

Inspiring leaders to  
improve children's lives



**National College**  
for Leadership of Schools  
and Children's Services

---

**Schools and academies**

---

# Leadership for personalising learning

**John West-Burnham**

**Resource**

# Contents

Summary	3
Introduction	4
Why personalised learning?	7
What is personalised learning?	9
The components of personalising learning	12
Management for personalising learning	18
Leadership for personalised learning	24
References	33

---

## Summary

Leadership for personalising learning focuses on and extends what is already known about effective school leadership in general and learning-centred approaches in particular. The specific components may be summarised as:

- values that focus on individual well-being, the implementation of the five Every Child Matters outcomes (ECM) and a commitment to securing equity and excellence;
- leadership that sees learning as its core purpose;
- leadership that is widely distributed across the school community and serves as a collective resource;
- creating a broad community of parents and agencies to support learning;
- ensuring that the implementation of personalising learning is a learning process focused on the needs of individuals.

These leadership principles have to be underpinned by management strategies that focus on minimising within-school variation, enable student voice and choice and ensure an information and communications technology (ICT) strategy and school systems and structures, then embed personalising learning into consistent practice.

These leadership principles have to be underpinned by management strategies

---

# Introduction

Personalising learning is on the one hand what most teachers would recognise as the most effective way of supporting the learning of any learner – quite irrespective of age or ability. Yet on the other hand it represents a challenge to many long established beliefs, structures, relationships and practices. Personalising learning is perhaps best understood as part of a range of integrated strategies which have as their common purpose the achievement of the five Every Child Matters outcomes for every child and young person; increasing our confidence about their well being and systematically working to improve their life chances. This can only be achieved through the collaboration of all elements in children’s services so as to enable a set of coherent and interdependent policies to achieve optimum impact. This Framework focuses on the particular contribution of schools through the experience of learning and teaching. However it is important to recognise the contribution of other elements of children’s services and the central importance of families and communities to effective learning, academic success and improved life chances.

The purpose of this framework is to provide an overview and summary of our current understanding of the issues and implications for leadership of the movement towards personalising learning. This needs to be set in a broader context and this was provided by the Prime Minister in his speech on education for the new global age given in May 2009, he argued that education for the future required:

- a more strategic role for government – intervening when schools consistently underperform, but standing back and allowing teachers and school leaders greater freedom to innovate
- more freedom for the professionals working in our schools, with those professionals taking responsibility for consistently improving classroom practice and demonstrating their success to parents and the public
- more involvement for parents in their child’s education – with the responsibilities that brings for parents – and also the need to ensure that our system responds to parental views on the quality of education and the availability of good school places
- and above all – investment in excellence – in resourcing a system that can unleash the talents and potential of every child

**(Speech by the Prime Minister, 5 May 2005)**

In many ways effective school leadership has always sought to focus on the individual learner and all teachers are intuitively aware of the impact that engagement with the individual pupil or student in response to her or his needs can have.

Personalising learning is a unique opportunity to combine policy and professional imperatives. It offers a portfolio of strategies that relate directly to the imperatives of Every Child Matters (ECM) and tangible opportunities to address individual well-being, progress and achievement. At the same time it provides a focus on alternative strategies to raise attainment, secure performance and sustain school improvement. It also offers a systematic response to the overarching issue of creating a school experience that prepares young people for life in the 21st century. It is therefore fundamental to any debate about Building Schools for the Future (BSF). It is also worth stressing that personalisation is part of the new agenda in the management of all public services and represents one of the greatest challenges to our thinking about the nature of the relationship between provider and client.

Part 3 of this resource summarises the arguments for moving towards personalising learning and part 4 provides an overview of the current ways of defining the components of the process. It is important to stress that the strategies and systems outlined are not unique to personalisation; they are characteristic of effective leadership and management in any context. What is significant is the way in which they are focused on the learning of the individual learner

The rest of this resource summarises the three components of any school's approach to personalising learning:

- the components of personalising learning. (Part 5);
- the management infrastructure needed to support personalisation. (Part 6);
- the relevant leadership strategies. (Part 7)

The table below shows the components of each of the key areas of this framework.

Key components	Management	Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learning how to learn</li> <li>- Assessment for learning</li> <li>- Teaching and learning strategies</li> <li>- Curriculum choice</li> <li>- Mentoring and support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Minimising within-school variation</li> <li>- Student voice and choice</li> <li>- Information and communications technology (ICT)</li> <li>- School systems and structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Culture and values</li> <li>- Learning-centred</li> <li>- Distributed leadership</li> <li>- Collaboration</li> <li>- Leading change</li> </ul>

It is, of course, wrong to draw an absolute divide between management and leadership – they have to be in a symbiotic relationship. However, it may be helpful to distinguish between those activities which are essentially operational and need to be embedded in the daily life and practice of the school and those which are primarily concerned with broader, strategic, issues.

---

It is impossible to over-state the importance of leadership in making personalising learning work. Leadership that is focused on learning has the greatest impact on performance and achievement. Leadership for personalising learning can be seen as having three specific components: developing a strategic approach, managing the operational issues and creating a culture that reinforces the personalised approach.

The strategic approach involves two main leadership activities. Firstly, developing scenarios with staff and governors which bring the possibilities of personalising learning to life, helping them to understand how the principles set out in the Children's Plan will work in their school. Secondly, school leaders will need to link the implementation of the various components of personalising learning into school improvement strategies and long-term planning.

The operational issues are concerned with the incremental movement of the school towards embedding the working practices associated with personalisation into roles, structures, policies and strategies. An example of this would be the way that many schools have moved their pastoral systems into a mentoring approach with clear consequences for the role of teachers and other adults, the deployment of time to support students and the provision of support and training.

The most challenging aspect for school leaders will be the change of culture required in some schools to make personalising learning a secure entitlement for all learners and to ensure consistency of quality provision. The work that most schools have done on the five Every Child Matters outcomes is an obvious example of changing the values that schools work by, the language that they use and the criteria that they employ in review and evaluation. There is very powerful evidence that school leaders have the greatest impact on school culture through the shared vocabulary they develop, use and reinforce, through their modelling of appropriate behaviours and by intervening to support and embed new ways of working. Leaders who focus on vision and values are most likely to bring about a fundamental change in culture and working practices.

Each section concludes with questions and activities designed to support personal reflection and discussion.

