



PERSONAL LEARNING PLANNING IN SCOTLAND 1998–2005

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1 INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the development of personal learning planning in Scottish primary and secondary schooling. Since 1998 the concept has been incorporated in several Scottish initiatives to improve educational provision and opportunity. The paper also suggests some ways forward for this particular approach to learning. Currently, personal learning planning is an important component of the Scottish Assessment is for Learning (AifL) programme, which aims to nurture the links amongst assessment, learning and achievement.

Personal learning planning is a life skill, important for individual development. Many schools have developed approaches to personal learning planning through the action research methodology of the AifL programme. Underlying this work is a set of principles about effective learning and teaching that have come to prominence particularly in the last decade and have been endorsed and enhanced by practice and further research. The general context is one of reforming approaches to assessment to enhance learning and achievement.

Personal learning planning is built on the following concepts that empower learners to become increasingly self-directed, self-evaluative and responsible for their own learning:

- gathering and interpreting evidence to review current learning – its strengths and weaknesses
- planning learning accordingly, knowing what is to be learned and what evidence will show success
- evaluating and discussing learning
- discussing and deciding what should be done next
- noting progress and next steps.

These processes – involving learners, teachers, those at home and in the community – are essentially about learning how to learn.

2 REVIEW

2.1 New Community Schools and personal learning plans

The terminology ‘personal learning plan’ emerged in 1998 as part of the agenda for the New Community Schools programme. All young people in these schools were expected to have a ‘personal learning plan’ (SOEID, 1998). The pilot phase of the programme ended in 2002 and subsequently it has been rolled out across the country. The programme is now known as the Integrated Community Schools programme.

New Community Schools initially attempted to raise attainment in disadvantaged areas by bringing together all mandatory and voluntary services for young people so that obstacles to learning such as poor health and difficult family circumstances could be addressed in an integrated way. School and local authority managers and teachers were expected to contribute to multi-disciplinary approaches, supporting the progress of young people. In terms of this kind of multi-agency objective, the initiative has had some success (Sammons, Power, Elliot, Robertson, Campbell and Whitty, 2003).

The rationale for personal learning planning within the NCS programme was implicit – tailoring both curriculum content and learning/teaching approaches to the needs of

individuals would inevitably help to raise the motivation and achievement of all young people; and most particularly those whose achievement was relatively low. Implementation was supported by a short 'framework' document (SEED, 2000) outlining key objectives and benefits, general characteristics and essential criteria. The main aspects can be summarised as follows:

- the empowerment of pupils through the encouragement of self-evaluation of strengths and weaknesses; and the negotiation of personal learning targets as part of an agreed curriculum programme
- support for transition from stage to stage and class to class
- the improvement of attainment, with the starting point for each PLP resulting from assessment on entry into education; and the plan's recognition of achievement and needs in relation to targets
- ensuring that new learning builds on prior learning and broader personal or learning needs
- the achievement of partnerships amongst all those involved in children's learning and development, with a corresponding explanation of responsibilities
- more accurate decision making about resourcing
- improvement of the health and wellbeing of young people (through improved information, decision making, self-esteem and personal responsibility) whether as an aspect of individual action plans or as part of a general health education programme
- the incorporation of information technology in the realisation of the plan, appropriate for use by pupils
- guarantees of confidentiality and access only to appropriate people
- a process which includes, for all partners, the sharing of objectives; the outlining of responsibilities and the crucial role of the teacher
- emphasis 'that adequate time is made available in completion of PLPs, and one option may be to allocate time during the Personal and Social Development part of the curriculum' (SEED, 2000)
- timescales which fit appropriately to the school year and the structure of the curriculum; PLPs can fulfil an important role in the process of reporting to parents
- rationalisation and co-ordination with other planning and reporting documents, such as the Progress File, Records of Needs, Individualised Education Plans and Care Plans.

