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Research Associate Report

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"Are you learnin' us today, Miss?"

Developing assessment for learning as personalised practice

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Special series on **Personalised learning**

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Introduction

I was fortunate enough to be educated in a vibrant, caring and progressive primary school in Kirkby Town just outside Liverpool. It was common for my class to have different teachers during the week. On corridors and playgrounds we would often try to capture our favourite by asking imploringly,

> "Are you learnin' us today, Miss?"

Today, over 50 years later, when asking myself whether any teacher could teach effectively without learning about the learner, the irony apparent in that childhood phrase was not lost on me.

Last year I was taken by David Miliband's invitation to a conversation about personalisation. Enthusiastically I engaged in a quest for clarity, reading articles, attending conferences, questioning myself and others. I soon encountered a tension between opposing views on what 'personalisation' meant.

On the one hand there are those who consider it a gimmick or the latest in a long line of buzzword-driven initiatives. On the other are those who hold it has the potential to transform schooling and deliver in the 21st century an education based on excellence and equity.

By definition, to personalise is to move away from uniformity and standardised approaches. I was interested to find out what was happening in schools in this context. Of the five key elements of personalisation I focused on 'assessment for learning' (AfL) as this was the obvious point where learning about the learner began. I was also eager to discover how the use of the data generated impacted on 'teaching and learning'.

> Assessment for learning is the process of seeking and interpreting data for use by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are in their learning, where they need to go and how best to get there. (Assessment Reform Group 2002)

Twenty years ago I wrote a thesis on aspects of children's rights – and specifically the right to education. It concluded that every person has an inalienable human right to education simply because h/she exists. Furthermore this education had to recognise each person's uniqueness and to empower the individual in actualisation; what might be called "being everything you can be".

My aim was to travel without preconception and to report objectively how schools and school leaders were engaged with the personalisation agenda. Secretly I hoped to find schools like those described by Charles Leadbeater:

> … personalising learning schools equip children to become more active engaged learners able to reflect on what they learn, on how they learn, what they find hard or difficult, how they best express themselves. (Leadbeater 2005)

I was not disappointed as on my journey I had to compromise on neither my objectivity nor my aspiration.

Methods

Including my own school, four primary schools were involved in this study. The leaders of these schools are members of the National College for School Leadership's (NCSL's) Leadership Network and were considered by Ofsted as 'excellent' or 'outstanding' in their latest inspections. Nonetheless, I tried hard to lessen any potential for misunderstanding or tension.

Firstly, I wrote to the schools outlining my intentions and inviting their participation. Then I visited the school to meet with the headteacher and to tell the story of journey I hoped to take.

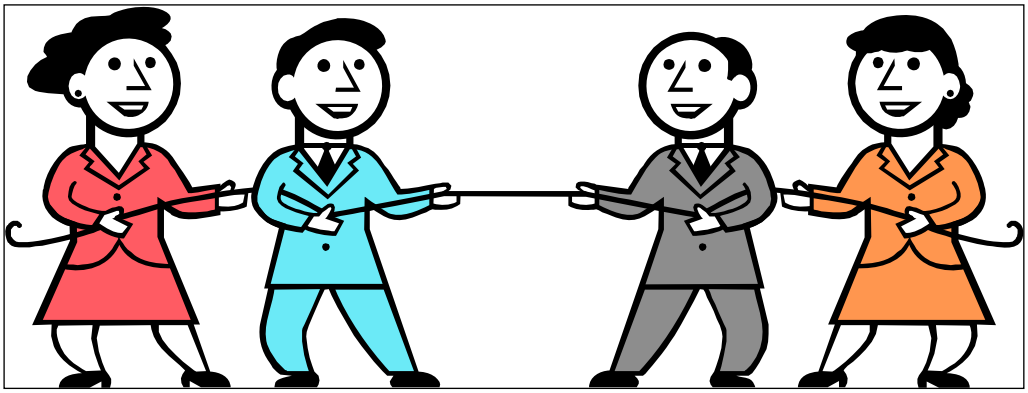
In *Through the looking glass* Alice meets the Cheshire Cat at a crossroads. Confused by the signposts she implores the cat to help her find her way:

> "Where do you want to get to?" he asks.
> "I don't know," she replies.
> "Then it does not matter which road you take," smiled the cat.

Determined not to make the same mistake as Alice, I brought to this first meeting a set of images to map out the ground I hoped to cover. Each image signposted an important feature of the learning journey.

For example, one acknowledged the tension between competing definitions of personalisation, as in the following figure.

Personalisation



The research journey then comprised:

- a meeting with school leaders on personalisation to repeat the introduction
- a first meeting with a small group of pupils
- a pause of one week for everyone to collect their thoughts
- a focus group interview with the children identified by each school
- a mind-mapping exercise carried out by the focus group children on 'How I learn best'
- a learning-focused tour conducted by pupils in their schools
- semi-structured interviews with 11 teachers in total
- another 'comfort break' pause
- a final interview with the headteacher to reflect on the unfolding story.

Many of the teachers reported that they found the ‘story board’ an effective device for coming to an understanding of my purpose. They were able to see beyond me as ‘the man in a suit’ and to tell their own story with confidence. Each of the interviews with staff and children were recorded, transcribed and analysed before the final meeting with the headteachers, who also provided additional information through e-mails and school documentation.

Findings

My intention when embarking on my learning journey was to discover how the personalisation agenda was impacting on the project schools. In particular I wanted to find out how pupils, teachers and leaders were affected by involvement with AfL.

How far was children's experience of learning personalised?

