

# POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

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## Teachers' views on Personalisation

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Policy ideas in education are often interpreted by teachers in a variety of ways. As we all know, the implementation outcomes of new initiatives and ideas depend to a great extent on the ways in which teacher respond to them. The concept of personalisation has been made very prominent in recent official curriculum and education policy statements. It would, however, be fair to say that the concept itself seems to carry a variety of meanings (for instance, see 'Personalisation in education – the debate goes on', p21). For this special issue we invited a number of primary and secondary teachers working in different subject areas to take part in an interview with us on the theme of 'personalisation'. The main purpose of conducting and reporting these interviews was to create an opportunity to air the views of a group of classroom teachers who are actively thinking about the implications of this high profile policy initiative.

### Talking to Teachers

We received very generous support from the teachers we invited and we were able to interview eight teachers (including one working in a consultant position). These teachers are specialists in Business Studies, English, EAL, and ICT. All the participant teachers work with pupils from ethnic and linguistic minority backgrounds. Their teaching experience ranges from first-year teaching to 32 years; one of the teachers entered the profession from industry recently. The length of the interviews varied between 11 and 20 minutes. The interviews took place in late June and early July this year. The interviewer was the present author. We do not suggest that the views reported here reflect the opinions of the whole of the teaching profession, nor do we claim that they represent an exhaustive set of ideas and interpretations. Instead we present them as valuable expressions of understandings and opinions from teachers with a diverse range of experiences. In these interview conversations the term 'personalisation' was used in conjunction with teaching, learning and education more generally. No attempt was made to restrict the

usage of this term since the purpose was to explore teachers' views.

Before the telephone interviews commenced, the participant teachers were sent a set of questions (see below). The interviews were quite open in that the teachers were encouraged to dwell on any of the pre-set questions that they regarded as important. There was no attempt to elicit an explicit policy evaluation from the participant teachers during the interview.

- What is your understand the concept of Personalisation?
- How might this concept enhance the quality of teaching within the National Curriculum?
- How might this concept be implemented in teaching, particularly with reference to pupils who are EAL learners?
- Are there any problems (actual or potential) associated with this concept?
- Any other thoughts?

These questions were accompanied by a set of quotes drawn from recent official DCSF and QCA documents on the initiative of personalisation (see Figure 1 in 'Personalisation in education – the debate goes on', p21). The quotes were supplied as background information; we made it clear to the participants teachers that they did not have to refer to them if they chose not to. EAL as a teaching and learning concern was raised by the interviewer explicitly in the interviews as a reference point for discussion.

### Emerging themes

Several themes and points of views were developed by the participant teachers in the interviews. The main ones are summarised under three headings. Selective quotes from the participant teachers will be used to illustrate the points being made. All the participant teachers are given pseudonyms for reporting purposes. The words inside the square brackets were inserted by this author to increase the transparency of what was being said.

#### Personalisation as curriculum differentiation

Several of the teachers felt that personalisation was fundamentally about differentiation of teaching content and teaching activities to suit their pupils' diverse learning needs. The key assumption underlying this view seems to be that for an externally designed curriculum to work it was important to find ways to stretch its prescribed content for pupils at different points of readiness to engage with the curriculum content and learning activities. By and large differentiation meant adopting different focuses for teaching (and learning) activities within any particular topic.

*Well, it sounds a lot like differentiation to me ... It is [about] making sure that every lesson is addressing the personality and learning needs of every student ... if you are presenting information, if you give an activity and you have to break [it] down for the slower ones and [set] an extension for those with higher aptitude. The timing would be different for each of them and it would involve more planning ...*

(Mrs Harrison, Business Studies)

*... in ICT there are a number of different qualifications, one of them is DIDA [Diploma in Digital Applications], it is a project using and the students for example have to promote healthy eating in school and they put all the work together in an E-portfolio, they might do a survey on healthy eating in school, they might do a publisher poster... it is endless and limitless for the pupils who are independent learners, it is an excellent qualification. For those who lack skills and are not very good in working independently, it is not so good. It is not so good because you have to kind of do everything for them.*

(Mr Staunton, ICT)

*Basically not everybody can fit into a mould so you know human nature everybody is different. Some people, very few in fact, will fit exactly in to the mould if you look at the National Curriculum ... Others who have more difficulty. So some people have learning difficulties or language difficulties or may not be stretched enough. So making your teaching personalised, personalising it as much as possible to their background their needs.*

