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Personalised Learning

Section 1: Context

“Personalised learning”: what does this term actually mean, and why now should it be thought worth discussing? A reading of the literature shows that, as with many important concepts, there is no single agreed meaning. Personalised learning means different things to different people. Later in this paper an attempt is made at succinct definition. Before that however, it will be useful to explain why a discussion of personalised learning seems relevant and necessary at this stage in the development of Scottish education. The explanation has three parts, each of which can be connected to *A Curriculum for Excellence*, the document from the Scottish Executive which proposes a potentially radical review of the school curriculum.

1. First, there is a quite widely shared perception that, whereas the present model of schooling largely assumes that individuals should be expected to adapt to fit the structures and practices of institutions, in future more emphasis should be placed on how well the structures and practices of institutions can be adapted to fit the individual. The notion of schools as being akin to factories for human learning may have been successful in establishing compulsory education on a mass scale in the nineteenth- and twentieth- centuries, but it is now outdated. As *A Curriculum for Excellence* indicates, individuals differ in their personal needs, beliefs and preferences and they are entitled to expect that twenty-first century education – in its widest sense - will acknowledge these differences. In other words, schools could be “personalised” in the broad sense of becoming more sensitive and responsive to individual difference.
2. The second part of the explanation concerns learning. From many research studies, we now understand that human beings are fundamentally social creatures who generally learn best when working together in supportive environments towards goals that are perceived mutually as challenging and meaningful. The capacity of each individual’s learning is practically limitless, but people cannot be forced to learn: learning is an active process that requires the individual’s willing participation and acceptance of responsibility. This is hardly compatible with forms of schooling that provide for learners hardly any scope to exercise choice; that are dominated by externally imposed goals and crowded course programmes that offer little scope for collaboration, creativity or deep learning; and that wrongly attach to some individual learners labels such as “low ability”. According to *A Curriculum for Excellence*, two key purposes of education are to produce “successful learners” and “confident individuals”. This suggests that schools could become more “personalised” in the sense of providing individuals with more scope to develop personal responsibility for learning, shape their own learning experiences and contribute to the learning experiences of others, and participate in supportive and ambitious learning environments.
3. The third argument for taking forward the concept of personalised learning stems from the other two key purposes of schooling that are identified by *A Curriculum for Excellence*: to enable young people to become “responsible citizens” and “effective contributors”. If these aims are to be achieved, schooling must create contexts in which young people can think about the kind of society in which they would like to live and work and about how each young person individually can contribute towards the shaping of this society. Schools could become more “personalised” by

better enabling each individual to develop his or her identity, commitments, and relationships to others and wider society.

In summary, it seems relevant and useful to explore a conception of personalised learning that resonates with the principles of *A Curriculum for Excellence*. The conception is based around three broad notions of how schools could change:

- becoming “personalised” in the broad sense of being more sensitive and responsive to individual difference
- becoming “personalised” by providing individuals with more scope to develop personal responsibility for their own and other people’s learning
- becoming “personalised” by better enabling each person to develop his or her individual identity, commitments, and relationships to others and wider society.

Section 2: Definition

The term “personalisation” has entered educational discussion quite recently but is now widely used. It is perhaps not surprising that there is no agreed definition and, indeed, no real consensus about the way in which it should be used.

It is perhaps necessary to start this brief section on definition by indicating what personalisation should not mean. It is not a synonym for individualised learning in the sense of a programme of learning activities undertaken by an individual, normally in isolation. It is not, therefore, a new term for programmed learning, whether by computer or in the form provided by highly-structured approaches such as Kent Maths. It should also be noted that a differing range of opportunities and challenges exist for Personalised Learning in each of the education sectors, from pre-school to post-16.

There is a tendency to see the secondary sector as the part of the education service which will confront the greatest difficulties in introducing more personalised approaches. The more fragmented curriculum and the greater pressure from external assessment would be widely seen as problematic. It is important, however, to recognise that other sectors will also experience difficulties. The pressures of an over-crowded curriculum are present also in primary schools. Perhaps more importantly, where a single teacher has charge of all or most of the curriculum, accommodating different learning styles - or even different personalities - is not easy.

Learning is an intrinsically social process. For most people, most of the time, developing understanding requires interaction with others. The social dimension of education is not simply a by-product of particular institutional structures such as schools which have been developed to offer universal education in a cost-effective form. Rather, it is something which is intrinsic to any humane process of personal or intellectual development.

Equally, personalisation is not simply about extending choice. Statements made by the Scottish Executive suggest that personalisation is seen in terms of giving (secondary) pupils a wider range of curricular options, and these statements are echoed by the majority of staff in the secondary sector. In particular, the development of vocational courses is seen as a priority.