> The challenge with pupils is considering the extent to which they are genuinely involved in understanding their learning and are able to make decisions and choices about it. (Assessment Reform Group 2002)

I wanted to hear first hand about the children's experiences of learning. The children I spoke to were all from upper junior classes. During my visits I tried very hard not to lead them but rather to allow them to talk freely about school.

The children provided insights into their personal experience of education during the focus group interviews, learning-focused tours and through their mind maps.

Judging from the children's own accounts of schooling there is clear evidence that they were engaged and active partners in learning. This was expressed by them in relation to a number of recurring themes:

- a sense of being part of a community of mutually supportive individuals
- learning seen as both challenging and enjoyable
- learning seen as a social activity.

> "You don't just make friends with children. You make friends with teachers and other adults too."

In each school visited, the pupils had a very positive attitude to school life. They felt supported in the learning process by those around them. They shared a strong sense of community that they valued highly. When asked what was the best thing about their school, almost unanimously the reply was "my friends". Not remarkable perhaps but then every group included teachers and other adults as their friends.

At the heart of AfL is the learner taking increased responsibility for action. Teachers were conscious of putting a premium on mutual respect, involvement and responsibility in the day-to-day life of their schools. One headteacher explained the ethos of the school with the motto 'TEAM' – Together Everyone Achieves More. Another school's mission statement was, 'Working together, striving for excellence'. Here teamwork was at the heart of all activity and 'to excel' was defined as simply getting better at what you are doing day by day. Similar concepts were evident in all project schools.

The children had clearly invested in their learning communities. For each it was part of them, and they part of it. When guiding me on their learning tours the children were encouraged to talk freely about the significance of each chosen place. In each place the children's enthusiasm and words emphasised the importance of shared experience, identity, voice and contribution. They were proud to be part of their schools.

I was taken to an infant class to see duck eggs in an incubator. The children talked animatedly about how they had once collected eggs, helped them hatch then returned them to the duck pond. I was shown art work displayed on an infant corridor. Some children pointed to their work from two or three years ago, kept

because of its quality, and their sense of being valued was palpable. In an assembly hall a display on alliteration was the focus. It was explained that this was a joint venture between upper juniors and infants where learning partners passed on their learning to the younger children.

In classrooms and unit bases the sense of pride in belonging and contribution was evident. I was shown sketchbooks, paintings, sculpture and needlework, all developing the theme of a mythical beast over time. In another class a 'celebration tree' that charted progress against targets was the focus of attention. I was shown an all-weather sports pitch, an adventure play area and a copse. The children had been involved in designing these and were clearly empowered by seeing the process through.

The mind maps provided further insights into what was valued most in the learning process. The children worked alone on the mind maps for a while before pairing and sharing to promote further discussion within the group as a whole. On bringing their contributions together I was struck by the greater weight given to examples of 'working together' when compared to other ways of learning.

On the theme of 'How I learn best', the responses ranged from the pragmatic "go to school" to the more esoteric "my mum says I am a visual learner".

Some did indeed involve solitary activity:

- looking on the internet
- concentrating
- reading books
- practising.

Most involved some form of working together:

- working in pairs
- asking questions
- helping someone who is stuck
- explaining what I am doing to others
- setting goals as a target partner
- celebrating each other's success
- agreeing goals set by my partner
- by my teacher learning me.

Here, clear emphasis is given to the positive aspects of social interaction. Agreeing goals, explaining to others, setting goals as a partner, and celebrating success all entail negotiation with, or the appreciation of, others.

> "The teachers try to challenge us and make it fun … they don't give you too much, just enough to make you feel comfortable and challenged."

When one child offered this comment the rest of the group nodded enthusiastically in agreement. It is a very positive statement describing as it does the interaction in terms of challenge, fun and comfort. These children were consciously working hard, enjoying their learning and were highly motivated.

The comment above provides an insight into the way in which curriculum experience had been personalised. There are a number of significant elements at play here:

- the use of ‘the teachers’ practice’, that is, that it is not isolated to one individual
- it was also inclusive of all children
- challenge and fun were complementary elements
- balancing comfort and challenge indicates emotional intelligence.

To set challenge consistently at the edge of the child’s comfort zone and to maintain motivation in the way described above requires skilled teaching. From the children’s perspective, embedded in the original comment is a sense of the teacher knowing them well both as learners and as individuals. This reinforces the earlier notion of being active within a learning community.

All this has resonance in the guiding principles of AfL put forward by the Assessment Reform Group (2002), suggesting that classroom practice should:

- focus on how pupils learn
- be sensitive and constructive because any assessment has an emotional impact
- take into account learner motivation.

Inevitably, on occasion progress and challenge are not resolved easily. This is the nature of learning. At times it is easier to make progress than at others. However, the children interviewed were as positive about what happened when things ground to a halt as they were when things were moving along smoothly.

Talking about teachers, one group stated that “they want to see you get better at what you are stuck at”. Commenting on the help given when this happens another said “it wouldn’t seem right if they didn’t help us like they do”.

The reality of getting ‘stuck’ as a learner is that you often feel isolated or discomforted or a little foolish. Frustratingly, it often appears after a great deal of effort, and it can be difficult to resolve alone. The term ‘cognitive dissonance’ has been used by educational psychologists to describe a state of mind where what is new cannot be reconciled with what is already known. Often anxiety is the negatively charged result.

When discussing how learners make progress Sadler (1989) states:

> … in assessment for learning, the learner’s task is to close the gap between the present state of understanding and the learning goal.

When these children ‘got stuck’ teachers would not simply show them the direct way out of the dilemma but instead modelled for them aspects of active learning. The children described how teachers would discuss with them the things they were good at and the things they found more difficult. Together they would come to recognise that certain things needed to be improved on. These would be set as learning goals or targets. There was no sense of failure at all at being stuck; it was simply a place on the learning journey. The children were keen to point out that their teachers did not say “this is the only way to do it” but would show them different ways so that they could choose.