The evaluation of the pilot phases of the NCS programme (Sammons et al, 2003) revealed that generally it had made little impact on everyday classroom practice – on the relationship between learners and teachers; and on the way teachers taught. While the **organisation** of some schools (or clusters of schools) and other agencies had become, to an extent, more person (pupil) centred, **classroom practice** had been largely unaffected. Overall there was little change in curriculum and pedagogy across the pilot projects. Small-scale projects for young people with particular difficulties were set up and several were successful, although very few directly addressed the issue of personal learning planning. Of these, some concerned involvement in vocational education, tailored to young people's particular interests. There were limited attempts to vary the curriculum to fit individual needs, but across schools generally directing learning and particularly assessment remained the province of the teacher. The focus remained on

teaching, rather than on the individual needs of the learner and on concepts of self-evaluation and personal planning.

In a notable number of cases, personal learning planning was consigned to a context outside the classroom, such as after-school clubs (Sammons et al, 2003).

The difficulties of the NCS programme in implementing personal learning planning could be attributed to two factors:

- PLP was only one element of a large and diverse set of objectives to be implemented by schools in a restricted timescale of three years.
- A detailed rationale and practical support were not readily available. There was little to be found in terms of previous research directly referring to the concept of personal learning plans in the school context. Training or staff development associated with personal learning plans was a relatively small part of NCS development work at local and national level.

2.2 The Assessment is for Learning (AifL) programme

Roughly coincident with the New Community Schools pilot programme, the Scottish Executive was conducting a review of assessment. In September 2001 the Education Minister stressed the need for a more effective assessment system with emphasis on:

- nurturing the link between assessment, learning and attainment
- involving young people in understanding the process of learning and its review
- increasing teachers' skill in the accurate tracking of learning and progress
- engaging young people, teachers and parents in purposeful dialogue about learning needs and progress
- using assessment to identify barriers to learning and needs, as early as possible
- reliable assessment data for the evaluation and improvement of provision at all levels in education.

Within the ensuing Assessment is for Learning programme, 10 projects were set up to realise these goals. The first related to improving the processes of formative assessment in Scottish schools. Projects 2 and 3 of the Assessment is for Learning programme related to personal learning plans. The first phase of the programme ran from 2002 to 2004 and work currently continues in a second phase.

The Action Group associated with the Assessment is for Learning policy was charged with overseeing three aims, the first of which is particularly relevant to the development of the PLP programme:

'to develop one unified system of recording and reporting, the personal learning plan (PLP), which would bring together the current PLP, Progress File, transition records and Individualised Education Programmes (IEPs).'

(AifL Programme Update – August 2003, p5)

Thus an overriding programme goal was to rationalise and refine the varied approaches to assessment and reporting existing in different sectors of education, within the Executive and across local authorities; and to reduce the overall burden of assessment on schools and teachers. Another fundamental policy concern was to bring assessment

more closely into the service of learning and the raising of achievement. Throughout the 1990s the work of Black and Wiliam (especially their 1998 overview) was influential in reinforcing messages in earlier Scottish policy development about the significance of formative assessment in improving the quality of learning (SOEID, 1991).

It was envisioned that the full implementation of personal learning planning would lead to a more streamlined approach to reporting with greater learner involvement. This emphasis on reporting (however firmly based in formative process) and the terminology of 'personal learning **plans**' were soon seen as detracting from fundamentally developmental processes. Therefore approaches at national level increasingly stressed that personal learning plans are anchored in formative processes – personalised learning, self-evaluation, feedback about learning and planning next steps. A change of terminology to 'personal learning **planning**' further emphasised process as opposed to product.

Project 1 of the Assessment is for Learning programme – *Support for Professional Practice in Formative Assessment* – aimed 'to investigate effective classroom approaches to formative assessment and produce guidance for schools and teachers about assessment policies and practice to raise attainment.' On the AifL website, formative assessment was described as an encapsulation of the following principles:

'Learners learn best when ...