**What differences did individual teachers make to your personal learning and academic success?**

**How have you made a difference to the success of individual learners?**

**When have you made the greatest impact as a teacher and leader?**

The most challenging aspect for school leaders will be the change of culture required

---

# Why personalise learning?

The White Paper (2009) offers a clear model of what the optimum situation for effective learning might look like:

The right curriculum is essential in making sure that children and young people are prepared for life. But for every child to succeed, good teaching practice, focused on the strengths, weaknesses and needs of each child is essential. Successful schools have, for years, been assessing pupils' individual learning needs and tailoring teaching methods and the curriculum in response. (p30)

This has clear implications for the role of teachers and other adults concerned with the quality of the learning experience:

... (they) have high expectations for all children, particularly those from groups that have traditionally failed to achieve their potential. They use proven, evidence-based teaching and learning practices, such as assessment for learning... (p30)

There are many motives supporting the movement towards personalising learning, they can be summarised in broad terms as follows. Personalising learning is:

- a powerful intervention strategy to support individual achievement and attainment;
- a focused policy to help secure ECM and well-being;
- a means to secure and embed school improvement and the entitlement of every pupil to effective teaching and learning;
- a strategy to overcome social disadvantage.

There is a need to recognise the moral dimension of personalising learning. It is not just another initiative with a range of techniques. It is perhaps best seen as a powerful opportunity to focus on the core purpose of schools – the quality of the learning of every individual – by developing a direct link between principle and practice. This is explicitly expressed in the Children's Plan:

World class schools providing excellent, personalised teaching and learning will then help all children and young people – including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable – to progress in their education and wider development. At every stage, children and young people will have opportunities to grow and develop, and their individual needs will be addressed in the round by the complete range of children's services. (DCSF 2007: 55)

Personalising learning can also be seen as a potentially powerful strategy to address one of the most taxing issues in education in England: the ratio between excellence and equity. As a system we are very good at excellence, we are less confident about equity. Personalising learning offers a direct means of sustaining excellence and moving towards equity:

... the best way to achieve world class standards is a system in which all children receive teaching tailored to their needs and which is based on their "stage not age". (DCSF 2007: 8)

---

There is widespread recognition of the need for public services to focus on the needs of the individual client. In a publication for the National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services (National College), Charles Leadbeater defines the essence of personalisation as being:

... about understanding and taking time and consideration to learn about what it is that the people we serve in public services really want. At its root personalisation is about education, about morality, human social goals, connecting with the internal motivations that we need to unlock for people to really learn; it's about moving from seeing education as meeting and imposing external standards to meet external yardsticks, to working on internal motivation and aspiration. (National College 2007: 14)

That is why we need a new framework to show how personal needs can be taken into account within universal equity and excellence in education. In recent years the policy agenda has grown to recognise the fact that in the context of greater diversity we can only understand these terms by putting the needs and wants of individual learners at the heart of the system. (National College 2007: 6)

Virtually every source available sees personalising learning in terms of maximising personal potential and recognising how our understanding of learning is changing:

- 'Giving every single child the chance to be the best they can be, whatever their talent or background' (DfES 2004: 7).
- 'High quality teaching that is responsive to the different ways students achieve their best' (DfES 2004: 7).
- 'A system that responds to individual pupils, by creating an education path that takes account of their needs, interests and aspirations' (DfES 2004: 7).
- 'Rooted in a deep respect for the integrity, dignity and validity of each person' (West-Burnham and Coates 2005: 18).
- 'Possessing different kinds of minds, individuals represent information and knowledge in idiosyncratic ways' (Gardner, 1999 245).

To build a successful system of personalised learning, we must begin by acknowledging that 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. (DfES 2004)

Personalised learning puts children and their needs first. This new approach will look widely at all barriers to learning...faced by children and will... work to overcome them. (DCSF 2007: 55)

Personalising learning is perhaps the most effective way of translating the rhetoric of the learning-centred school into the actual reality of every learner's experience. It also offers powerful models to transform and enhance the quality of the working lives of the adults in schools.

**What do you find the most compelling argument for personalising learning?**

**In what ways do the principles of personalising learning coincide with your school's aims, values and mission?**

**Are there any valid, professional arguments against personalising learning?**

Personalised learning puts children and their needs first



---

# What is personalised learning?

Personalised learning is much more than a portfolio of effective teaching and learning strategies focused on the individual. It is primarily about an ethos or culture that is expressed through a number of pivotal components:

- **Achievement:** personalising learning has to be focused on maximising the achievement of every individual by the full spectrum of definitions, most notably all of the components of ECM.
- **Aspiration:** central to personalising learning is a culture of high expectations and aspiration, again expressed in every dimension of a child or young person's life but focused in particular on their entitlement to optimum success at school.
- **Inclusion:** personalisation applies equally to the gifted and talented and those with special needs. In many ways it offers a powerful strategy to ensure optimum provision for all young people that is geared to their particular needs and talents.
- **Relational:** learning is an interpersonal process and personalisation offers scope and opportunities to maximise the quality of learning relationships between learners and all those involved in supporting them, including parents and fellow learners.
- **Accountability:** personalising learning clarifies personal and professional responsibilities and places high significance on performance for all those involved in the learning process. It can help to remove dependency across the system and highlight individual outcomes and strategies.

The Gilbert Review (2007) defines personalised learning in the following terms:

... personalising learning and teaching means taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child's and young person's learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate. It means strengthening the link between learning and teaching by engaging pupils – and their parents – as partners in learning. (2007: 6)

The five core components of personalised learning were defined by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) as:

- Assessment for learning and the use of evidence and dialogue to identify every pupil's learning needs and the steps they need to take
- Teaching and learning strategies that actively engage and challenge learners and develop their ability to focus on their learning skills and their capabilities to take ownership of their own progress
- Curriculum entitlement and choice that allows for breadth of study, personal relevance and flexible curriculum pathways
- Creative approaches to school organisation, to enable a student-centred approach which integrates performance with wellbeing and inclusive approaches with attainment
- Strong partnerships beyond the classroom, both to enrich learning and support care of pupils in the wider sense through, for example, home-school links, inter-agency work, or community partnerships. (National College 2007: 27)

---

The DfES report Making Good Progress (2004) highlights the potential contribution of personalised approaches:

- A curriculum that takes account of prior learning and experiences and helps pupils to develop the full range of knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes.
- Attention to appropriate curriculum materials...
- Securing expected levels and good progress for all pupils in speaking, listening, reading and writing...
- Strategies that enable pupils to see clearly how they are progressing...
- An explicit focus on higher order thinking skills...
- Study support and out-of classroom learning... (2004: 15)

A further perspective on personalised learning is provided by the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) in their model of deep learning that is defined as:

Deep learning is secured when, through personalisation the conditions of student learning are transformed (Sims 2006: 2)

They identify the gateways to deep learning as: student voice, assessment for learning and learning to learn.

