning Co-ordinators’, or ‘Key Stage Learning Leaders’ who are explicitly tasked with focusing on learning. Many of these people work with individual students, their teachers and their parents, to devise learning pathways that aim to meet their needs.

A universal, personalised learning service would indeed be a revolutionary goal. By giving the learner a growing voice, their aspirations and ambitions would become central to the way services were organised. At the moment the heart of the system are its institutions – the DfES, the LEAs, many agencies, and the schools themselves – that lay down what education is and how it should proceed. Studies of performance management across a wide range of organisational fields show that productivity invariably rises when people have a role in setting, and thus owning, their targets. The same is true for learning.

Assessment for learning

The assessment system currently has multiple stakeholders. Public examinations have served universities by selecting between candidates, served central government by holding teachers and schools to account and served the public, with aggregations of results functioning as proxies for school quality. In a personalised system, a central function of assessment must be to help students understand what they have been doing and how they can improve. This means that assessment will need to be formative, as well as summative, and its goals will need to be shared and developed by learners as well as professionals.

[How can learners become more involved in their assessment? What works and what doesn't?](#)

[What is the current relationship between assessment and accreditation? Does assessment for learning change this relationship? How?](#)

Read what others have said, and tell us what you think as part of the Innovation Community at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit

Learning beyond the classroom?

Learning beyond the classroom hints at a blurring of the boundaries between ‘know-what’ and ‘know-how’. In 1999, the Opening Minds report by the Royal Society for the encouragement of the Arts identified a mismatch between the aims of the national curriculum and the best form of education for the new century. They launched a pilot programme in six schools, testing a curriculum that was constructed around competency skills under the five headings of learning, managing information, relating to people, managing situations and citizenship. All the schools involved reported ‘stunning’ results both in terms of teacher and student motivation, and in actual results.

[So does personalisation mean that we need to blur the boundaries between ‘know-what’ and ‘know-how’? How could we do this?](#)

[In a personalised system, what might count as learning? How can we recognise the kinds of learning that go on beyond the classroom?](#)

Read what others have said, and tell us what you think as part of the Innovation Community at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit

Teachers as ‘brokers’ working with other staff to create solutions?

This pamphlet has argued that if personalisation re-writes the role of the user, it is inevitable that the role of the producers will also have to shift. It has also suggested that innovation comes through producers and users working together to develop solutions. Imagining the implications of this in relation to education suggests some far-reaching changes to the workforce and the kinds of skills that professionals will need.

What is the role of teachers in a personalised system? How is it different to their role in the current system? What kinds of skills and training do they need?

What kind of support do teachers need to perform their role? How can schools engage others – such as parents, community workers and other professionals – to provide this kind of support?

How can non-teaching staff be used in such a way to facilitate more personalised learning?

What does personalised learning mean for the traditional hierarchies and silos within schools? Do they still have a place? How might school organisation need to change in a personalised system?

Read what others have said, and tell us what you think as part of the Innovation Community at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit

Schools as ‘solutions assemblers’ in a personalised system?

As part of the solutions that the school offers, it might engage with other providers, such as social services, to meet the need of the ‘whole child’, the needs of every aspect of each of their learners. This engagement with a broader community implies significant shifts – not only in the culture but also the practical aspects of a school. The development of ‘extended schools’ underlines this shift.

Where have you seen examples of this happening? What are the greatest practical barriers to involving parents and other community members in the school differently? How can these barriers be overcome?

Is this about bringing more people *in* to the school, or is it about taking the school out to the community? What does this mean for accountability and funding? Should each school get a set sum per child? Should the money follow the student? Should every student have an amount they can spend on learning materials from outside the school?

How can schools work more effectively with one another – as ‘solutions assemblers’ – to enable a more personalised approach to learning? Who else – what agencies, organisations and professionals – should be involved to ensure that the needs of the ‘whole’ learner are met?

Read what others have said, and tell us what you think as part of the Innovation Community at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit

Obstacles

The biggest challenge to the personalised learning agenda is its implications for inequality. Middle class homes are often far more conducive to personalised learning than many poorer homes that have less space, fewer computers and books. Thus, the more that personalised learning promotes self-provisioning, the more it could widen inequalities. As more learning would be done in the pupil's own time, so the state will have to work harder to equalise the conditions for learning outside school. Personalised learning will promote equity only if the resources for individualised, home-based learning are also more equally available. Personalised learning encourages us to focus on the totality of resources available for learning, at home and at school.

Middle class children do not just have more resources for learning. They and their parents probably have more time and capacity to make choices about education. Choices are made in a social context of peer and family influences. If these mitigate against learning – for example if parents had a negative experience of school, or elder siblings left school with few qualifications – then providing young people from poor, chaotic or disrupted families with *more* choice may not encourage them to consider *different* choices.

Public policies that depend on users making an investment of time and effort will favour those with relatively stable lives. It will be less favourable for those with chaotic or impoverished lives, people who

struggle to get from one day to the next. Smoking cessation illustrates this point well. Smoking is declining fastest amongst the most well off and better educated: these are the people who are more likely to have the information, incentives and resources to change their lives. Smoking is a major cause of ill health and a drain on the public good: it costs the NHS more than £1500m a year to treat smoking related disease. But no public service can “deliver” non-smoking. The decisions to start and stop smoking are made by individuals in the context of a wide range of factors, among them peer influences, advertising and emotional stress. To reduce smoking from 25% of the population to, say, less than 5%, would only be possible with a public policy that persuaded millions of people to change their lives. Public values would have to infiltrate the private domain. Yet because the capacity to make these choices are unequally distributed, so too are the outcomes.

