

Leadership of personalised learning

Professor David Hopkins, Chair of Educational Leadership, University of Bolton

Personalised learning is an idea that has recently been capturing the imagination of teachers, parents and young people around the world. It is an idea that has its roots in the best practices of the teaching profession, and it has the potential to make every young person's learning experience stretching, creative, fun and successful.

Personalisation is the guiding motif that allows a system to evolve from one based on delivery of services to one that emphasises mass customisation and co-production. It is about putting citizens at the heart of public services and enabling them to have a say in the design and improvement of the organisations that serve them. In education, this can be understood as personalised learning: the drive to tailor schooling to individual need, interest and aptitude. This emphasis provides a bridge from prescribed forms of teaching, learning skills, curriculum and assessment, to an approach to classroom practice that is predicated on enabling every student to fulfil their potential.

In one sense, personalised learning represents a logical alternative to what Pasi Sahlberg has characterised as the GERM virus (Sahlberg, 2011). The key GERM policies - standardisation, focus on core subjects, search for low-risk ways to reach learning goals, use of corporate management models and test-based accountability policies - are ubiquitous in current neoliberal education policy debates. It may be that these strategies serve a function in the first phase of a long-term, large-scale reform effort (Hopkins, 2013). However, in order to sustain system-wide improvement, societies are increasingly demanding strategies characterised by diversity, flexibility and choice.

In line with this, my view is that the genesis of personalisation lies somewhere slightly different from the political emphasis with which it is currently associated. The foundations of personalisation may be partly political, but in the main they reflect an ethical root.

It is moral purpose that drives personalisation. We see it most vividly in the concern of the committed, conscientious teacher to match what is taught, and how it is taught, to the individual learner as a person. That is not just a question of "sufficient challenge", of aligning pedagogy to the point of progression that each learner has reached, even though that is vitally important. It is also part of the teacher's concern to touch hearts as well as minds, to nourish a hunger for learning and help equip the learner with a proficiency and confidence to pursue understanding for themselves.

The concrete expression of the phrase "every child is special" and the creation of an education system that treats them so, is what personalised learning is all about. This means overcoming the false dichotomies and the *either/or(s)* that have bedevilled schooling for so long, so that for all students learning means *both/and* - both

excellence and enjoyment, skills and enrichment, support and challenge, high standards and high equity, present success and long-term participation, deep engagement and broad horizons, and in so doing, breaking the link between socio-economic disadvantage and attainment. That is the goal for personalised learning.

As David Miliband (2004), the U.K. Minister of State during the second term of New Labour, said when we were introducing the concept of personalised learning into the English educational system: "Giving every single child the chance to be the best they can be, whatever their talent or background, is not the betrayal of excellence; it is the fulfilment of it."

In exploring the notion of leadership and personalised learning in this article, I shall:

- define the concept a little further
- review its main components
- provide a curricular example
- explore how to move personalised learning to scale
- emphasise the importance of leadership for the implementation of personalised learning.

What is personalised learning?

Personalised learning is not a new idea. Many schools and teachers have tailored curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of children and young people with great success for many years. What is new is the drive to make the best practices universal. It is re-imagining the education system around the learning needs and talents of young people that is the basis for every school becoming great.

In his 2004 speech, David Miliband described personalised learning as:

... high expectations of every child, given practical form by high quality teaching based on a sound knowledge and understanding of each child's needs. It is not individualised learning where students sit alone. Nor is it students left to their own devices - which too often reinforces low aspirations. It means shaping teaching around the way different youngsters learn; it means taking the care to nurture the unique talents of every student.

To build a successful system of personalised learning, we must begin by acknowledging that we should be giving every child the chance to be the best they can be, whatever their talent or background. Personalised learning means high-quality teaching that is responsive

to the different ways students achieve their best. There is a clear moral and educational case for pursuing this approach. A system that responds to individual students, by creating an education path that takes account of their needs, interests and aspirations, will not only generate excellence, it will also make a strong contribution to equity and social justice.

It is essential, as Miliband noted, that personalised learning is not confused or conflated with individualised learning. The radical shift to what some consider the alternative to universalism – de-schooling options or an individualised or distance learning approach to teaching and learning at school age – would almost certainly set us back in terms of ensuring that every child gets a high-quality education. Individualised learning risks the students with the poorer learning histories most, for they are the ones who benefit from a well-structured learning environment. Individualised learning weakens the broader curriculum experience of the child by reducing the social and moral dimension that is an inevitable part of learning together. In personalised learning, the input to the whole group is designed in a way that enables individual students to receive it differently according to their prior knowledge as well as experiences, and the design of the learning process.