The experiences reported above linked to key aspects of AfL such as the sensitive use of feedback, setting goals collaboratively and receiving constructive guidance.

> “We look at each other’s work to see how we might improve.”

A third theme to emerge strongly across the project schools was engagement with partners for learning at a number of levels. The first partnership in evidence was that with the teacher. Much of what has been said already indicates that children saw teachers as partners in the learning process. Children said they set targets for learning “with the help of the teachers”.

A number of strategies used to generate targets were mentioned in this context. In one school the children used review sheets on which they answered given questions about work they had done and “we get our targets from that”. Schools used variations on “two stars and a wish” where the child notes two things done well and one thing to improve on after finishing a piece of work. This then provides a point of departure for a discussion on how to improve.

I had expected that preparation for Year 6 SATs or other assessments based on national curriculum learning objectives would have figured prominently here. However, this was not the case. One child referred to using a target sheet to chart progress “for SATs”, then emphasised how the teacher “worked with you to improve”. There was broadly based recognition of the key role that teachers play in the target-setting process. However, the targets negotiated were not confined to a narrow band of SAT-related learning objectives on a checklist, but were generally broader in response to the individual child’s learning needs.

The learning partnership mentioned most frequently was that with other pupils. Helping others learn through sharing understanding and providing constructive criticism was common practice. Children shared talking partners aimed at giving time for reflection before and during tasks. They had target partners who identified areas for improvement after working together. They acted as reading partners for younger children, helping them to empathise with the teacher’s role. They shared marking partners who used an agreed set of criteria to mark and comment on completed tasks.

I asked one child how marking each other’s stories worked. I was a little mischievous in my question as I wanted to discover just how honest the marking was. Surely you would help a friend get a good mark? The reply was given confidently that “the best way to help my friend is by being positive as everyone has to improve somehow”. Furthermore “if someone is too critical then things won’t really change”. To support the marking process the classroom had a “big display of all the things needed for a good story”.

Children were often encouraged to work as a unit when evaluating outcomes and suggesting ways to improve on performance. As a table group they looked at each other’s work to find the most common mistake. They would set targets for each other based on this. They helped each other in understanding tasks. One child described how he would discuss his work with his target partner. Both understood what a good outcome might look like as learning objectives had been openly discussed in class with the teacher before starting. Both partners had to accept any target suggested. Both also had to agree that the target had been met at a later review before a new one was selected. This process encouraged children to progress their own learning through self-evaluation within a standards framework.

The impression given by the children’s accounts is that they are active, responsible learners. They identify strongly with their schools. They value learning highly and have invested much of themselves in the process. For these children education did not appear to be a solitary, competitive pursuit but a shared enterprise where individual success is celebrated by all.

These things do not come about by accident and I wondered what it was that had created this climate. I turned to the work of the teachers to learn more.

What strategies were teachers employing to personalise learning?

> "We model involvement and taking responsibility for learning."

> "Learning in my classroom? The root of that is my relationship with the children [and] creating an environment where we are trying to work together to make the improvements we need to make."

I interviewed a total of 11 class teachers for this research. The classes they taught ranged from reception year to Year 6. Experience of teaching was equally broadly based, ranging from a few years to over 30. Individually distinct in their responses, they did share one important characteristic: a commitment to child-focused education. Each teacher said quite clearly that valuing the individual was the foundation on which they built teaching.

This was expressed in a variety of ways:

- we treat children as individuals
- we need to know about their personalities and what they need to feel happy and settled in school
- children should know you respect them
- formal teachers would have no place here
- we value what children say
- we look for things to build each child's self-esteem.

A conscious effort had been made in each school to create environments in which learners gain the confidence to engage in learning. I was shown classrooms where the physical environment had been quite deliberately designed to reinforce messages about learning.

Here I found:

- interactive displays encouraging further exploration of themes
- child-generated learning objectives written on strips of paper and attached to the ceiling charting learning over time
- motivational slogans, for example, 'getting stuck isn't the problem but staying stuck is'
- accessible resources encouraging pupil choice.

Teachers also created learning environments where children could explore how to assess progress towards goals effectively. One teacher used a topic on making bags to model important aspects of evaluating outcomes with an infant class. The children had been asked to make paper bags as part of a topic on India. They drew up designs, collected the materials and made a bag to the design brief. As the topic progressed the teacher would ask the class to look at what was produced and encouraged them to say what was good about the bags. Later the designer/maker would be asked what would make the bag better having had time to think about the comments made. In this way the teacher was consciously drawing the children into an understanding that the process was at least as important as the product; that improvement was incremental.

A teacher in a reception class spoke about using the children's interests and needs as the starting point and main driver for learning:

> "…it is when the children are interested, passionate even ... that they choose to challenge themselves and strive to achieve more."

This teacher spoke of involving the children in "sustained shared thinking" in order to model the processes involved in taking responsibility for one's own learning. The role of the adult was to share the learning objective at the child's level of understanding, and to model the processes involved in achieving that goal. The culture was one of success and challenge where success is "learning new things and being able to do new and different things".

Another teacher spoke of modelling self-assessment in becoming a co-learner with the class: "I can do that better, I can develop that idea". I visited this classroom during an art lesson when the class were sketching using pencils. The teacher was lying on the floor busily working on his sketch and obviously engrossed in it. It was explained to me that he had been encouraged to become one of the class and to learn alongside the children in order to model and encourage reflection and self-evaluation. This had led to a conviction that children learn to learn better when they see an adult struggling hard to improve.