While increasing choice in this way may have some motivational effect, there are theoretical difficulties which require to be taken into consideration. Clearly, there is a degree of choice which is difficult to reconcile with compulsory attendance. At a more practical level, freedom of choice may on occasion conflict with an equality of opportunity. There is a concern that, given a very wide choice, young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds may be less likely to take up options which present greater

difficulties in the short term but offer enhanced opportunities for later life. Free choice in itself, therefore, is not necessarily always a good thing.

Such arguments can, of course, appear highly paternalistic. Whether they are sustainable in current circumstances is, perhaps, open to question. An alternative formulation, based on the notion of “entitlement”, may be more consistent with the current realities of adolescence.

Viewed in this way, a personalised approach to the curriculum would confer on each young person an entitlement to a wide range of experiences. These would include experience of a variety of learning approaches enabling the individual, over time, to develop an understanding of how he/she learns best. A specific instance of this entitlement would relate to the use of technology in the curriculum. Much more fundamentally, the individual learner would be entitled to interact both with the teacher and with other learners. Both individual attention and participation in learning as a social experience would be a part of everyone’s schooling.

Personalisation thus emerges as a way of making the curriculum more personal-centred and humane. However, it entails responsibilities as well as rights. The individual learner has a claim on the time and the assistance of both teacher and peers but has an obligation to make a positive contribution in return. Personalised learning is, therefore, part of the process of establishing the school as a mutually-supportive community of learners.

Section 3: Underlying Values

If we take the conception of personalisation espoused above, that is that education should become more sensitive and responsive to individual difference, that it should promote the development of responsibility for one’s own learning and also that of others, and that it should help the individual to develop a sense of his/her own identity and commitments in relation to wider society, then we can identify certain beliefs and values which might be said to underpin a more ‘personalised’ learning experience for both learner and teacher and from these a set of prevailing conditions in which personalisation (meaningful/effective learning?) can best operate. The developments and initiatives outlined above provide powerful exemplification of these in action.

Broadly speaking, the beliefs and values underpinning personalisation might be said to include the following:

Every individual is unique, has different needs and will contribute differently to the learning process

Crucially, these differences are seen as having a positive value, not only accommodated but respected and celebrated. Where this belief is strongly held within an institution, choice and flexibility within the curriculum will be ‘givens’, seen as adding value for everyone rather than as responding to ‘difficult’ or ‘extraordinary’ groups who are failing to adjust to a standardised curriculum. The assumption will be that students are different and need choices, that these should be provided (albeit on a group basis) as a matter of course, and that student participation in making these choices is a valuable aspect of his/her education. Similarly, allowing students to prepare for and take exams when they are ready to do so would become part of normal practice, foregrounding learning and diminishing the role of testing to that of affirmation of learning rather than an end in itself.

Every child has a limitless capacity to change and grow

The underlying assumption behind education becomes that every child has a limitless capacity to change and grow, irrespective of apparent current attainment levels. In classrooms and schools where this belief is held, segregation and categorisation will be minimised, and the choice of appropriate courses and options will be negotiated with learners themselves. The values of equity, fairness,

respect and equality of access to information will be salient features of this belief and will be highly visible in all aspects of classroom practice and school life.

Learners are responsible for their own learning, and should also be expected to help promote the learning of others

If learning is about developing as a person into adulthood and beyond, education must help each young person develop and understand his/her own distinctive set of skills and abilities. Learning approaches which cultivate and encourage a sense of personal responsibility for learning, such as sharing learning aims and involving learners in target setting and in self- and peer-evaluation help do this. Allowing the student's own individual personality, experience, needs and outlook to drive the learning, and to have the experience of making hard choices from perhaps limited options, will be a feature of schools where this belief is held. Equally, the expectation that every student has a responsibility, given their distinctive skills and abilities, to contribute to the learning of others will be evident in classroom methodology and whole school ethos.

Learning is a social activity and operates most powerfully in a collaborative context

As already mentioned, the danger of the word 'personalisation' is that it may come to be seen to be synonymous with individualisation or differentiation, even down to the level of customised worksheets and automated IT programmes. The belief that learning is a social activity, and that the best learning often takes place within a social context, is in fact key to effective personalisation of learning. It is in a social context, after all, that the individual has most opportunity for expression, feels safe to experiment because supported, and can hence become actively engaged in group learning. At a pragmatic level, while it is impossible for a teacher to provide an individual child with one-to-one attention, children can gain this through working collaboratively with each other in small groups where the learning is suitably structured. Co-operative Learning has already proved to be a highly motivational and effective model of achieving personalisation in many classrooms and schools where this belief is held.