One can summarise this approach to personalised learning as follows:

- As an educational aspiration, personalised learning reflects a system-wide commitment to moral purpose, high excellence and high equity, and to every school being or becoming great.
- As an educational strategy, personalised learning relates to, and builds on, the learner's experience, knowledge and cognitive development, develops their confidence and competence, and leads towards autonomy, emancipation and self-actualisation.
- As an approach to teaching and learning, personalised learning focusses on individual potential, develops the individual's learning skills (particularly in ICT), and enhances creativity and social skills.
- As a curriculum orientation, personalised learning offers an approach to subject teaching that balances societal aspirations and personal relevance, and unifies the curriculum offer across sectors and age groupings.

This leads directly to the following implications that can help guide day-to-day practices:

- **For children and young people**, it means clear learning pathways through the education system, and the motivation to become independent, e-literate, and fulfilled, lifelong learners.
- **For schools**, it means a professional ethos that accepts and assumes every child comes to the classroom with a different knowledge base and skill set, as well as varying aptitudes and aspirations, and because of that, there is a determination for every young person's needs to be assessed and their talents developed through diverse teaching strategies.
- **For public education directors or independent education boards**, it means promoting high standards of educational achievement and wellbeing for every student, ensuring that all aspects of organising and running the school work together to get the best for all students.
- **For federal and state authorities**, it means a responsibility to create the conditions in which teachers and schools have the flexibility and capability to personalise the learning experience of all their students, combined with a system of intelligent accountability so that central intervention is in inverse proportion to success.





- **For the system as a whole**, it means the shared goals of high quality and high equity.

The rationale of these principles is clear: to raise standards by focussing teaching and learning on the aptitudes and interests of students and by removing any barriers to learning. The key question is: “How collectively do we build this offer for every student and every parent?”

A model for personalised learning

The starting point for delivering personalised learning is the expertise and professionalism of the whole school team. Principals, teachers and support staff already do much to fulfil the potential of every student, but there are six key components that can help to deepen and extend this personalisation of education.

Personalised learning occurs within an “in and out” of school context, where schools in a local community and beyond increasingly share both staff and curricular resources within a framework of shared accountability. Figure 1 illustrates the central components of personalised learning within and beyond the school.

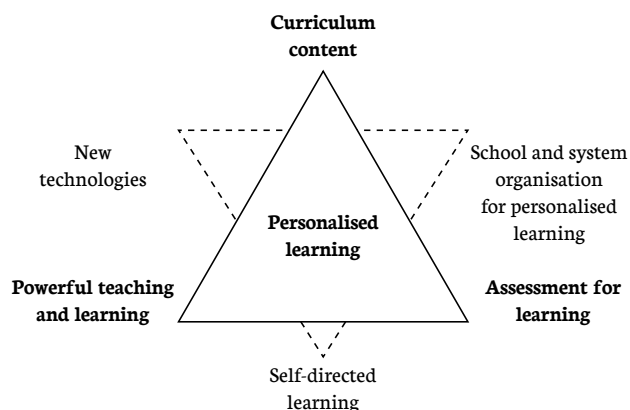


Figure 1. Central components of personalised learning within and beyond the school

This leads to an operational definition of personalised learning around six key components:

- Assessment for learning
- Powerful learning and teaching
- Self-directed learning
- Customising the curriculum offer
- The contribution of the “new” technologies
- Organising the school and system for personalised learning.

Assessment for learning implies:

- that the school, its teachers and the system develop a high-level capacity for using data to promote student learning
- the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for learners and teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there
- shared objectives and feedback that identify targets for improvement, “higher-order” questioning, as well as self and peer assessment.

Powerful learning and teaching implies:

- the curriculum should focus on understandings and competencies that have enduring and intrinsic value

- high expectations and challenging targets should be set for all, but while standards should remain constant, time and support should be varied according to individual student needs
- teachers should show students how to incorporate new information into their existing knowledge through activities that induce critical thinking and solving conceptual problems.

Self-directed learning implies:

- that self-directed learning contracts provide the basis for project work that is an essential and ongoing feature of the curriculum offer
- individual learning profiles
- counter-intuitively, that there is a strong emphasis on cooperative group learning and social interaction.

Customising the curriculum offer implies:

- modifying the framework of any centralised curriculum to ensure a continuum for personalised learning across the three phases of education: foundation, middle and 14-19
- using the enquiry into subjects within the context of standards as the building block of curriculum provision
- involving students in the formulation of their own educational goals. This is the key to them establishing engagement in learning and a long-term commitment to schooling.