> "The root of that [learning] is my relationship with the children [and] creating an environment where we are trying to work together to make the improvements we need to make."

Children were at the heart of these schools' endeavours and the importance of showing mutual respect underpinned their pervading cultures. The choices that adults made about how they worked reinforced that respect.

> "… we want the children to develop questions, quite probing questions really, to assess their own learning and where they want to take this to."

In the study schools, teachers shared the common goal of wanting to provide the best learning opportunities for the children. The schools also exhibited a questioning culture towards school improvement. They actively sought out new ways of doing things to refresh teaching.

As one teacher put it:

> "As a school our strength is the ability to reflect on what works and what doesn't means we are a self-improving school."

To a greater or lesser degree all had considered the effectiveness of accelerated learning, the thinking skills agenda, multiple intelligence theory, learning to learn and the variety of styles in both teaching and learning. All the schools had taken on board the AfL strategies associated with the Primary Strategy.

Teachers were teaching. The framework was in place. Lessons were well structured with clear objectives; teaching respected the differences in children and the plenary explored outcomes and learning. Targets were being developed in 'child talk' to make them more accessible. Children had individual targets that were reviewed regularly.

Black and Wiliam (1998) suggest that when schools use questioning effectively, pupils become more involved in progressing learning. A related effect on teachers can be:

> … a shift in their role of presenters of information to leaders of an exploration and development of ideas in which all children are involved. (Black and Wiliam 1998: 7)

This shift was implicit in one teacher's commentary on the development of questioning techniques within the classroom. Questioning had been used regularly to provide information for the teacher about how well children understood tasks and how much learning subsequently took place. In some ways this was done as a check on whether what had been sent had been received. The teacher stated that 10 years ago the emphasis would have been on the teacher teaching – "this is the only way to do it".

However, the greater and growing emphasis was on the development of questioning of the pupils by the pupils in order to get them involved in the evaluation of their learning. Teachers modelled this process by talking to children about how well they felt they were doing with a particular task, how confident they were about sharing learning with others, and could they explain how they were going to use the new understanding. Children were encouraged to work in similar ways with learning partners during class lessons. All this was aimed at increasingly passing responsibility for learning from the teacher to the learner. As one teacher put it:

> "'I want to learn' is the most important thing to get a child to say."

Besides encouragement to change the 'how' of teaching and learning, at the same time there were also examples of children changing the 'what' of the curriculum across the schools.

One teacher of a lower junior class said "there is no point teaching children what they already know". This might seem an obvious thing to say; however, this simple realisation has led to fundamental changes in the way learning experiences are structured. Before a topic begins the teacher carries out an audit with the children logging what they know and what they would like to find out. The 'already known' forms the baseline for learning; the 'find outs' form a list of learning objectives. The latter are written out and displayed in the classroom. Topic reviews share new knowledge and shift the baseline for next time.

At another school, feedback from the children resulted in changes to the organisation of the curriculum. Teachers felt that much of the current Key Stage 2 curriculum beyond the core subjects was inappropriate. Much work had been done to empower pupil voice and pupils were asked what they thought would help them in their learning. As a result, a topic on Egypt was moved to Year 6, one on fashion dropped entirely and Spanish replaced French on the curriculum "because we go to Spain on holiday".

These examples serve to illustrate that in the study schools, teachers were confident enough to shift their ground in order to improve learning for the children. Indeed response to the children's needs was very much part of school culture: "the way we do things round here". Teachers questioned the curriculum, pedagogy, the profession and themselves. Any changes needed to improve were implemented, sometimes as a whole school focus as with AfL, sometimes as exploration or experimentation at a class level.

> "There are things we are still not happy with like being driven towards very fixed and unavoidable tests but we know personalising learning is effective as the children are happier and the scores are still there."

The perception among teachers is that they are constrained in their efforts to personalise education by the present high levels of accountability and prescription.

Some were concerned at the demands made on their time when personalising learning, for example through the use of individual learning conversations with pupils. Others were aware of a tension between accountability, in terms of SATs outcomes for example, and the flexibility needed to respond to an individual's needs. One teacher was quite blunt about his perception of "jumping through hurdles" to achieve SATs results, later adding, "we felt constrained [by the existing national curriculum]". In response this school had introduced more creative ways of working within the national curriculum framework.

David Hargreaves (2005) described personalisation as a process that:

- reinforces some current practices
- demands modification of some of these practices
- entails creating some new practices.

This process of reinforcement, modification and innovation can be seen in the developing use of assessment in the project schools.

To personalise is to respond to an individual on the basis of what is known about that person. Teachers have always sought information about pupil performance and this can be seen in the continuing use of a wide range of summative assessments. Across the schools teachers included foundation stage profiles, QCA optional tests, SATs, NFER progress papers in Maths and English, school-devised end of unit tests and Schonell reading and Vernon spelling tests as part of their data gathering. Teachers recorded the outcomes.

The summative use of such tests remains strong with, for example, league tables based on Key Stage 2 SATs regarded as a major indicator of a school's effectiveness. However, effective AfL calls for the focus to be on the formative use of these outcomes. Teachers are becoming more skilled in tracking performance. To encourage this development some schools have dispensed with the role of an assessment manager. Instead the task of gathering data to carry out an initial broad analysis is distributed among the leadership team. Teachers are informed of general patterns emerging from the analysis and how this might affect school priorities. The onus is then placed on the class teacher to interpret the data at class or cohort level and where necessary to use it to adapt teaching to the child's needs.