- they understand clearly what they are trying to learn, and what is expected of them*
- they are given feedback about the quality of their work, and what they can do to make it better*
- they are given advice about how to go about making improvements*
- they are fully involved in deciding what needs to be done next, and who can give them help if they need it.'*

Participants in development projects in the first phase, including local authority staff, were involved in national, regional and local staff development, often with contributions from staff who had been involved in similar work in England and who were experienced in putting specific techniques into action.

The AifL programme was also committed to a model of 'transformational change' (Hayward, Priestly and Young, 2004) where there was an explicit effort to overcome the factors which have been postulated as preventing change from taking place. Hayward et al suggest that the Black and Wiliam work, on which much of the AifL programme is predicated, itself demonstrates the difficulty of translating research findings into school practice:

'The Black and Wiliam (1998a) meta-analysis of the research evidence suggests that there are fairly clear and consistent findings to demonstrate the positive impact of formative assessment on children's learning. However, their study also recognises that the relationship between research findings and classroom practice is less certain. What might be the reasons for the lack of consistency between the research evidence and practice? For example, might it be the result of teachers being asked to engage in practices inconsistent with their own views of what constitutes quality in learning. Or could it be, as suggested by Doyle and Ponder (1977), that even where policy and research is congruent with teachers' values it may not be practical? It may lack instrumentality, either lacking the clarity and/or kind of detail necessary for other teachers to translate ideas into practice, or simply

be too difficult to put into operation under classroom conditions. Or the policy may involve costs, such as the perceived risk of negative inspection reports.'

(Hayward et al, 2004)

Hayward et al (2004) describe three main considerations in the design of the AifL programme to overcome such barriers:

- Reflection on a previous major initiative (Assessment 5–14) suggested that the top-down model of change, relying on staff development demonstrating the grounding of new policy in research, was ineffective.
- Recent work by Wiliam and Lee suggested that partnership encouraging teachers to explore the implementation of research findings was an effective strategy.
- Work on transformational learning which is based on the interdependency of theory building, capacity building and practice, characterising deep learning. Ownership of change is a key issue for sustainability.

The authors summarise the model of change promoted by the AifL programme:

'An important feature of the formative assessment project has therefore been the attempt to begin to change the power dynamic amongst teachers, researchers and policy-makers. Assessment is for Learning has provided teachers with the impetus through ideas and resources, but the nature of the translation of these into practice has been primarily the responsibility of teachers involved with the project.'

The evaluation of Project 1 (Formative Assessment) highlighted its approach to the management of change as contributing to its success in improving pedagogy:

'The nature of the project itself with its focus on pupil learning and the enhancement of teaching resonated with teachers taking them back to fundamental pedagogic principles. Its success in delivering improved pupil motivation and engagement provided teachers with immediate positive reinforcement for continuing the development, implementation and evaluation of the strategies.'

'A key feature of the project was the extent to which participating teachers were involved in self-evaluation. The extent and depth of the self-evaluations demonstrated the high level of commitment to the project by participating teachers and schools ...'

(Hallam et al, 2004)

The Formative Assessment project in its support for teachers' judgements about pupil achievement and its emphasis on assessment as the servant of learning has been welcomed by teachers. Likewise, its downplaying of the significance of summative assessment has been well received. The development of learning outcomes and success criteria; techniques of pupil self-evaluation such as traffic-lighting; and strategies to ensure the engagement of the whole class have been employed enthusiastically and effectively. Teachers have appreciated a return to strategies and techniques that support effective learning and self-evaluation.

2.3 Focusing on learning: personal learning planning and formative assessment

The aims, strategies and development approach of the Formative Assessment project are discussed above because personal learning planning can be seen as a natural outcome of formative assessment. Personal learning planning ensures that the focus of

formative assessment lies yet more surely in the person-centred domain. Personal conversations between teacher and learner take account of current knowledge, expertise and skill, involving clarification of what has been learned and how – where the strengths and weaknesses are; and how improvement might be made. Next steps are planned conjointly and discussion takes place about who and what can help. All this seems familiar formative assessment territory. Personal learning planning extends this into a continuing process with young people self-evaluating and planning over time and across the curriculum, building a record of their own progress, their achievements and the difficulties they have encountered and overcome. Throughout, the role of evidence of learning is crucial. Valid judgements can only be made on the basis of relevant evidence, for example, in the school context, written work, artefacts, and audio/video recordings of experiences.