The contribution of the "new" technologies implies:

- opportunity for personal creativity, the ability to match curriculum to individual learning styles, and putting the pace of learning under the individual's control
- concurrent and extended learning opportunities outside of a normal school day
- building diagnostic assessment for learning with different pathways to follow.

Organising schools for personalised learning implies:

- differentiating the workforce for student learning, enhancing the role of the learning mentor and providing each learner with the link to an adult
- block timetabling and grouping students on the basis of learning needs, within and between schools to ensure network and community learning
- establishing a system of transferable learning profiles and credits to underpin assessment and to ensure flexibility.

A curricular example

These six components are of course not free floating; they link together to provide powerful contexts for learning. Importantly, the personalised learning offer needs to be the centrepiece of the range of state policy options. Personalised learning becomes the key message in the federal and state governments' educational narrative, as well as the recipient of a series of symbolic and substantive policy initiatives. In parallel, curriculum content needs to be reviewed in light of the key components of personalised learning and relentlessly connected to the standards agenda. Table 1 illustrates how we achieved this in England in the mid-2000s as part of the Key Stage 3 (KS3) namely, lower secondary, 11-14 years old curriculum (Hopkins, 2007, p. 70). In this way, the curriculum becomes the medium and the message of personalised learning. Similarly, at the same time, we created a personalised learning offer in elementary education through the implementation of our "Excellence and Enjoyment" policy (DfES, 2003).

Table 1: Key Stage 3 and personalised learning

Key Stage 3 and personalised learning	
Powerful learning and teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing thinking and learning skills across the curriculum • The Learning Challenge program • Mentoring skills.
Self-directed learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaching study and research skills • Introducing learning contracts.
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance on different curriculum models for KS3 • The two-year KS3 pilot - creating time for the tailored curriculum.
New technologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementing ICT across the curriculum • Teaching the use of the internet • Interactive teaching programs.
Organising schools for personalised learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Models and materials for catch-up provision • Involving parents project • Teaching strategies that include and challenge everyone.

Moving personalised learning to scale

To meet the full range of individual needs and aspirations inherent in the goal of personalised learning requires extensive, but disciplined, innovation of many different kinds and at different levels in educational provision and professional practices (see Table 2). This entails changes at the *level of the classroom*, for example through enquiry-led curricula, rubrics to scaffold learning and develop skills; at the *level of the school*, for example through peer coaching that utilises protocols for the theories of action that ensure consistent teacher practice; as well as at *system level* with the creation of networks between schools and other collaborative arrangements. It should by now be clear that the dissemination of the outcomes of innovation and new methods of personalised learning cannot be achieved by a policy-led model alone, but requires new mechanisms of lateral transfer through networks.



Table 2: A Matrix for reflecting on the potential of personalised learning at various levels in the system

Personalised learning	Learning classrooms	Learning schools	Learning systems
Assessment for learning	Appreciation of student involvement in goal setting and learning from feedback	Enquiry-led and data-driven school improvement	State system for credit transfer, and student learning profiles
Deep learning	Personalised learning strategies and skills with personal learning support, proportionate to need	Professional learning communities	Innovation, knowledge sharing and network learning at all levels and across the system
Self-directed learning	Self-directed learning contracts and projects	Project-based work and curriculum options shared between schools and within the community	State assessment based in part on student projects during each course of study as part of final assessments
Curriculum content	Through project-based work	Scope for different students to work at different depths for different periods of time	State Curriculum based on personalised learning principles and links through age range
New technologies	Repertoire of ICT teaching strategies and awareness of different learning styles	ICT learning opportunities between schools and within community	State Grid for Learning extended to accommodate personalised learning
Capacity building	Subject focus (content), methodological range and environment for learning	School-specific whole-school approach with tailored external challenge and support	Establishing networks with emphasis on diversity, collaboration, innovation, lateral accountability and trust

The challenge for personalised learning is to create a *learning system* that is capable of adapting to deep changes in our economy and society by pursuing universal participation and achievement. To achieve this requires leadership, and we turn to this *desiderata* in the final section of the article.

Leadership for personalised learning

Leadership is essential for the successful implementation of personalised learning at the school level. A good way of focussing on the contribution of leadership is to draw on Leithwood and

colleagues’ (2007) conceptualisation of the central tenants of instructional leadership. They summarise this as the four central domains of setting direction, managing teaching and learning, developing people, and developing the organisation. Table 3 below sets out these practices (Higham, Hopkins, & Matthews, 2009). This analysis reinforces the argument that enhancing learning and teaching is *the* key priority for school leadership. The critical leadership challenge here is to ensure that quality teaching and learning is underpinned by more specific and precise teaching frameworks for personalised learning (Hopkins & Craig 2015a, b & c).