Another teacher recognised the "pressure to always look at achievements in terms of cohorts and benchmarks". This can be "disheartening to those committed to personalisation" who fail to see the celebration of those who do not score highly in SATs, for example. The efforts of teachers in all the schools to compensate for the force of the standards imperative have been recorded above. The reason underpinning action could be summarised in the words of a teachers commenting on this issue of balance:

> "Learning is more than pencil and paper. Learning is about life experiences, the social and emotional skills required to be an active part of a community."

How did leaders enable the development of AfL as part of a personalisation agenda?

> Leaders do not impose goals on others, but work with them to create a shared sense of purpose and direction. (Leithwood and Riehl 2003)

One of the questions I asked the teachers was "what are the implications for leadership in the context of AfL?". A key issue identified in the responses was

“sharing the vision”, that is, enlisting all staff in securing commitment to the vision. One teacher stated that:

> ”… for personalisation to work at its best … it needs to be embedded both in the teaching and learning in the classroom and in the philosophy of the school.”

When talking to headteachers I was drawn to this notion of personalisation being embedded in both philosophy and pedagogy and to the relationship apparent between theory and practice.

The main driver for increased personalisation was the leaders’ set of core values. Just as the children had emphasised friendship as the thing they valued most, the headteachers had built person-centred cultures within their schools based on the premise that each person is worthy of the greatest respect.

The school leaders were passionate advocates of placing the child’s needs at the heart of all the school did. Creating the climate for positive relationships to flourish was seen as fundamental to the health of the learning community. One leader spoke of the importance of knowing that a child goes fishing with his father at the weekend, or that another child regularly visits his grandparents in Wales. Adults in the school were conscious of modelling this with colleagues, “they [pupils] see us treating each other with respect”.

All of the schools’ mission statements affirmed this inclusive vision. One described a “welcoming, friendly school where children feel secure …, where pupils enjoy developing into confident independent learners”. Another supported ’Working together, striving for excellence’, with the expectations children, teachers and parents might have of the shared experience of school. The first is that each child can expect to be treated with respect. A third proclaimed “a learning community where members can feel valued … within a caring and happy environment”. In another, the motto ‘TEAM’ – Together Everyone Achieves More – was explicit in its value of the individual contribution to the common good.

In one school, a major overhaul of the curriculum to make the learning experience more relevant and exciting was instigated because “by looking into the children’s faces I could see it wasn’t working”. This sensitivity to how the school was affecting children’s lives was widespread. In planning, the aim was “to see the child as human being and work outwards from there”. Another school had introduced game-based lunch clubs in response to children’s requests as part of bringing a “small school feel in a large school”. This placed value on the child’s personal interests. In all the schools every opportunity was taken to celebrate each child’s achievements so that difference was positively recognised.

One headteacher used the metaphor of a tiled wall to describe the school. Whereas a well-constructed and grouted wall of regular shaped tiles can be a joy to behold, the preference was for a mosaic of different shapes, sizes and colours gradually building its unique pattern and mirroring the inclusive nature of education and life. Another head expressed a similar idea, saying “you cannot address the inclusion agenda if you see success only in terms of the narrow band of achievement measured by SATs”.

These leaders were, however, realistic about having to address the standards agenda. In all the schools standards measured by statutory tests were above average with corresponding positive value-added scores. All were also committed to a broad curricular experience for their children. All were fully committed to maintaining a focus on the person and not on the product. They insisted that each

child be treated as an individual worthy of respect. In doing so, they provided a compass by which to judge any change in direction in school practice.

> "As a leader you want people to work from a set of principles."

AfL featured prominently in the improvement plans of these schools in recent years. This had evolved from the school leaders' personal conviction that it would fundamentally benefit children's learning. A response to the roll out of the Primary Strategy had a part to play here; however, developments inside these schools went beyond solely implementation of central advice.

School leaders saw effective practice in AfL as a lever for raising standards in teaching and learning. The increased use of data by class teachers informed them on the next steps to take in teaching. Part of this process involves providing pupils with feedback focused on their learning. This in turn draws pupils into choosing appropriate learning activities from the options. With increasing discrimination, pupils can become co-designers of their learning. For example a lower junior group decided, through discussion, what to study on the topic of 'The environment'. Questions were raised, investigations suggested and activities planned by the children. Teachers guided the learning journey through regular reviews of outcomes that inevitably raised new questions and avenues of enquiry. It was this potential to empower learners that was most valued by leaders. To this end, the leaders had sought to build the capacity for a more personalised experience for pupils within their schools in a variety of ways.

The headteachers had created the conditions for staff to take ownership of the developmental process. In one school the headteacher had conducted an audit of existing practice in assessment in order to:

- raise awareness
- establish ownership for staff
- share effective practice
- develop sustainable policy and practice in AfL.

The audit provided an informed platform from which the implications for teaching and learning could be explored through discussion and professional engagement with the guidance provided. What emerged was the importance of developing the learner's capacity to self-assess and of establishing consistent practice across the school. This was written into the school improvement plan as a main aim and committed to by all staff.

A later review resulted in a 'handbook', noting effective practice and containing a number of questions to help staff self-audit on a continuous basis.

A similar outcome was sought in another school when the headteacher offered a 'think piece' to teachers looking at personalisation for learning and within-school variation. A paper was delivered to staff that summarised the various voices to be heard in the conversation that had been begun by David Miliband's speech to the North of England Conference in 2004. The need to deal sensitively yet effectively with variation in standards of teaching and learning across the school was included as a related theme. Staff were invited to reflect on the issues raised.

A consensus emerged that personalisation could have a positive impact on school improvement. The assessment co-ordinator was given the task to introduce AfL to the whole school using the Primary Strategy developmental materials, starting with the school self-evaluation grid. A year on and staff are confidently using pupil

interviews to set individual targets, peer marking is commonplace and pupils are engaged in a wide range of learning partnerships, where children are consciously trying to help each other make progress.