So, personal learning planning enhances formative assessment with its stronger emphasis on the independent role of the learner and greater requirement for ongoing systematic noting of planning and achievement. With support, the learner makes an essential contribution to these recording, monitoring and decision-making and goal-setting processes. This involvement encourages the essential life skills of self-evaluation and personal planning. As children develop, their capacity for applying success criteria, evaluating their own work and planning next steps grows. Self-evaluation becomes an increasingly independent activity.

Personal learning planning must have the experience of the individual at its heart – whether articulated as part of a teacher/pupil conversation, group or peer-to-peer dialogue.

While this person-centred approach is also essential to the concept of formative assessment, some of the school work in this area has concentrated on teaching methodologies, with staff planning and reviewing what they will do to develop better learning for their pupils. This might include, for example, laying out learning intentions and discussing success criteria with pupils on a group or class basis. Formative assessment techniques have included, for example:

- Reviewing learners' work with an entirely formative focus – giving comment only, rather than grades or marks – designed to focus attention on both achievement and specific development needs
- Learners evaluating their own work in terms of its quality and how much assistance they need to improve, for example, by using a traffic-lighting, colour-coded system. This becomes a conduit for teachers to help individuals or groups of pupils – a method of supporting self-evaluation for learners and prioritising teacher support and further planning
- 'Wait time' implemented on a class or group basis – making sure that when questions are asked to probe and support learning, sufficient time is given for thinking about the issues involved. Learners are also involved in using this and other techniques in their independent group work. Likewise 'no hands up', with its consequent asking of any learner for a response, is a group or class technique.

Techniques like these can be implemented without major systems change in schools – they rely on individual teachers altering their practice to incorporate more dialogue about the purposes of any learning activity and ways of evaluating success; providing more time for learners to think and respond; greater learner involvement in evaluating achievement and planning. Change stays largely in the hands of the individual practitioner. While there may be some reduction in curriculum coverage to take account

of greater attention to deeper learning, school-based reporting systems need not change. Many teachers have found such pedagogical change demanding but evaluation shows that these changes could be made without fundamental change to school structure, organisation or curriculum (Hallam et al, 2004).

Personal learning planning, however, requires organisational change, especially in secondary schools, if it is to reflect young people's experience of the curriculum. Releasing teacher time for dialogue with young people and for learners to self-evaluate requires change to school and classroom organisation.

Personal learning planning adds to the formative assessment process by including notes of forthcoming learning goals or targets, along with learning opportunities. Both young people and parents value this prospective approach. The personalised approach gives young people the chance to include interests outside school; to understand how these contribute to their overall development, bringing school and other areas of life closer together, building self-esteem and self-confidence.

The process of personal learning planning naturally creates a record of progress – through the shared evaluation of evidence, achievements and development needs become clearer, forming a personal resource that young people understand and can act upon. As personal learning planning develops, it makes an increasing contribution to information for reporting.

Because it is essentially person-centred, personal learning planning helps teachers to become increasingly aware of the achievements and needs of all their pupils. It is an equitable approach to the meaningful involvement of young people in their own learning.