Any review of the leadership required for success in personalised learning has to start with establishing consensus as to the components of the personalising learning process. The Gilbert Review identified existing practice in schools that points to the following elements being present in varying degrees in many schools:

- Pioneering and evaluating approaches to learning how to learn.
- Using data on pupils' learning for target setting, tracking progress and supporting further achievement.
- Using ICT to enhance collaboration and creative learning.
- Using timetables flexibly to allow, for example, weeks devoted to intensive study on themed project work.
- Designing approaches to engaging and raising the achievement of underachieving groups.
- Establishing curriculum teams of staff and pupils to develop plans for improving learning and teaching.
- Increasing curriculum breadth by delivering some lessons remotely using video conferencing.
- Greater use of adults other than teachers to extend the range of skills and support for pupils. (Gilbert Review 2007: 12)

Summarising the various perspectives listed above produces consensus on the essential components of any approach to personalised learning:

- learning how to learn
- assessment for learning
- a portfolio of effective teaching and learning strategies
- curriculum choice
- mentoring and support.

---

However, it is important to stress that personalised learning is about a new culture of teaching and learning. The Children's Plan identifies the essential components of such a culture as follows:

**Personalised teaching and learning:** The distinctive feature of the pedagogy of personalisation is the way it expects all pupils to reach or exceed expectations, fulfil early promise and develop latent potential. Personalised lessons are stretching for everyone. At the heart of personalisation is the expectation of participation, fulfilment and success. The hallmarks are ambitious objectives, challenging personal targets, rapid intervention to keep pupils on trajectory, and vigorous assessment to check and maintain progress. There are clear plans to support those who do not or cannot maintain trajectory.

**Other key features include:**

**Talking to learn:** Pupils are challenged to justify their answers by explaining their thinking.

**Guided work:** The teacher works with a small group to apply what has been learnt in the main part of the lesson.

**Keeping up:** Instead of retrospective catch-up, the first impulse of personalisation is to hold pupils in to the pace of learning.

**Tracking for success:** Effective teachers are continually updating what they know about each child's progress and using the information to plan next steps with precision. Tools such as Assessing Pupil Progress are used to track progress and to tell pupils how they can do better.

**Planning for progression:** In the past, progress meant getting through topics. Today it is about pupils progressing in their learning. The curriculum is constructed to deliver efficient steps of progression, helped by the National Strategies Frameworks.

**Stimulating new talents:** A range of cultural and social opportunities are on offer to help children to discover or develop new interests and talents.

**Different paths to the same ends:** The curriculum of the past was dominated by content coverage led by the teacher. Today we are building a curriculum around optimum progression for individual pupil learning. This means improving the way we tailor the curriculum for individual needs, and increasing choice. (DCSF 2007: 64)

There is no one authoritative definition of personalising learning available, this is probably a good thing as each school needs to develop its own version that is right for its context and, more importantly, the product of shared deliberation and open consultation across the school. However it is often helpful to have a starting point. The following is offered purely to start a dialogue in schools:

**Personalising learning is a strategy focusing all of a school's resources to ensure that the potential of each learner is realised by ensuring that the learning experience is appropriate to them personally and that they are able, with support, to decide what they learn, how they learn, when they learn and who they learn with.**

**Which of the above strategies are already in use in your school?**

**Which strategy is most likely to be implemented in the short term?**

**Which strategy presents the greatest challenge?**

**How would you describe the culture of learning and teaching in your school?**

**What would be the logical sequence for the implementation of the components of personalised learning in your school?**

---

# The components of personalised learning

## Learning how to learn

A central feature of any model of personalising learning is the focus on building the confidence and capacity of the individual learner – in a sense, empowering the learner. This is usually interpreted as:

- giving the learner a sense of their own efficacy and value as a learner;
- developing personal skills and strategies to enable self-management and direction;
- building a repertoire of learning strategies to offer a range of learning options;
- developing skills for further study and employability.

There are numerous formulations of the possible components of a learning to learn strategy. A generic model would include the following elements:

- self-management, organising time, workload and projects;
- developing a sense of personal effectiveness as a learner, using learning styles, developing effective learning behaviours, developing resilience and concentration;
- building confidence in literacy, oracy and numeracy;
- learning how to research, organise and present data;
- developing skills in analysing, explaining, justifying, demonstrating causality and developing a logical argument;
- developing confidence in working with others, notably on a one-to-one basis and in small groups;
- becoming meta-cognitive, learning to review and reflect and becoming reflexive as a learner.

---

## Assessment for learning

In the context of personalised learning, assessment becomes formative and summative and is extended from assessment of learning to assessment as and for learning. This implies:

- negotiation of learning outcomes, relevant assessment criteria and the means of assessment;
- agreement of who will assess what and how;
- linking assessment with feedback, mentoring and progression.

Assessment for learning is about validating deep learning that means that it should be capable of demonstrating the extent to which:

- the topic has been personally understood;
- there is evidence of active engagement with ideas and concepts;
- links have been made to prior learning and implications for the future are explained;
- evidence and information are presented in appropriate ways;
- academic criteria are met in terms of organisation and presentation.

The formative nature of assessment for learning implies the development of a wide portfolio of assessment strategies, for example:

- self-assessment
- peer assessment
- computer-based assessment
- internal teacher assessment
- external accredited assessment.

Of course the fundamental purpose of assessment is related to pupil progress and the achievement of appropriate standards. The Making Good Progress pilot (DCSF 2007: 66) aims to create a situation where:

Teachers use their detailed knowledge of each pupil's progress to provide more accurate support, more differentiated teaching and more personal provision. For example, they adapt teaching plans, re-group pupils in class according to their understanding, provide additional time and support on difficult topics, offer options and specialisms, set more challenging tasks for those who need to be stretched and set personalised targets.

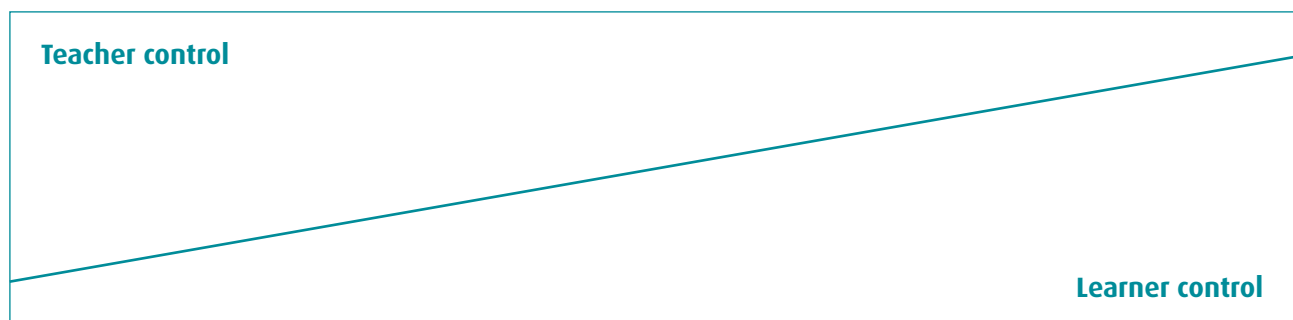
---

## Teaching and learning strategies

One of the most challenging aspects of personalised learning is the movement from a (stereotypical) generic approach to teaching to the facilitation of the learning of the individual. The issues in this context can be summarised as:

- What is to be learnt?
- How is it to be learnt?
- When is it to be learnt?
- Where is it to be learnt?
- Who is it to be learnt with?