For another leader the intention was “to wrest back the initiative on learning from central government”. After completing an online evaluation of teaching and learning, staff were asked to do the same. This effectively set a school baseline for improvement. Subsequent training and development opportunities had built capacity in the schools. Staff used Primary Strategy materials to aid discussion and to inform practice. These included:

- ‘Planning/designing opportunities and AfL’ (see DfES handout 1A and 1B)
- ‘Creating a learning culture’ – (i) Conditions for learning; (ii) Delivering on classroom community, collaboration and personalisation (DfES handout 2A and 2B)
- ‘Understanding how learning develops’ – (i) Delivering on learning to learn; (ii) Learning across the curriculum (DfES handout 3A and 3B).

The use of “Assessment for learning to make individuals partners in their learning” was written into the school’s development plan as a priority for teaching and learning. This set the direction for staff development in the short to medium term.

Another strategy used was to identify and support specific teachers in driving the agenda forward in roles specifically designed for this purpose. As one headteacher said, “you have got to have a key person to work with you”. One example of this was a teacher given the task of developing pupil voice across the school. Work on a small-scale pilot provided insights into positives and pitfalls that could then be shared with the whole school. In another school one teacher was given licence to personalise learning “to the max”. Again the experience was shared and staff invited to take on particular ideas. The senior leadership team encouraged engagement with this agenda and when a particular practice built a sufficient evidence base showing it to have a positive impact it was promoted as effective teaching.

It is neither possible nor desirable to micro-manage every aspect of school life. The headteachers in the project schools were conscious of bringing together a set of principles for AfL that were expressed as expectations in their schools. This was “the way we do things around here” in practice.

> “We are encouraged to be innovative … making choices is important to us and we are supported in that process … it keeps your teaching alive.”

The comment above made in one school was echoed in other schools. Teachers told me at various times that:

- “we are free to plan in different ways”
- “we have to remember that teachers are also individuals and need freedom to innovate”
- “leadership supports staff so they gain confidence in exploring for themselves new and innovative ways of teaching”
- “we have the freedom to put our ideas into operation”
- “there is flexibility in planning, teaching and learning”
- “we are not being constrained by ‘documents’ and strategies, etc…”.

The teachers welcomed and prized this freedom to try things out. There is evidence that this freedom was licensed by the headteachers both implicitly and explicitly. One headteacher stated that:

> "If you don't innovate then you can't personalise, and you can't innovate unless relationships are right and the people feel comfortable with being different."

The priority given by all the school leaders to promote positive relationships in every area of school life is well documented above. This strength of relationships allowed new ideas to be evaluated without undue pressure to adopt them. The headteachers understood how staff could be constrained by a perceived need to succeed; to get things 'right'. To overcome this they were active in supporting innovation and experimentation and protecting staff from undue anxiety. Leaders gave time for staff to explore, to experiment and to reflect on outcomes. This was intended to build in all staff the confidence to move forward despite any setbacks. One headteacher made this very clear in saying:

> "… there is no fear of failure here – if things go pear-shaped you can learn more from it – there has to be a time for shutting the door and see what happens without anyone watching."

Teachers felt empowered by the support of leaders to act in the interests of the children. They reported on the importance of being creative in order to teach the children well; of keeping the children motivated and interested; of arranging the curriculum to suit the children being taught. The common goal of innovation was seen as securing better opportunities for learning for their children. As a teacher said:

> "… the ability to reflect on what works, and what doesn't, means we are a self-improving school."

The NCSL model for networks is based on the premise that we can all learn from each other. All the heads belonged to formal and informal networks. These included not only the NCSL Leadership Network but also Networked Learning Communities, Primary Strategy Learning Networks, local authority-sponsored cluster groups and networks based on contact with local higher education and other institutions involved with initial teacher training. This involvement modelled collaboration and this was, in turn, to be found in many examples of teachers valuing teamwork and their openness to learning with others.

The school leaders spoke of initiatives aimed at creating learning communities in their schools. Staff regularly observed each other teaching. Teachers with specific skills gave demonstration lessons. Video conferencing was used to enhance teaching and learning, and to take the initiative out into other schools. Senior staff mentored more inexperienced staff as they came to understand the school's way of doing things. Cross-phase groupings formed as ad hoc working parties to explore an issue on behalf of the rest of the staff. During our conversations the teachers appreciated how the culture of learning supported them in getting better at what they did. It was a major factor in encouraging them to innovate.

Conclusion

It is evident that the schools in this study are finding ways to personalise children's education through the effective use of AfL. The contribution it has made would suggest that other schools might also benefit from adopting similar practices to those described in this study, while being mindful of their own context.

I visited only three schools but the common ground between them far outweighed the differences of context or style. In each school I found:

- a child-centred community
- strong leadership guarding the moral purpose of the school
- staff modelling mutual respect and a sense of community in all they did
- the reality of 'external accountability' balanced with 'licence to innovate' on behalf of the child
- embedded resilience when meeting challenge – no sense of 'failure'
- an emphasis on growing life-long learners as far more important than league tables
- learning communities where members shared high expectations of themselves and of others
- collaborative partnerships and supportive networks
- engagement with central initiatives personalised in the context of the school.

The Department for Education and Skills' school self-evaluation grid published as part of the 'Excellence and Enjoyment' initiative uses a four-step matrix to help set improvement targets (DfES 2004). These four development stages are:

- focusing
- developing
- establishing
- enhancing.