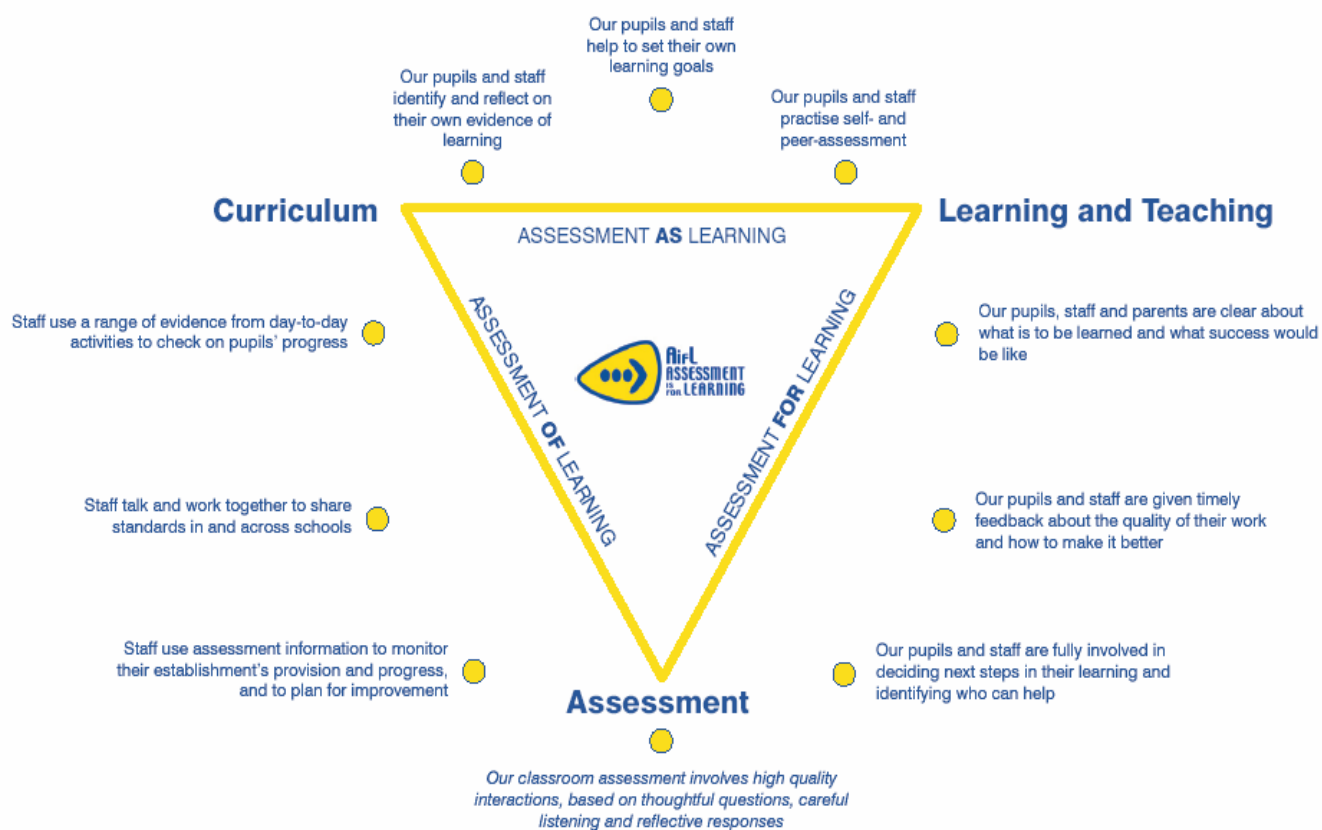
Throughout its development, the AifL programme has been underpinned by three functions of assessment, as it relates to learning:

- **assessment as learning** – reflecting on evidence of learning and planning for next steps – pupils and staff together review achievement and progress, evaluating progress against success criteria, engaging in dialogue, self and peer assessment
- **assessment for learning** – clarification and discussion of learning intentions and the criteria by which success will be judged, preceding 'all those activities undertaken by teachers and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged' (Black and Wiliam, 1998)
- **assessment of learning** – the gathering and interpretation of evidence to support accurate evaluation of achievement and progress at individual, class, institutional and national levels. This includes processes of moderation to ensure reliability and validity of standards.

These three key functions of the Assessment is for Learning programme have been represented diagrammatically, showing their relationships with practice.

What is an AifL School?