The answers to these questions will determine the extent to which personalised learning is real or a token exercise.



Personalised learning is not about a mass movement to the right of this diagram; rather it is about informed choices as the most appropriate being given the topic, the developmental stage of the learner and the desired outcomes. Therefore, sometimes, whole class teaching is highly effective and appropriate; at other times individual activity is best. The role of the teacher is to negotiate and advise on the appropriate answers to the five questions above.

Given the implications of the emphasis on learning how we learn (see earlier), then quite irrespective of the structure of the learning experience there is also the issue of the nature of the learning process. To enhance the other elements of personalised learning, teaching and learning strategies will need to be:

- based in challenge, problem solving and research
- creative and innovative
- constructivist
- intrinsically motivating, ie perceived to be personally relevant and significant
- capable of differentiation
- open to multiple forms of assessment.

---

## Curriculum choice

The choice of what is to be studied is fundamental to any model of personalised learning if its potential is to be realised and it is to move beyond a cosmetic exercise. This is not to imply an 'open-market' approach but rather guided opportunities, according to age and ability, to design personal learning pathways which are challenging, relevant and significant. In practice this might mean:

- a focus on themes and ideas rather than progression through information;
- cross-curricular themes and integrated approaches to significant events;
- the 14–19 diplomas;
- the development of personal pathways following specific gifts and talents and special needs;
- accessing the curriculum in a variety of ways, in school, online, studying a specialist option and other schools and colleges, employers and universities;
- learning through community engagement and through employment projects.

The implications of this approach include:

- detailed and systematic diagnosis of each learner's wants and needs to negotiate a personal learning pathway;
- developing programmes based on learning skills rather than content;
- providing project-based approaches that focus on academic and social outcomes;
- creating time to enable individual interests and projects to be followed.

This all resonates with the QCA view:

Developing a curriculum to meet student needs:

Meeting the needs of individuals involves allowing them to work at a pace appropriate to their ability and circumstances. Thus different members of a teaching group could take varying amounts of time to achieve the agreed outcomes, rather than all of them completing the course in a predetermined period. They would progress in the manner that suited them best by:

- spending more time to acquire or consolidate learning
- studying an area in greater or lesser depth
- moving to a higher level of learning in the same or a related area
- moving on to a different, equally demanding, area of learning
- moving on to a different, more demanding, area of learning
- experiencing a different type of learning
- concentrating on personal development or experience (QCA)

The choice of what is to be studied is fundamental to any model of personalised learning

---

## Mentoring and support

It is difficult to envisage how any model of personalised learning could work without being underpinned by mentoring and an entitlement to personal support. Mentoring is widely seen as the most effective way to support deep learning, to secure understanding and to bring about personal change. In this context mentoring is usually characterised as being:

- a long-term, one-to-one relationship;
- based on high-level interpersonal skills;
- focused on supporting the learner's personal effectiveness;
- a blend of challenge and support.

Mentoring has a number of specific functions in ensuring that personalised learning works:

- mentoring academic progress and development;
- supporting learning to learn strategies and review and reflection to enhance learning effectiveness;
- advising and guiding on curriculum choices and learning strategies;
- reviewing well-being, attendance, engagement in learning.

In a fully personalised learning environment mentoring may well be the dominant activity for teachers and other adults. However, it is important to stress the importance of peer mentoring – learners mentoring learners in terms of specific aspects of curriculum content and topics and in providing support at the critical phases of school life.

The Children's Plan makes a commitment to one-to-one support:

*From the moment they arrive in secondary school every child will have a personal tutor who knows them well in the round and as a main contact for parents. (DCSF 2007: 57)*

The work of these tutors will include:

- helping with induction
- agreeing learning targets term by term
- encouraging ambitions
- arranging additional support
- helping the child make choices
- maintaining contact with parents
- liaising with other professionals and agencies.

For each of the five elements of personalised learning discussed above, review the current state of your school's engagement.



Component	Score	Issues and implications
1. Learning to learn		
2. Assessment for learning		
3. Teaching and learning strategies		
4. Curriculum choice		
5. Mentoring and support		

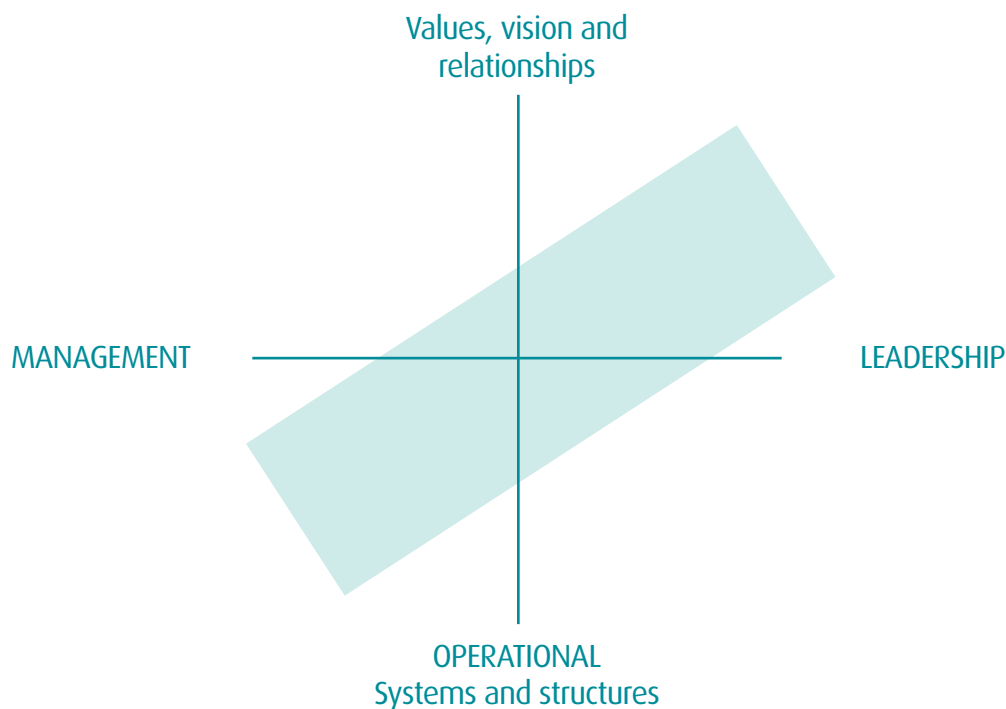
**Score each component:**

- A = Fully established, confident and consistent practice across the school.
- B = Emergent practice across the school or established in parts of the school.
- C = At the planning and development stage.
- D = Not yet on the school's agenda.