Schools will be familiar with using the descriptors for each stage to set a baseline from which effective practice can be developed. Although the evidence gathered about the study schools is very positive it would be doing them a disservice to suggest that in every aspect of AfL the schools had reached the 'enhancing' stage. Both teachers and school leaders were realistic in their assessment of their relative positions on the developmental continuum above. For all, it is a work in progress requiring sustained moral purpose, capacity building and the careful management of resources.

Gilbert is quoted in an Edexel Synopsis Paper on personalisation as stating:

> … the whole thing is a duplicitous gimmick. In reality schools just do not have the resources, time or space in the curriculum to implement it. (Gilbert 2004)

My research journey began with the question whether it was right to subscribe to the view above or whether personalisation had the potential to transform schooling. The scope of my enquiry was limited to evaluating the impact of AfL on teaching and learning. However, AfL is one of five components (DfES, 2004) or 'nine gateways' (Hargreaves 2005) to personalisation and is important to an understanding of the broader issue of personalising education. It is a concept that the profession can hardly ignore as personalisation is mentioned, in one form or another, in no fewer than 90 of the 110 pages of the DfES' five-year strategy (DfES, 2004).

Some teachers did express concerns over the amount of time it took to carry out assessment in this way. Giving feedback sensitively means finding quality time in a busy day. These same teachers were convinced that it was important enough to find that time. The insights into learning gained during conversations with even the youngest child can make teaching and learning more efficient and effective. It was time well spent because it meant less wasted effort later trying to match learner to task.

Both teachers and school leaders recounted ways in which their schools had changed for the better as a result of developing expertise in AfL. It is difficult to say these changes were 'transformational', yet many of the changes were quite radical and sustainable. One example is the use of 'graphic organisers' when planning learning activities. In this model children are helped to list what they 'know' and what they 'want to know' before starting a topic. These lists are displayed around the classroom. The 'want to find out' items form learning objectives that become what has been 'learned' as the work progresses. An end of unit review notes 'what has been learned'. In a spiral curriculum model these form a baseline for further learning. The KWL (know, want, learn) model helps children to set personal goals for learning and also to track learning. It is also powerful as it teaches children how to approach new learning to get the most benefit from it.

The teachers described how an understanding of the processes involved in AfL had transformed teaching and learning. Teachers were not teaching as they did five or ten years ago. The most significant difference was the involvement of the individual child in the evaluation of learning and the effectiveness of teaching. Teachers saw themselves as partners in learning, as co-educators with the children.

The curriculum of each school had strong roots in a person-centred culture created by school leaders. They had emphasised nurturing positive relationships across the whole school community as the basis of growth. They had consciously promoted environments within which teachers sought to provide quality learning experiences for all the children in their care.

> "It's nothing new – it's something we were doing before without the title."

Few of the teachers referred directly to the term 'personalisation' when listing the key features of teaching and learning. However, all used phrases like 'child-centred', 'child-friendly' or 'person-centred' to describe a preferred style. AfL provided a focus for teachers that they were happy to accept: the child first and teaching second. Nor was this seen as an abdication of authority. Teachers valued sharing the business of teaching and learning with the learners simply because it resulted in better teaching and learning. People were happier and standards were maintained.

In an article on personalising learning Charles Leadbeater spoke of:

> … grey haired revolutionaries, practitioners whose experience gives them the self-confidence to lead others to radical innovation. (Leadbeater 2005)

The teachers I spoke to form a very broad spectrum of experience. Some had been teaching but a few years, while some had been in education for 30 years or more. They shared an equally broad spread of class teaching experience and all year groups were represented from foundation stage reception classes to Year 6. They also shared a passionate commitment to teaching and learning. In addition, they were actively and effectively personalising the learning experience by developing practice in AfL.

During my research I interviewed each of these teachers using the same basic set of questions. These enquired about school development plans; key features of teaching and learning, personalisation and AfL; how achievement and progress were measured and monitored; and the part pupils played in these processes. This array of questions could have been quite daunting but there was a high level of self-confidence shown when responding. The common factor was not experience but confidence. This confidence can be seen in the widespread enthusiastic involvement with innovative practice.

What I encountered was not there by accident. In some ways practice had evolved organically from the complex relationships between child and adult, and between adult and adult at all levels of the school community. However, it appeared that the strength of the leaders' purpose had had the greatest effect. Each had set the child at the centre of the school and guarded this position through the years of central prescription and accountability. For them AfL provided an opportunity to take back control of the curriculum experience on behalf of the learner.

Hargreaves' (2005) advice to those considering embarking on making education more personalised is 'think big – start small'. He urges leaders to have a clear view of the end point, to articulate this vision and to embed it in the culture of the schools. The school leaders here identified stepping-stones along the way to take their schools from where they were to where they want to be. In this way effective leadership can be seen as crucially important to school improvement.

Based on this study I have identified six key questions for leaders to consider when embarking on this journey. These reflect the concerns I met in the study schools. There is no one way to follow. It is a personal pathway that must be found. When attempting to personalise learning through AfL leaders might consider the following.

1. How will AfL benefit pupil learning?

AfL had benefited children in the study in two ways. They were more self-confident and they achieved more. This was a simple matter of fact reported by all the schools. Pupils and staff worked together from reception classes to Year 6 actively engaging in learning. Learning was a challenge and also fun to do. Both pupils and teachers felt empowered by the process.

The continuum in 'Excellence and Enjoyment' provides a blueprint for developing AfL. The effective use of AfL will almost certainly contribute to the improvement of scores in Literacy and Numeracy tests and tasks. It can have an extended function in that it raises the quality of teaching as teachers reflect on whether their teaching has indeed brought about learning.