(Miss Gilbert, English)

*Well it stems from differentiation really doesn't it. You have kind of got the three main - low ability, middle and higher ability and you have got all the ones in between and it's how much you would break down your lessons for the ones in between ... I mean I have a few EAL students in my lessons and sometimes what the EAL learners are doing is completely different from the rest of the class because we need to build up their vocabulary and their confidence with the language and some of them have come in and they have never used a computer before depending on where they have come from. For them they could be having a completely different lesson. I really like it actually because it doesn't exclude them.*

(Miss Wolley, ICT)

### **Personalisation as whole-person empowerment and independence**

For some of the participant teachers, personalisation signified something much more than differentiating the curriculum content and teaching activities in respect of pupils' need. They saw it as an opportunity to take account of their pupils' personal development, and to create learning experiences that would lead to independent learning.

*It is actually about empowering and enabling independent learning so it is about teaching children how to learn about being independent, it is about using a range of teaching strategies that will support that for particular children's needs. It is based on interaction, it is a much more social dialogic approach rather than teach from the front and imparting, it is very much about the engagement of the learner so they learn how to learn and to become responsible for their learning as they take in the strategies and approaches that they are exposed to. I think it is quite far reaching ...*

(Miss Ferdinand, National Strategy Primary Adviser)

*[Getting through SATs tests] is not the measure for me ... that is just not enough ... I do see [my pupils] as individuals with needs and potential ... I think it is important to develop their creativity, that is really important too ... children coming into the latter half of KS2 there are so many aspects of adjustments and learning that have to be made for them to cope with life in the UK I feel for them the pressures they are under ... I feel very guilty the pressures we put them under, as we know that it takes such a long time for them to become fluent, also the fact that they bring with them many skills and talents it takes a while to uncover, many of them are very gifted and talented they are not always obvious ...*

(Miss Davison, EAL)

*... for me personally it doesn't fit to have personalised learning within the [prescribed] curriculum, it is paradoxical. Personalised learning is ... learning that is designed not just by the teacher [but by] the pupil as well ...*

(Mrs Early, EAL)

### **Personalisation as a challenge**

Many of the participant teachers expressed some strong reservations as to the feasibility of putting their understandings and interpretations of personalisation into practice. Their views were grounded in different reasons. The information inside the round brackets preceding each of the quotes indicates the view on personalisation expressed by the teacher concerned during the interview.

(Personalisation as curriculum differentiation, EAL as a teaching issue)

*Obviously it will involve more training because most teachers and I will admit myself don't know how to address EAL pupils ... I don't know how to address them in terms of Business Studies theory and the terms that they need to understand and the concepts that they need by the end of their time with us.*

(Mrs Harrison, Business Studies)

(Personalisation as whole-person empowerment and independence, EAL as a teacher education issue)

*I think there are still a lot of teachers who find that very difficult, particularly with the experience I have had recently. There are a lot of teachers coming out of training now, particularly those who have done a PGCE year who are completely and totally unprepared to really even pitch a lesson even at the middle of a class let alone think about the range of teaching approaches that they need to include in their planning and their teaching. I think that is a real issue ...*

(Miss Ferdinand, National Strategy Primary Adviser)

(Personalisation as curriculum differentiation, classroom practical realities, limits to personalisation for EAL pupils)

*In an ideal world um yeah it would be practised all the time, it is nigh on impossible to do it every lesson. We do have LSAs who help those who have difficulty writing or understanding um most of [our lessons] have differentiated work. Some lessons will have worksheets that are differentiated or different expectations ... having the more able help the less able. As regards EAL learners, we are doing 'Of Mice and Men' at the moment, and they are reading it in the EAL dept beforehand so that is easier for them to understand when we discuss it in class. There is no way that they are going to understand. There is a lot of American slang that even the English speaking children have difficulty understanding ...*

(Miss Gilbert, English)

(Limits to personalisation with mainstream material for EAL pupils)

*The reason is [that] the teacher has a curriculum that is fixed, I am talking purely about additional language learners now, even if [teachers] vary this by giving differentiated work based on the topics, a lot of the topics are not based on [the students' experiences], cannot be adapted to the learning styles of quite a number of the students ... I can give you a very good example of this. We had some end of year tests, the tests were [externally set]. For the Year 7 there was a question to write a letter to the Head to say that the class was going to raise money to save the lifeboats a charity 'Save the lifeboat'. I was [helping] children who had never seen a lifeboat and had never seen the sea ... and they had to put together some ideas ... I even printed off a picture of a lifeboat ... The whole question was totally impossible for someone who has never seen the sea.*