---

# Management for personalised learning

This section explores the management systems and structures that are necessary to ensure the successful implementation of a strategy to personalise learning. It has to be recognised that vision and values are not enough of themselves to secure successful implementation – leadership has to be balanced with effective management to translate principle into practice. This is demonstrated in the following diagram:



The shaded, diagonal, rectangle is the area of optimum effectiveness where there is recognition of the relationship between management and leadership as essential elements in the same process. The relative balance between them will be determined by the context of the school – so sometimes it may be necessary to focus on the management infrastructure – in other situations the leadership element may be more significant.

The elements in this section are all essentially to do with systems, how the school actually works. They will vary in significance according to the particular approach adopted by the school ie they will not all be required to work to the same level of significance at the same time. However topics such as minimising within school variation and student voice are highly significant in their own right and are important issues for every school – quite irrespective of the debate around personalising learning.

---

## Minimising within-school variation

One of the strongest arguments for personalised learning is that it offers one of the most powerful strategies to reduce within-school variation.

As well as excellent individual teaching practice, consistency in approach within each school is also important, so that each child's experience is consistently excellent from lesson to lesson and the key learning experiences are constantly reinforced. We believe that every school should have a clear teaching and learning policy which identifies its key practices and strategies for securing consistently standards of teaching and ensure that it is providing the right support for teachers to deliver that consistency. These policies must be devised, owned and implemented locally... (White Paper p32)

Every school leader is confronted on a regular basis by the reality of inconsistency across the school. This may be minor, alternative interpretations of school uniform, or it may explain the school's failure to improve, for example, variation in performance between departments. Variation is the enemy of improvement, and eliminating variation is the greatest challenge in securing entitlement and consistent quality of experience. This has proved to be one of the greatest challenges in securing school improvement and raising standards:

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), variation in performance within schools is four times as great as variation in performance between schools. The result is that the UK has one of the biggest class divides in education in the industrial world.

In comprehensive school systems, within-school variation in pupil attainment seems to be much greater than between school variation ... a recent DfES study of 2003 data showed that in value-added terms, Key Stage 2 (KS2) within-school variation is five times greater than between school variance, for KS3 it's 11 times greater and for KS4 it's 14 times greater. (National College 2006: 3)

The biggest single variable (30%) that explains within-school variation is teachers – teaching strategies, professional characteristics and classroom climate explain the often disturbing variation within schools. In providing a richer portfolio of learning strategies personalised learning offers a means of

reducing within-school variation and thereby improving personal and school performance.

A combination of the strategies identified in the National College report *Narrowing the Gap* (2005) and in the paper by Professor David Reynolds 'Schools learning from their best' provides the following strategies to reduce within-school variation:

- Changing school ethos and culture to focus on individual and collective responsibility and accountability for pupil achievement.
- Developing data-informed school policies and teaching strategies so as to enable evidence-based interventions in classrooms and for individual students. This implies sophisticated data collection and management systems and data-literate staff.
- Increasing openness and transparency about teaching practices through peer observation and support, middle leaders' active engagement with classroom practice and increased professional dialogue about effective teaching and learning.
- Ensuring a more appropriate 'fit' between individual students and their curriculum experience.
- Developing standard operating procedures, common protocols and shared criteria to ensure the availability of models of best practice, to develop a common language and facilitate monitoring and review.
- School-based professional development, used to consolidate and embed all the above points, to create a culture of enquiry into professional practice (using action research models) and support peer mentoring/coaching.
- Pupil voice is particularly important in this context. Possible applications might include:
  - perceptions of effective learning and teaching;
  - feedback on learning experiences;
  - lesson observations by students;
  - involving students in continuing professional development (CPD);
  - surveys focusing on the learning experience.

---

## Student voice and choice

It is not unreasonable to argue that personalised learning moves students from being subjects to citizens. As citizens they have an entitlement to be direct participants rather than have token consultation. If personalised learning is to go beyond paying lip-service to a greater focus on the individual then students have to become active protagonists in the design and delivery of their learning.

Johnson (2004: 3) powerfully expressed the case for student participation:

The growing view of children as competent, active contributors with a right to a say in those matters that affect them, has led many schools to introduce new approaches to pupil participation. Furthermore, published literature and new research continues to show this increased openness to working with children in school improvement has the potential to make schools both more responsive to their needs and more engaging. Arguably this is particularly important in the key area of teaching and learning. In any event, this increased openness to collaborative working will inevitably bring with it a range of exciting opportunities for adults and children alike.

If personalised learning is to work then it requires children and young people to become active partners in their learning. In the most general terms this means being highly responsive to the individual's entitlement to the curriculum that is most relevant to their needs. In other words the curriculum becomes a personal experience of learning rather than generic provision. This implies students as active participants in their learning being able to make authentic choices. Practical expression of student voice could include:

- involvement in planning and designing curriculum experiences;
- participation in monitoring, review and evaluation procedures;
- feedback to staff through lesson observations;
- regular satisfaction surveys;
- collaboration with students in other schools;
- bridging with the local community.

It would be fundamentally wrong if these principles were not also applied to all staff. For many schools the movement towards distributed leadership is also including students. If personalised learning is to be embedded into a school culture then students have to move from consultation to participation in terms of their involvement with the management and leadership of their learning. There may be a case for student groups to parallel school leadership and governance groups in all matters to do with effective learning and the school as a learning environment.

If personalised learning is to work then it requires children and young people to become active partners in their learning

---

## ICT

ICT is pivotal to personalised learning. Computers provide the means to implement many of the core principles of the personalisation process. What is clear is that most learners now have access to, and are fully engaged in, a wide range of information technologies. The internet is becoming more available, more interactive and more personalised. Most young people are involved in some sort of 'social networking', for example, MySpace, YouTube and Facebook. These resources, combined with the increasing availability of handheld devices, offer enormous potential for effective learning to be integrated with emerging technologies.

In practice what this means in schools and for curriculum design is that children should learn how to access and make choices about media, and that they should be supported to participate in the creation and the critical evaluation of media. It means preparing children as informed participants in media culture, able to make sensible choices about what they do with media and to recognise its intended effects. (Williamson and Payton 2009 p34)

Examples of the contribution of ICT to personalised learning might include:

- maintaining accurate detailed and accessible data on learners' academic progress, notably as a resource for academic mentors;
- managing students' learning pathways to ensure continuity, progression and appropriate coverage;
- supporting academic mentoring by building a detailed profile of the learner;
- acting as a resource bank for all the opportunities available for study in the school, local learning networks and other sources;
- providing access to learning activities through a school intranet;
- supporting 'learning to learn' activities through appropriate software;
- providing access to various integrated learning systems;
- managing assessment resources and the assessment of a range of learning activities.