2. Is the culture of the school sufficiently learner centred?

In 1980 I taught in a comprehensive school with nearly 1,800 boys on roll. One of my colleagues taught a group of disaffected and challenged youngsters. Each day would start with a small breakfast meal in the classroom. Her reasoning was pure Maslow's 'Hierarchy of needs' (Maslow 1968). Prior to functioning intellectually, both physical and emotional needs must be met. This was such uncommon common sense. These lads were not going to learn anything if they were hungry and did not feel valued as people.

A traditional view of education is based on the 'send and receive' model. The teacher sends; the pupil receives. The teacher can then check if what went out actually arrived intact by using summative tests. Recently the notion of the 'consumer' has challenged this view in the few places it still exists. In this view pupils (and parents)

are consumers just like in the real world. Getting feedback from consumers is essential as it may help the designers of the curriculum. However, the decision whether to change rests with the provider not the consumer. Choice is therefore more apparent than real.

AfL is person centred not product centred. As pupils become more involved, more skilled, more discriminating choosers, they will potentially become co-designers of education. This may soon become the real world of schools. We have seen how leaders have grounded person-centred cultures in their schools that in turn underpin the assessment process. This focus pre-dates the use of AfL and similar initiatives. It provided a benchmark to judge whether to get involved or not in the first place. Unless the culture is learner centred it is difficult to see how AfL could be sustained over time.

3. How far do core values support personalisation?

Headteachers may promote a person-centred culture in their schools but it is the teachers and other staff that will make it work. The aims of the culture will find practical expression in the life of the school. This has been expressed as “the way we do things around here”. This is a very potent force in all schools. New staff are inducted into the life of the school both informally and formally. Often it is the informal messages that are the most powerful.

In this study, approaches to personalisation gained purchase because they were introduced and developed within learning communities where individuals are respected and their achievements celebrated for who they are and not what they are. The headteacher is no more important than the site manager or cook. Each has a valuable role to play in the health of the school community. There will be a hierarchy of increasing responsibility and accountability but not intrinsic worth. The shared core values of members of the community will determine whether personalising learning is effective.

4. How can you best build the capacity to engage in personalisation?

As with all school improvement initiatives, staff development is crucial to success. Many of the ways in which leaders built capacity in their schools are detailed above.

Hargreaves (2005) suggests that “starting with a small group of volunteers” concentrates minds, avoids ‘quick fix’ solutions, and often results in other colleagues being drawn into the initiative. This view has resonance with practice found in the schools where key staff were supported in innovating on behalf of the rest of the staff.

Both school improvement plans and performance management targets were used to recognise the baseline for development and subsequent progress towards the objectives set.

5. How can you empower pupil voice so that it is influential in securing changes in teaching and learning?

Pupil voice forms an intrinsic element in the personalisation agenda and in these schools has not been seen as a passing fad. Adults welcomed children into school in a warm, friendly and caring way. This, the leaders believed, built community cohesion and responsibility as well as self-esteem. Children in all year groups shared the responsibility for keeping the school a safe place for all. Adults were genuinely interested in who they were and what they did both in and out of school. Staff were

encouraged to have fun in lessons – as one leader commented, “cold teaching is poor teaching whatever the ‘success’”.

AfL is a two-way process. As teacher and learner experience interdependence, the independence of the child can grow as s/he learns how to learn. Along the way pupils will challenge teaching with the comments they make during conversations. As we have seen, schools that take pupils’ views seriously will change quite radically if convinced that it will improve things for learners. It is important to remain open to these messages and be prepared to act on them. Children soon learn to stop sending out signals if they know they aren’t being received.

6. How might resources be used to benefit AfL?

The intellectual capital of the teacher is a vitally important resource. It is in the nature of leaders that they are first into new territory. Leaders should consider how to introduce staff to new, and possibly challenging, ideas so that this resource is increased and applied effectively.

Leaders will also need to review how other resources are allocated to support staff involvement in the full range of AfL processes. Sometimes the resource issue is to do with time, sometimes with support in the classroom and sometimes with the teacher’s personal understanding of how AfL might be woven into the daily routine of the classroom.

Leaders will be concerned to obtain maximum value for money from all available resources. Evidence from the study schools suggests strongly that a whole school focus on AfL can result in more effective teaching and learning. Assessment *of* learning is important in evaluating whether learning has indeed taken place. Recently assessment *for* learning has shown how all data can be used formatively. The former remains useful to teaching, but the second is a much more potent force for improving teaching and learning. Perhaps assessment *as* learning will become the term most typically used in this context. We have seen how AfL draws the learner into the design of appropriate learning experiences. Also AfL techniques model how to learn independently of the teacher. Through involvement with AfL over time the learner may come to self-evaluate against success criteria and choose next steps autonomously. Isn’t this how adults often learn new skills, by learning from mistakes and using new understanding or knowledge or skill to move further forward?

‘And finally…’

It was with these two words that I finished the interviews with the children, teachers and school leaders during this study. My intention was to pause for a moment and reflect on what had gone before to see if anything significant had been left unsaid.

More than once I have described my learning journey as a magical mystery tour. Travelling to schools for the first time I felt privileged to share the way they did things.

What I uncovered in my ‘tour’ was not just how AfL was being used and how it had been developed, but about the culture and ethos of the schools that supported its integration. For personalisation to become embedded, it is as much about an ethos that acknowledges its importance as a principle related to rights and responsibilities, as about technical practices.

As such, on reflection, I feel the final words in this research paper should go to Kalhil Gilbran:

> You may give them your love but not your thoughts
> For they have their own thoughts
> You may house their bodies but not their souls
> For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow….
> You are the bows from which your children
> As living arrows are sent forth. (Gilbran 1980)

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