The more that services become personalised, the more that public resources will have to be skewed towards the least well off to equalise opportunities. Well-educated and informed consumers are already well prepared to take advantage of choice. Young people coming from backgrounds which make being well-educated, informed and ambitious more challenging, will need additional help to exploit the opportunities personalisation makes available to them.

And that is why the role of teachers and other professionals will be critical.

Their role – as advocates, advisers, brokers and ultimately, solution assemblers – will be vital, to mediate the individual's relationship with the services they need. The people who most need bespoke, labour intensive and personalised services are the most vulnerable, who are often served by multiple, poorly coordinated public services.

Children who are excluded for any reason, or who are at risk, should all have personal advocates to help them assemble the solutions they need from amongst the panoply of public services on offer.

With careful design and the right kind of inclusive approach personalised services need not widen inequalities. On the contrary, they could be most valuable for people in most need.

Is personalisation a panacea? What are the risks?

The challenge facing everyone involved in the business of education reform is how new reforms can bridge the gaps between the least successful and the most successful in the system. Any reform needs to tackle this issue, otherwise we risk simply reinforcing existing barriers to participation in the system. If we agree that one size does not fit all, how can we ensure that everyone benefits from any reforms, not just those who were already doing well?

What do you think are the main risks in moving towards a system characterised by universal personalisation? How can these risks be managed appropriately?

What do you think are the main barriers and how might they be overcome?

What is needed in practice to ensure that everybody gets access to the benefits of a personalised system, rather than it simply benefiting the few? In other words, can a personalised system meet the goals of excellence and equity?

Read what others have said, and tell us what you think as part of the Innovation Community at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit

Join the debate

Government is increasingly an endeavour to shape the conduct of people in their private lives as parents, teachers, students, taxpayers, persuading them to exercise choice in a collectively responsible way. Yet because many people – teachers, parents, children – question the central state’s authority to tell them how they should live, the state has to act through intermediaries, experts and third parties to relay and translate its strategies into action.

Personalisation through participation is part of the solution to this dilemma of how to rule through shaping freedom. The story needs to make sense for service users and practitioners, but it also needs to be incorporated into the way politicians and civil servants understand and undertake large scale reform. It needs to be a story of what role the state plays in creating public goods in a society in which people want more choice, more voice and more scope for self-organisation.

In this sense, personalisation in education cannot be seen as simply another initiative. It is a characteristic – indeed the culture – of the *whole* system. Personalisation challenges much of the current education script – the accountability frameworks, assessment regimes, the roles of parents, the roles of teachers and other adults, the nature of the buildings and, indeed, the way each of these components interact.

The challenge now is for the real experts – the students as well as the teachers and other practitioners working with young people up and down the country – to lead the way in re-writing the script. You can help to shape this process by telling us what you think as part of the Innovation Community at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit. We will then publish the comments, ideas, suggestions and inspiration you provide later on in the year.

Innovation Unit

The Innovation Unit works with practitioners, policy makers and other organisations on innovative responses to learning-related challenges facing the education system.

We are a small team of Innovation Directors. We have all been teachers and then either become headteachers or worked in LEAs at a senior level. Some of us have also worked in Universities, the DfES, the GTC and the BBC. We’re supported by a small civil service team.

Our vision is one in which professionals from all areas of education share successful developments in an accountable system where disciplined, informed innovation is the norm.

We aim to help every part of the system be confident in its ability to do this so innovation that genuinely improves teaching, raises standards and makes learning personal and powerful for every student flourishes. We see innovation as a key route to excellence and equity.

The Unit provides strategic direction to existing system-wide programmes, and to ideas in development. It seeks out and supports projects from practitioners or elsewhere that have the potential to provide strategic intelligence or widespread practical benefit for the system. It provides opportunities for practitioners, policy-makers and other interested parties to share and develop their insights in open-source settings.

One of the Unit’s activities is to manage a piece of legislation called The Power to Innovate. This is the provision whereby the Secretary of State can exempt schools, LEAs and Education Action Zones wishing to test new ideas for raising standards in education from any education legislation that is preventing them putting their ideas into practice.

Log onto our website to find out more about The Power to Innovate and other aspects of our work, as well as how to get in touch with us if you have a query or if you wish to share your innovative practice or ideas. We look forward to hearing from you.

Mike Gibbons, Maureen Burns, Anne Diack, Valerie Hannon, Deryn Harvey, Toby Salt

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/innovation-unit

020 7925 6165

innovation.unit@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

Demos

Demos is an independent think tank which has worked with government departments and non-governmental agencies; with local authorities and social enterprises; and with charities and community-based organisations that provide public services.

It has a strong research interest in education and has worked with numerous education bodies including the DfES, National College for School Leadership; Creative Partnerships; Education and Learning Wales (ELWA), and several education action zones and individual schools.

Demos works on a wide range of education projects – from policy-oriented research and evaluating practice, to developing organisational strategies and stimulating public debate.

In bridging the gap between policy-maker and teachers, Demos is defining a new kind of education system whose institutions can continuously reinvent themselves while meeting the individual needs of students.

www.demos.co.uk

National College for School Leadership (NCSL)

NCSL was formed in 2000 to provide a single national focus for school leadership development. In collaboration with Demos, the Innovation Unit, OECD, Hay Group and many others, it encourages national and international debate on leadership issues.

Through its website, online communities and research publications, NCSL acts a primary resource for school leaders. It also provides support through its leadership development programmes, ranging from opportunities for bursars to headteachers to leadership teams.

Working directly with schools, NCSL is leading on workforce remodelling, the national primary strategy and increased collaboration and networking among schools.

The cumulative goal of all these activities is to have every child in a well-led school, and every school leader committed to continuous learning.

www.ncsl.org.uk

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