Computers provide the means to implement many of the core principles of the personalisation process

---

## Systems and structures

As personalised learning becomes embedded in schools so it will require a reconsideration of the way in which a wide range of resources are displayed. In essence, access to, and the deployment of, time, space and people will have to change.

- The provision and management of a wide range of learning spaces to enable individual, paired, small group, class and cohort activities.
- Access to learning resources, notably ICT and specialist subjects, for example, technology and science on demand whenever possible.
- Provision of all-day catering facilities to recognise individual learning programmes.
- Flexible timetabling arrangements to maximise choice and embed alternative learning strategies.
- Close liaison and integration with other schools and providers to ensure coordinated provision across institutions.
- Rigorous and systematic monitoring systems to manage attendance, access to support and academic progress.
- Computerised monitoring and support systems to ensure valid data for managers.
- Redefining staff roles to balance responsibility for curriculum delivery and learning support.
- Creating school structures to reflect personalised learning, for example, house systems, learning teams, peer mentoring.

Many of the issues involved in integrating personalising learning into the infrastructure of a school's management systems are demonstrated in the TDA's guidelines on school development planning which includes the following topics and questions:

### Learning potential

Exploring the key characteristics of successful learners. Understanding how what happens outside the classroom can affect pupil performance.

- What are the characteristics of successful learners?
- What factors (and their root causes) prevent some pupils from learning while others succeed?
- How is this currently being addressed within the overall school improvement plan?

### Personalisation

Encouraging conversations that can lead to a better understanding of the broader needs of individual pupils, and identifying ways in which these can be met by extended services.

- How will the school identify issues affecting individual pupils or cohorts?
- How will this information help the school and partners develop an offer which is appropriate to the evolving needs of individuals or cohorts?
- How will pupils and parents be involved in shaping this?

### Every Child Matters

Examining the role of the school in influencing ECM outcomes in the context of wider community priorities and local authority plans.

- How does ECM relate to teaching and learning at the school?
- To what extent is ECM addressed within the school improvement plan?
- Which other agencies are working locally to achieve the ECM outcomes?

What is very clear from these extracts is that school improvement planning is not just a matter of defining outcomes and strategies to achieve them – it is much more concerned with shared outcomes and their associated processes and relationships. In particular improvement can only be achieved through an explicit and shared focus on the nature of learning in the school and the recognition of the fact that learning is, at its heart an individual process which starts with the learner.

For each of the five elements of personalised learning discussed above, review the current state of your school’s engagement.

Component	Score	Issues and implications
1. Minimising within-school variation		
2. Student voice and choice		
3. ICT		
4. Systems and structures		

**Score each component:**

- A = Fully established, confident and consistent practice across the school.
- B = Emergent practice across the school or established in parts of the school.
- C = At the planning and development stage.
- D = Not yet on the school’s agenda.

---

# Leadership for personalised learning

## Leadership to create a culture and values system focused on the learning of the individual student

At its most fundamental level of expression leadership is about securing clarity of values and shared purpose. These two factors are significant variables in determining the culture of any school. In the context of personalised learning the following principles and purpose would seem most appropriate to informing leadership strategies and behaviours:

1. An explicit focus on, and commitment to, the well-being of every individual expressed through the implementation of the five components of ECM:
  - being healthy
  - staying safe
  - enjoying and achieving
  - making a positive contribution
  - achieving economic well-being.
2. Working to secure both excellence and equity across the school system by minimising within-school variation and maximising individual potential.
3. Recognising the move from provider-led to client-led public services.
4. Helping to create a shared commitment to personalised learning through the development of shared scenarios for the future.

It is difficult to see how the five Every Child Matters outcomes could ever be fully achieved without a focus on personalising learning. This in turn implies:

- A shift from the focus on the school, Year group or subject as the starting point for school planning to a focus on the individual learner.
- The development of policies and strategies that reinforce and embed the focus on personalised learning.
- The development and deployment of staff to ensure personalised provision.
- The creation of monitoring, review and evaluation strategies that focus on the experience of the individual learner.
- The development of integrated strategies to ensure effective working with all agencies.
- Recognising that personalised learning for children and young people means personalised learning for adults.

However clear the moral consensus around learning, there is a parallel need to translate that imperative into a clear strategy that might include the following elements:

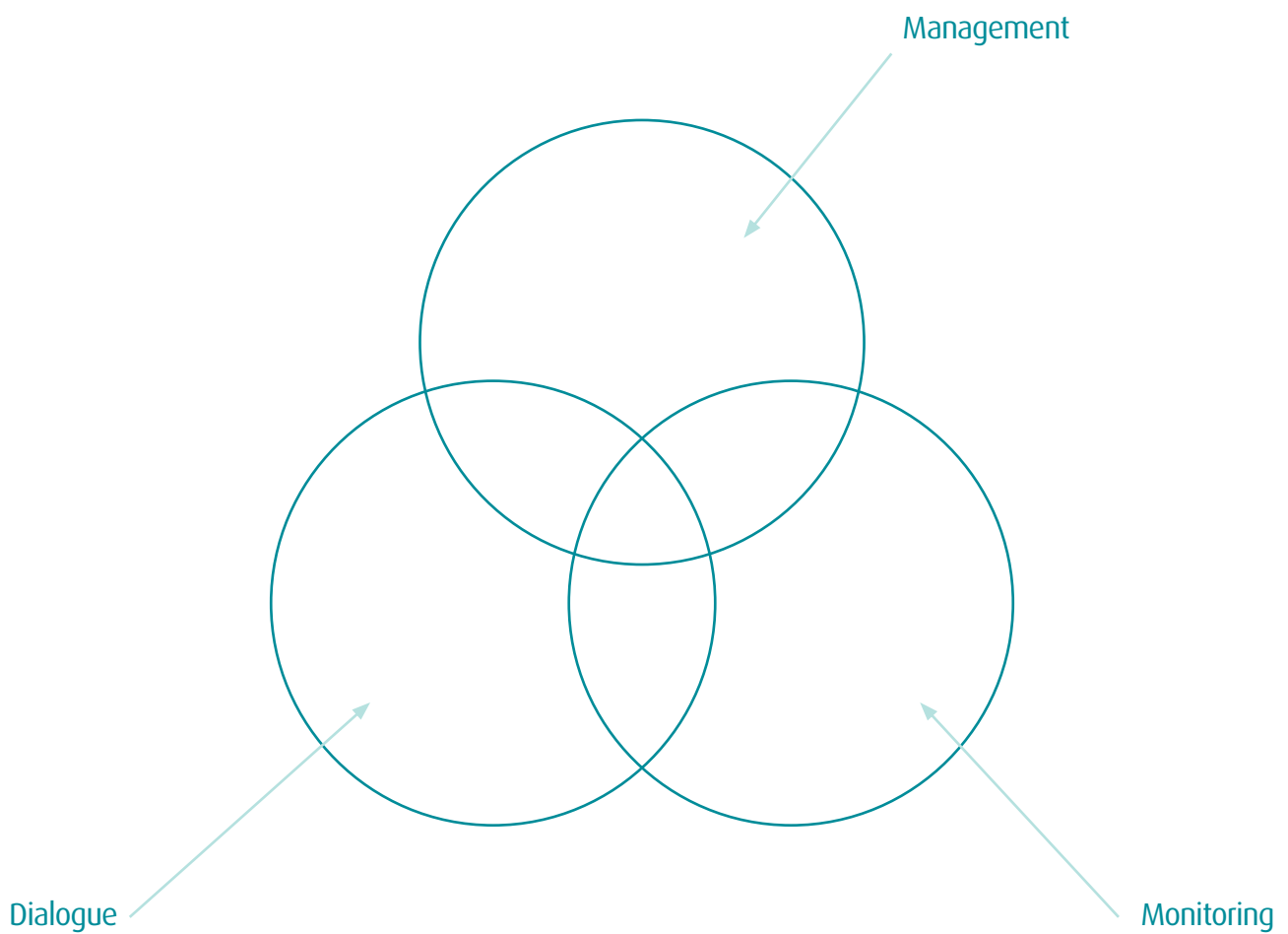
- A clear scenario for the future of the school designed around personalised approaches to learning.
- Budgetary planning which focuses on the resource implications of new approaches to learning.
- Developing staff capacity to work in the new learning environment.
- Reviewing roles and responsibilities to ensure that 'form follows function'.
- Building capacity to work in networks and clusters.
- Forging links between all phases of education to ensure continuity, progression and consistency.