(Mrs Early, EAL)

(Personalisation as curriculum differentiation, classroom practical realities)

*I have found that for my teaching I have done it for four groups but any more than that and the planning is just ridiculous ... I like the idea but we are not going to have*

*enough time to be able to do it. We need more planning time.*

(Miss Wolley, ICT)

(Personalisation as curriculum differentiation, classroom practical realities, limits to personalisation for EAL pupils)

*It is very difficult for two reasons. The children I teach are from different ethnic backgrounds and have different needs from each other so that is one problem. They all have different needs. They are grouped under EAL but they all have different needs so we are back to the situation where for a teacher it is virtually impossible.*

(Miss O'Mally, English)

### **Practical, intellectual and professional concerns**

The first two themes, 'Personalisation as curriculum differentiation' and 'Personalisation as whole-person empowerment and independence', reflect the participant teachers' broader views on the nature of education. The 'differentiation' view seems to start with premise that there *is* or *will be* a pre-existing curriculum and that personalisation of learning (and education more generally) means making the required learning more achievable for all pupils. This involves varying the teaching and learning activities and stretching the curriculum content as far as possible to accommodate everyone. One may say that this is a 'technical' response to personalisation. The 'empowerment' view builds on the idea that in a personalised curriculum environment, pupils should have a say in determining what they want to learn. Intellectual growth and academic learning do not necessarily depend on the specifications of a pre-existing curriculum. Personalisation, in this view, is at least partly 'learner-led' and it involves a process of negotiation between teachers and pupils (and other interested parties). These two views relate to the points and principles discussed in the article Personalisation in education – the debate goes on' (p21).

The views expressed under the third theme 'Personalisation as a challenge' suggest that the participant teachers were aware of a range of practical, intellectual and professionalism issues. The practical concerns associated with the additional time and efforts that would be required to personalise learning were often directly linked to the idea of differentiating teaching. Intellectually some of the participant teachers were aware that a statutory curriculum laden with particular cultural assumptions, values and practices may render personalisation impossible in particular areas of teaching and learning. In terms of professionalism it was quite clear that some of the participant teachers felt that more EAL-specific expertise would be required if the move towards personalisation were to include pupils who were in the process of learning English.

The views expressed by the participant teachers in these interviews have shown the complexity of the concept of personalisation from teachers' perspectives. The other articles in this issue raise further issues from other standpoints. There are many questions to be answered. It would seem that if this concept is to be developed into a central tenet of the school curriculum, as the current official curriculum and policy statements seem to suggest, then we would need to see further clarification as to its meaning/s from the policy-makers' point of view, organised opportunities for teachers to engage in informed debate, as well as officially recognised channels for teachers to express their views and opinions. A profession-wide dialogue involving all key interested parties is needed now.

## Collaborating Teachers and Personalised Learning: Using Policy to Develop Good Practice

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### Introduction

In looking at the ways in which power is constructed through language and in interaction, actors can begin to see themselves as agents who have the power to transform practices and not merely as recipients of already decided upon norms.

Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester (2000:100)

This quote offers those of us working in educational contexts a positive and proactive view of the way in which we shape our classrooms. It emphasizes the ability of practitioners to change and transform settings. It asks us to think local and consider how our own practices as teachers and researchers will figure in the lives of the students we work with. This is not to present an overly naïve and innocent view of 'bottom-up change' (Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). For example, Shohamy (2006:79) has described how teachers can serve as 'soldiers' of the system carrying out orders without questioning policy and the ideologies and agendas behind it.

### New policy initiatives for inclusion

Inclusive education for all has been stressed as a cornerstone in British education policy for school-aged children over many years. The educational policies of inclusion have emerged from a constellation of views which has coalesced into sets of publicly espoused ideological perspectives, policy and professional discourses<sup>1</sup> (Leung and Creese, 2008). As a consistent educational policy since at least the 1980s, inclusion has shaped decisions, values and the practices of classroom life.

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Education and Science [DES], 1985; Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2002; Office for Standards in Education [OFSTED], 2001; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 2000; Teacher Training Agency [TTA], 2000).