The curriculum should foreground creativity, problem-solving, understanding and engagement, using subject content as the medium not the message

If the 'person' is truly to become engaged in the act of learning, learning cannot be seen as the acquisition of predetermined sets of knowledge. Rather learners must want to ask questions, find things out and exercise their individuality in finding solutions. A Critical Skills approach where students work in teams to solve problems and meet challenges, has proved to be extremely motivational in helping students to become engaged and exercise their curiosity, not to mention acquiring essential skills in working with others in the process. Schools where this belief is held will provide every opportunity for students to work across the curriculum, and will promote student-centred approaches to learning wherever possible.

Teachers see themselves as 'co-agents' of learning along with their students

This belief follows from the view that the best learning takes place when students take personal and group responsibility for how, what and even when they learn. Although much has been written about the power of this approach, schools and classrooms are hierarchical organisations, and finding ways of encouraging students to take this responsibility involves a change in the balance of power within the classroom and the school, and therefore a degree of risk. Teachers who believe that they enable and facilitate learning rather than deliver it, will also believe that students' own experiences and understanding will enrich what happens in the classroom. They will certainly not abrogate responsibility for the learning which takes place in the classroom, but will allow students to exercise their individual and group talents in helping to shape what happens.

Section 4: Implications for Schools

We can see a more personalised, sensitive and responsive approach to students' learning already embodied in recent developments in Scottish education. These include the various structural attempts to make the curriculum more flexible and adaptive, such as broadening curricular choice to accommodate different groups of learners, the relaxation of the fixed 'age and stage' approach to the curriculum and assessment, and the development of vocational education. The *Assessment is for Learning* programme encourages more meaningful engagement in learning by having teachers share learning intentions with children, and providing them with a vocabulary to talk about learning in a way which allows them to evaluate their own work and that of others. *Personal Learning Planning* similarly focuses on the individual learner entering into a discussion about target setting and next steps as a negotiated process which involves sharing responsibility with the teacher. Every school is now required to involve students in decision-making, which is indicative of a more personalised and responsive approach to students as active participants in the learning process. And initiatives such as *Determined to Succeed* focus on developing individual learning dispositions relating to the contribution which an individual is encouraged to make to his or her community and society.

The fact that a major driver for certain of these initiatives has been the challenge to the system created by disengaged and disaffected learners does not undermine the argument for further 'personalisation' of learning within *A Curriculum for Excellence* (ACfE). If anything, it strengthens the view that the concept deserves fuller consideration. Taken together, these various developments and directions offer evidence of a growing awareness that the 'factory model' of education is no longer sustainable. The enthusiasm with which teachers and students have embraced recent approaches to formative assessment and more collaborative approaches to learning, for example, is indicative of their increasing frustration with an examination-led 'one size fits all' model of education which gets in the way of teaching for understanding and ultimately deeper learning.

"No school is an island". For Personalised Learning to take effect within schools, therefore, a clear understanding needs to be developed at national, local authority, community and school levels. Individual schools influence the first two levels through sharing good practice (eg through the ACfE Register of Interest scheme), but this section will focus on the implications of Personalised Learning at community and school levels.

As ACfE indicates, the opportunity for children to develop the four capacities will strongly depend upon three factors.

1. The environment for learning

The sine qua non for the introduction of effective Personalised Learning in a school is clear understanding by teachers, pupils and parents that people develop best when they work closely together. This needs to be reflected in the organisation of the school:

- are pupils genuinely helping to organise aspects of the school community?
- are they (through pupil councils, class discussion, etc) helping to shape school development plans?
- are parents part of the schooling process, with daily two-way communication between school and home through diary planners, a school website which facilitates learning, meetings which help and encourage parents to involve themselves in their child's learning?
- are teachers developing the school and each other in a characteristically team-based way?
- to what extent do the individual requirements and preferences of pupils and parents influence the school?
- how effective is the school's communications strategy in promoting understanding of these approaches?

In all schools there are also numerous opportunities for using the built environment to promote personalised learning:

- do all pupils and staff influence and modify their immediate surroundings through decoration and display?
- do displays celebrate personal and group achievements and aspirations?
- are initiatives such as Eco-School used to improve the school environment in sustainable ways?
- are the school grounds used as a resource through which pupils can make personal explorations of the natural world?
- are school buildings and grounds organised so as to promote inter-personal relationships?