---

## Leadership which is learning centred

Southworth (2004) has identified three strategies which leaders can use to influence the quality of learning in schools: modelling, monitoring and dialogue. As is shown in the figure below, these elements are closely interrelated.



### Strategies for learning-centred leadership

**Source:** After Southworth (2004)

---

Southworth (2004) defines the three elements in the following terms:

**Modelling:** Modelling is concerned with the power of example. Teachers and headteachers believe in setting an example because they know this influences pupils and colleagues alike. Research shows that teachers watch their leaders closely. And teachers watch what their leaders do in order to check if leaders' actions are consistent over time and to test whether leaders do as they say. Teachers do not follow leaders who cannot "walk the talk". (2007: 6)

**Monitoring:** Monitoring includes analysing and acting on pupil progress and outcome data (eg assessment and test scores, evaluation data, school performance trends, parental opinion surveys, pupil attendance data, pupil interview information). Leadership is stronger and more effective when it is informed by data on pupils' learning, progress and achievements as well as by direct knowledge of all teaching practices and classroom dynamics. (2007: 7)

**Dialogue:** Dialogue in this context is about creating opportunities for teachers to talk with their colleagues about learning and teaching. The kinds of dialogues which influence what happens in classrooms are focused on learning and teaching. Leaders create the circumstances to meet with colleagues and discuss pedagogy and pupil learning. (2007: 8)

The combination of these three strategies forms a powerful nexus that has the potential to:

- secure and embed the moral purpose and culture of the learning-centred school;
- provide a model for effective leadership at school, team and classroom level;
- personalise leadership engagement with colleagues;
- model practice of the most effective relationships with learners;
- demonstrate a high-profile consistent commitment to the core purpose of the school.

For Sergiovanni (2001: 119):

Learning earns the center-stage position because it is a powerful way for schools to adapt, to stay ahead, and to invent new solutions. At the heart of any successful change is a change in culture which makes new goals, new initiatives, and new ways of behaving part of a school's norm structure...

---

## Distributing leadership to build capacity across the school

Leithwood and his colleagues (2007) provide two compelling arguments for distributed leadership:

Our conclusion from this evidence as a whole is that leadership has very significant effects on the quality of school organisation and on pupil learning. As far as we are aware, there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership. One explanation for this is that leadership serves as a catalyst for unleashing the potential capacities that already exist in the organisation. (2007: 5)

and

The most significant results of this study for our purposes, however, were the indirect effects of total leadership on student learning and achievement, through its direct effects on the three dimensions of staff performance. Total leadership accounted for a quite significant 27 per cent of the variation in student achievement across the school. This is a much higher proportion of explained (two to three times higher) than is typically reported in studies of individual headteacher effects. (2007: 12)

In essence the impact on pupils learning is far greater if leadership is seen as a collective capacity across the school rather than as the personal status of a few individuals.

Bennett et al (2003: 3) identify three key characteristics of distributed leadership:

1. Distributed leadership- is not something “done” by an individual “to” others, or a set of individual actions through which people contribute to a group or organisation. Rather, it is what Peter Gronn calls “an emergent property of a group or network of individuals”, in which group members “pool” their expertise. This “concerted action” of people working together takes place within a pattern of interpersonal relationships, and brings about a situation in which the amount of energy created is greater than the sum of the individual actions.

2. Distributed leadership suggests that many more people are involved in the leadership activity than might traditionally be assumed.
3. Distributed leadership sees varieties of expertise being widely distributed across many people.

Distributed leadership is pivotal to the success of personalised learning given that the latter implies greater richness and complexity in provision, more diffuse organisational structures and the need to ensure consistency, coherence and accountability. The model that was discussed in the previous section on learning-centred leadership applies to all those engaged in the delivery of effective learning, not just traditional patterns of school leadership.

The practical implications of distributed leadership include:

- Redefining leadership in schools so that it is seen as situational (school, team, classroom) rather than linked to hierarchical status.
- Empowering individuals and teams so that authority and decision making are located at functional levels.
- Developing a team-based structure and making teams the basis for leading and managing.
- Opening leadership development provision and programmes to all.
- Focusing on developing teacher and student leadership, as a major source of capacity and sustainability.

One of the most powerful potential benefits of distributed leadership is to increase a sense of personal responsibility and accountability – to remove dependence on school leaders and so create a culture of interdependent learning. Personalised learning involves leadership being widely available in every aspect of the school’s life.

---

## Collaboration

The achievement of the principles of the five Every Child Matters outcomes will only be accomplished through sophisticated networks and interdependent relationships involving schools in partnerships with parents and carers, other schools, the wider community and other agencies involved in the provision of children and young people's services. Personalised learning involves a focus on the whole student as learner – the school cannot work in isolation from all the other partners that contribute to effective learning and educational success.

Because we know that no school can provide the full guarantee to every pupil and parent through acting alone, partnership must become central to the organisation of the system. Schools will need to work with one another and with other partners in education and wider children's services if they are going to provide the full range of opportunities that children and young people will need for success. (White Paper p44)

For personalised learning to work it means that school leaders will need to develop highly effective strategies to:

- integrate parents and carers into the learning process, for example, the idea of parents as co-educators;
- develop highly interdependent working through local partnerships with other schools, colleges, universities and other providers – especially with regard to 14–19 provision;
- ensure that extended services are seen as an integral component of personalised learning, that is, ensuing access to effective learning opportunities;
- relate the personalised learning agenda to other public services as part of the movement towards personalised services;
- develop links with the local community and virtual communities to maximise learning resources and opportunities;
- support moves towards rethinking governance to recognise the changes outlined above.