A Place Where Everyone is Learning Together



www.LTScotland.org.uk/assess/aiflschool.asp

Personal learning planning is located most strongly at the *learning and teaching* apex, drawing on both the 'as' and 'for' sides of the triangle, with particular emphasis on the self-evaluative, self-directed and planning practices along the horizontal side.

3 DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

3.1 A Curriculum for Excellence – developing and recognising personal capacities

Recent Scottish Executive guidance about personal learning planning (SEED, 2004a) draws on formative assessment research findings and the evaluation of the AifL pilot personal learning planning projects (Robertson and Dakers, 2004). This advice provides a detailed set of principles for personal learning planning; and suggests it should evaluate personal skills and attributes drawn largely from the existing 5-14 curriculum. This recent guidance on personal learning planning articulates well with the thinking of the Curriculum Review Group and has the potential to make a key contribution to the implementation of A Curriculum for Excellence (SEED, 2004b) and the broader National Priorities in Education (SEED, 2001).

The purposes of the revised curriculum are to develop four main capacities for each individual – *successful learner, confident individual, responsible citizen and effective contributor*. These capacities with their constituent attributes and competencies will be supported by the generic skills that are embodied in the personal learning planning approach. Similarly, the seven principles of curriculum design, which include *personalisation and choice* and *relevance*, will be supported by the implementation of personal learning planning.

Likewise, resonance with the methodology of personal learning planning echoes through the *A Curriculum for Excellence* documentation. Personal learning planning involves the learner in understanding his or her own route through learning by way of the processes of dialogue, self-evaluation, recording and planning. The ministerial undertaking to overhaul the curriculum from S1 to S3, and to put in place new ways of recognising the achievements and attainment of all young people, offers opportunity for the incorporation of personal learning planning into new school systems:

‘... A young person will build up a record of their attainment and broad achievements which will be recognised and valued by themselves, parents, employers, colleges and universities – a ‘passport’ to further learning and work ...’

(SEED, 2004b)

These aspirations are reinforced by the undertakings of *‘Ambitious, Excellent Schools: Our Agenda for Action’* (SEED, 2004c), which promises *‘more freedom for teachers and schools to tailor learning to the needs of individual young people’* combined with *‘choice and opportunity for young people to help each of them realise their own potential’*. The principles of personal learning planning are recognised in this document as significant in the promotion of these goals.

Yet more recently, the importance of personal learning planning is recognised in the *Scottish Executive Circular No 02, Assessment and Reporting 3–14 (June 2005)*. This re-emphasises that, as the main purpose of assessment is to support learning, personal learning planning is of crucial significance in involving each young person and his or her parents/carers in understanding what promotes and hinders personal achievement and progress. Consequently, the Circular requires that school arrangements should be put in place for all young people to discuss their learning regularly with a member of staff. Young people should be supported to note the key points of discussion and decision and, in turn, this process should be discussed with parents/carers.

For some children, this process will contribute to the identification of additional support needs that may be recorded in an Individualised Education Plan or Co-ordinated Support Plan. The principles of learner and parent engagement remain essential.

In relation to information for parents, the Circular requires a summary of key points to be drawn from the personal learning planning process and from other assessment information to make a written report.

Currently, approaches to personal learning involve the learner in decision making, self-evaluation and identifying next steps within the broad boundaries of teachers' forward planning and lesson planning. Personal learning can be enhanced to include the self-evaluation of expertise and skills developed in the community or home environment. Elements of curriculum choice and flexibility for older pupils will come increasingly into play as *A Curriculum for Excellence* is developed. From pre-school onwards, personal learning provides a platform for the growth of decision making, self-evaluation and identifying next steps. The capacity to self-evaluate, using evidence to make well reasoned judgements and to plan accordingly, will increasingly be needed if young people are to find optimum benefit from opportunities offered by school and more widely.