2. The choice of learning and teaching approaches

Schools in which teachers, pupils and parents work closely together tend regularly to reflect on and develop their approach to learning and teaching. In this atmosphere, learning will almost inevitably be active and interactive. The Learning and Teaching Policy, as well as being at the heart of the school, will tend to develop organically and almost continuously:

- does the Policy support the development of pedagogies which result in all pupils being actively and personally involved in their own learning and the learning of others?
- is there a dynamic and productive alliance for learning between pupils and teachers, and indeed between them and parents and the wider community?
- are certain types of knowledge recognised as having intrinsic worth, but is it also understood that this knowledge can be learnt in ways which promote the four capacities as a central entitlement for all pupils, as pupils contribute to and take responsibility for the development of others?
- are the approaches advocated in Assessment for Learning fully integrated into the Learning and Teaching Policy, allowing personal feedback about next steps?
- are pupils actively planning their own personal learning and development in ways which help them understand their role within the civil society of the school, by choosing strategies and targets which best help others as well as themselves?
- do all pupils receive the support they need in ways which empower them to be active partners in both learning and teaching?
- is there an ICT-rich environment which promotes rather than hinders inter-personal learning?
- do learning activities in and beyond the classroom encourage pupils to make a personal contribution to the school community?

3. The ways in which learning is organised

Especially as the curriculum is reviewed and decluttered, there is an urgent need for CPD which will help staff to use the additional time created in order to develop learning and teaching approaches such as those above. The way a school approaches CPD must reflect the personalised learning which is being promoted (the medium is always central to the message):

- are there opportunities for teachers to work together, to learn from each other through shadowing, mentoring, team-teaching etc?
- are constructivist pedagogies explored and developed in practical ways (eg through such programmes as Cooperative Learning and Critical Skills)?
- is pupil feedback encouraged as part of the development process? are pupils sometimes used as trainers for teachers?
- are visits encouraged to colleagues in other areas of the school, and to other schools?
- does the school organise in-house staff development seminars with fellow teachers as trainers?

- is there a clearly focussed strategy for sending staff on courses specifically supportive of personalised learning?
- do all teachers actively pursue their responsibility to promote their own development and the development of their colleagues? do promoted staff plan and support this development strategically?

A Curriculum for Excellence offers great opportunities for schools to review both the range and the structure of the courses that they offer. In an information-rich world heavily shaped by e-communications, the balance between the acquisition of key knowledge and of skills is undoubtedly shifting. Emotional intelligence, digital literacy, the ability to learn and discern are all key skills. Likewise, schools are managers of learning opportunities, not sole providers of learning, and these emerging realities will also shape personalised education.

Section 5: Key Future Tasks

It is clear from the preceding sections of this paper that there are many ways in which Personalised Learning could be a positive contribution to achievement, attainment and enjoyment across the curriculum.

To enable the development of understanding regarding what Personalised Learning means to schools, there are two important areas which need to be addressed.

Firstly, a 'research tool' needs to be developed, to determine the readiness of schools to develop this approach. This could begin by seeking the views of pupils on their experience of school, exploring the nature of their engagement and involvement with it, and ascertaining how their school was helping them to develop into 'responsible citizens', 'successful learners', 'confident individuals' and 'effective contributors', and how supportive and ambitious their learning environment is. There are many creative ways in which pupil voice can be encouraged, at class, year-group and school level. For example, a number of methods of electronic survey are being piloted in Scotland at the moment, the most notable being SELS in East Lothian. Summary tables from the publication linked to the 'Learning Without Limits' research project could also be helpful in the development of the research tool.

Such a resource could help to create a baseline for Personalised Learning, and create pictures at both local and national level of the readiness of schools to adopt this approach. A number of benchmark case studies would serve as a helpful focus, showing how some schools have begun to develop their work in this way.

Secondly, to build upon the initial identification of a baseline, criteria or indicators should be developed, helping schools to look at the values of their institution and ways in which their ongoing developments in response to *A Curriculum for Excellence* can also promote Personalised Learning. These would draw upon the considerations outlined as questions in the previous section, and be linked to concrete examples of success, showing how ambitious, excellent schools can 'grow' a mutually-supportive community of learners. The importance of clear goals and targets would be emphasised, and clear links would be made to the four capacities of *A Curriculum for Excellence*.

These criteria would form a toolkit for schools and their wider community to develop Personalised Learning within the context of *A Curriculum for Excellence*.

Cognisance would also have to be taken of the assertion in ACfE that the education system will have a responsibility “to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment are directed to achieving the purposes [laid out in the document] and that qualifications reflect this fully” (p.17). In other words, changes in assessment practice will need to take place in the context of other developments; neither Personalised Learning nor *A Curriculum for Excellence* will be successful if they are introduced to an education system which does not evolve to accommodate them.