Table 3: Key capabilities of system leaders for personalised learning

Core practices	Key system leadership components
Setting direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Total commitment to enable every learner to reach their potential with a strategic vision that extends into the future and brings immediacy to the delivery of improvements for students. • Ability to translate vision into whole-school programs that extend the impact of pedagogic and curricular developments into other classrooms, departments and schools.
Managing teaching and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure every child is inspired and challenged through appropriate curriculum and a repertoire of teaching strategies and skills that underpin personalised learning. • Develop a high degree of clarity about, and consistency of, teaching strategies that focus on learning to both create the regularities of practice that sustain improvement and to enable sharing of best practice and innovation.
Developing people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enable students to become more active learners, develop thinking and learning skills and take greater responsibility for their own learning. Involve parents and the community to promote the valuing of positive attitudes to learning and minimise the impact of challenging circumstances on expectations and achievement. • Develop schools as professional learning communities, with relationships built and fostered across, and beyond, schools to provide a range of learning experiences and professional development opportunities for staff.
Developing the organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an evidence-based school, with decisions effectively informed by student data, and self-evaluation and external support used to seek out approaches to school improvement that are most appropriate to specific contextual needs. • Manage resources, workforce reform and the environment to support learning and wellbeing, and to extend an organisation’s vision of learning to involve networks of schools collaborating to build curriculum diversity, professional support, extended and welfare services, etc.

Although the impact of leadership on student achievement and school effectiveness has been acknowledged for some time, it is only relatively recently that we have begun to understand more fully the fine-grained nature of that relationship to personalised learning (Hopkins, 2007). An elegant summary of this evidence is as follows:

- The leadership develops a narrative for improvement
- The leadership is highly focussed on improving the quality of teaching and personalised learning
- The leadership explicitly organises the school for improvement
- The leadership creates:
 - clarity of the systems established
 - consistency of the systems spread across school
 - continuity of the systems over time
- The leadership creates internal accountability and reciprocity
- The leadership works to change context as a key component of their improvement strategy.

There are two relatively new features to this profile. The first is the emphasis on narrative and its impact on both strategy and school culture. It is personalised learning that is the central focus of the narrative within a unifying story around how every student reaches their potential. This is strategic insofar as it integrates a wide variety of initiatives, and cultural insofar as it speaks to the moral purpose of schooling. The second is the emphasis on “systems” and the transferability and sustainability of best practice, within and between networks of practice.

So, in concluding, this approach to personalised learning, according to Leadbeater (2004, p. 16), has the following consequences for education:

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.

This is an aspiration that should fuel the moral purpose of all educational leaders.

References

- DfES (2003). *Excellence and enjoyment: A strategy for Primary Schools*. London: Department for Education and Skills.
- Hopkins, D. (2007). *Every school a great school*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press.
- Hopkins, D. (2013). *Exploding the myths of school reform*. Berkshire: Open University Press, McGraw Hill Education.
- Hopkins, D. & Craig, W. (2015a). *The system and powerful learning*. Melbourne: McREL International.
- Hopkins, D. & Craig, W. (2015b). *Curiosity and powerful learning*. Melbourne: McREL International.
- Hopkins, D. & Craig, W. (2015c). *Leadership for powerful learning*. Melbourne: McREL International.
- Higham, R., Hopkins, D. & Matthews, P. (2009). *System leadership in practice*. Maidenhead, Berkshire: Open University Press/McGraw Hill.
- Leadbetter, C. (2004). *Learning about personalisation: How can we put the learner at the heart of the education system?* Nottingham, NCSL: Department for Education and Skills.

Leithwood, K., Day, C., Sammons, P., Harris, A. & Hopkins, D. (2007). *Seven strong claims about successful school leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.npbs.ca/2007-elements/pdfs/seven-strong%20claims.pdf>

Miliband, D. (2004). *Personalised learning: building a new relationship with schools*. Speech by the Minister of State for School Standards to the North of England Education Conference, Belfast.

Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons*. New York: Teachers College Press.



Professor David Hopkins is Chair of Educational Leadership at the University of Bolton, as well as Professor Emeritus at the Institute of Education, University College London and the University of Nottingham. Among a range of educational roles, David was previously Chief Adviser to three Secretary of States on School Standards in the U.K. and helped found the National College for School Leadership. David currently leads ACEL’s Curiosity and Powerful Learning school improvement program and was recently ranked as the 16th most influential educator in the world by the American-based Global Gurus organisation.