3.2 Learning to learn

Earlier, this paper outlined a conceptual journey from product (*'the plan'*) to process (*'planning'*). However, personal learning planning is more significant than a systematic series of processes. Personal learning is a central concept for the development of the capacities of all our young people. It is about learning to learn, developing our skills and attributes, and becoming increasingly self-aware, reflective and self-directed in the varied roles that we each adopt as individuals and members of an increasingly complex society.

Personal learning is supported by the key elements of formative assessment which address the clarification of what young people are to learn, the provision of constructive feedback and their involvement in deciding next steps. Essentially, personal learning planning extends the learner's direct and proactive involvement in all of these areas and adds specific emphases on:

- deciding on learning opportunities
- self-evaluation of what has, and has not, been achieved
- reviewing the way that learning has taken place
- making a record of progress and next steps.

In the development of personal learning, the emphasis builds from enhancing teaching approaches to encouraging independent learning – from a concern with effective pedagogy to an even stronger emphasis on the contribution of the individual learner to decision-making processes. It also provides the learner with an evidenced record of achievement and progress, with notes of how barriers to learning have been overcome.

It has sometimes been implicit that formative assessment practice and personal learning planning are two sides of the same 'effective learning' coin. This perhaps diminishes the perceived significance of personal planning. Formative assessment is seen as successful in improving learning and has been relatively straightforward for teachers to implement. Simultaneously, personal learning planning has sometimes been seen as over-complex and especially difficult administratively. Therefore staff ask, *'If these two initiatives are so similar, why do we need to do personal learning planning at all?'*

However, there is a major difference between personal planning and current implementation of formative assessment. To an extent, current formative assessment practice focuses on what the **teacher** will organise, facilitate and support to ensure effective learning.

Personal learning planning increasingly shifts the focus and responsibility to the **learner** – reviewing, planning and evaluating his or her own learning. Thus personal learning planning builds the learner's growing capacity to understand his or her own learning on the platform of good formative assessment pedagogy – learning about learning.

3.3 Conversations about learning

Dialogue about learning between learner and teacher/mentor is a major component of personal learning. Holding purposeful and productive conversations with young people has been one of the most difficult aspects of personal learning planning for schools and teachers to implement. Two of the most significant contributory factors have been: difficulty in organising the class or school timetable to release sufficient time; and some teachers' propensity to tell young people about their learning rather than finding out by skilful, open and patient questioning.

Conversations about learning are fundamental – they challenge young people to think about and articulate their own learning processes – what they plan to learn and how; what they have learned (do they understand and have they met success criteria?); what they need more help to understand; whether the method of learning was appropriate; how they might better achieve fuller understanding and greater skill. Learning takes place more effectively when learners reason out and explain their own responses.

3.4 The whole school perspective

Personal learning planning is a central aspect in a school aiming to enhance student motivation and capacity for independent learning. Earlier parts of this paper suggest that personal learning planning requires significant change in whole school organisation, systems and practices. Such change includes:

- reviewing the aims, goals and methods of education for young people
- sufficient training and resources to ensure effective dialogue and provision, meeting each learner's needs
- effective practices and systems to enable personalised learning
- information technologies to support self-directed learning and the process of personal learning planning itself, particularly tracking and monitoring learning and progress
- articulation of personal learning planning with mentoring, advice and guidance systems
- enhancing school ethos to give increasing weight to learner, parent and community voices.

3.5 What next?

Approaches to personal learning planning might be developed at local and national levels with particular attention to work with school and local authority managers, exploring the benefits and implications of personal learning within the overall AifL programme. Guidance could be developed along the lines of '*How to become an AifL school: personal learning planning*'.

Work with practitioners might enhance and extend the essential components of personal learning with particular emphasis on 'learning about learning', demonstrating how personal learning planning builds on the core aspects of formative assessment. Links would continue to be drawn with current educational reform, particularly the recommendations of the Curriculum Review Group in *Ambitious, Excellent Schools* (SEED, 2004c) and the subsequent SEED circular on *Assessment and Reporting* (June, 2005).

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