In essence:

... the school has responsibilities:

- first, to the pupils on its own roll
- second, to other children and young people in the wider area, and
- third, to the wider community which it serves.

(White Paper p48)

The Children's Plan places parents at the centre of all the strategies associated with effective learning. As the Secretary of State says in his introduction to the Plan:

... [this means] that more than ever before families will be at the centre of excellent, integrated services that put their needs first, regardless of traditional institutional and professional structures ... so that together they can engage parents and tackle all the barriers to the learning, health and happiness of every child. (DCSF 2007: 3)

In practical terms this means that parents will be entitled to:

- regular up-to-date information on their child's attendance, behaviour and progress;
- have complaints dealt with in a straightforward and open way;
- to be consulted via parent councils;
- regular engagement with their child's personal tutor;
- access to parent support advisers.

---

## Leading the implementation of personalising learning through a change process based on professional learning.

Personalised learning represents a significant challenge, in personal and organisational terms, to long established beliefs, practices, structures and procedures. It is essential that school leaders secure commitment and build confidence in new ways of thinking and working. The principles of leading change are now widely understood, if not always acted on. Personalised learning is more than another change; it has the potential to be a fundamental reworking of the historic pattern of schooling. It is therefore vital that school leaders use the change process as a model of best practice. This would seem to involve:

- building leadership knowledge and capacity around the theme of personalised learning and all its component elements;
- being open and transparent and maximising communication about the process;
- building a shared consensus around the values and principles informing personalised learning, seeing it as an entitlement rather than a tactic;
- ensuring that every stage of the change process is preceded and reinforced by relevant and effective professional development strategies;
- having a strategy which works through incremental change involving different components of personalised learning and different elements of the school to maximise success, build confidence and acceptance;
- maximising networking to learn from the success of others and disseminate successful practice;
- ensuring that the change process is inclusive and involves all stakeholders;
- monitoring, reviewing and evaluating against values and strategies.

There seems to be a very high consensus as to what constitutes personalised learning; what is clear is that there is no blueprint and no one right way. There are multiple pathways and this is confirmed by the evidence from schools that have started the process of personalised learning. Soles et al (2007: 8–9) provide examples of the common elements in their schools:

- we all work with our staff and community to articulate a vision and approach to learning that works for us in our context
- we use data to understand all our students' progress and focus our resources accordingly
- we provide high quality continuous professional development for all staff that is also personalised to meet their needs
- our pupils are genuinely involved in shaping their learning, even in one case by being involved in developing and monitoring the school development plan and reporting to parents on progress
- we are prepared to think 'outside the box' on any aspect of how we engage and support learning if we think it is needed, and we collect and use evidence that it is making a difference
- leading by example, including modelling how students are treated and setting expectations for high achievement
- using data to track pupils' achievements, analyse their progress and evaluate the quality of teaching (monitoring)
- generating discussion about teaching and learning (dialogue)
- sustaining school improvement, and
- creating structures, systems and processes to underpin all of the above.

Andrews (2007: 19) offers more specific guidance based on actual experience:

1. Ensure that school culture, philosophy and practices are such that students are already used to working independently, taking responsibility and having a voice; it's not enough to know what the vision is yourself, everyone has to understand and to get behind it.
2. Start small with a few committed members of staff who can then help embed the project and over time get the whole staff on board.
3. Ensure all members of staff – including support staff – whose work will be affected by the project are kept up to date with what is happening.
4. Devise an effective communication strategy so everyone is aware of what you hope to achieve and how the project will enhance student learning.

What seems to be important is that there is no one best way to introduce personalised learning. Schools need to build on existing strengths and areas of high confidence, develop capacity and commitment and create a long-term scenario that demonstrates leadership commitment and a clear sense of the changes in culture and practice that are needed to reinforce best practice and to ensure consistency of provision and entitlement.

Although it is perhaps an unfortunate analogy if you go back to the diagram on page 5 which was used to define the structure of this resource it becomes possible to envisage a number of permutations of that model to suit the particular needs of each school – rather like the windows in a fruit machine – it is for the school to define the winning permutation so there is no gambling with children's futures!

Personalised Learning	Management	Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Curriculum choice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Student voice and choice</li> <li>- School systems and structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collaboration</li> </ul>

In this example a school decides to use curriculum choice as the main vehicle for introducing personalised approaches. In that particular context it is clear that this involves students becoming active protagonists in the design of the learning experience. Equally it means a significant reshaping of the schools curriculum offer and the need for increased collaboration with other schools in order to meet the needs of all students.

In the example below the focus on teaching and learning strategies must be accompanied by a powerful initiative to minimise in school variation that implies a significantly enhanced role for middle leaders.

Personalised Learning	Management	Leadership
- Teaching and learning strategies	- Minimising within-school variation	- Distributed leadership

Of course it is artificial to separate out the various elements- obviously all strategies will include the need to focus on culture and vision and to understand the implications for leading change. It does seem to be the case that successful innovation is often based on the implementation of a very clear and specific project with careful consideration of the implications for effective leadership and management supported by distributed leadership and building capacity through professional development.

The successful implementation of each of the elements described above has to be seen in a strategic sense i.e. as contributions towards the creation of the learning centred school in which personalisation is the real experience of every learner, irrespective of age or ability. It is important to see the elements of the diagram on page 8 as being interdependent and mutually reinforcing and supportive, rather than elements on a 'shopping list'. Personalisation will only work when all of the elements are in place and building mutual capacity and sustainability.

For each of the five elements of personalised learning discussed above, review the current state of your school's engagement.

Component	Score	Issues and implications
1. Leadership to create a culture and values system focused on the learning of the individual student		
2. Leadership which is learning centred		
3. Distributed leadership to build capacity across the school		
4. Leadership which builds relationships with parents, communities and agencies		
5. Leading the implementation of personalising learning through a change process based on professional learning		

#### Score each component:

- A = Fully established, confident and consistent practice across the school.
- B = Emergent practice across the school or established in parts of the school.
- C = At the planning and development stage.
- D = Not yet on the school's agenda.



---

## References

- Andrews, C, 2007, 'A glimpse into the future?', *Ldr*, issue 28, September, Nottingham, National College
- Bennett, B, Wise, C, Woods, P & Harvey, JA, 2003, *Distributed Leadership*, Summary Report, Spring, Nottingham, National College
- DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2007, *The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures*, London, DCSF
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2004) *Making Good Progress*, London, DfES
- DfES (Department for Education and Skills) (2004) *A National Conversation about Personalised Learning*, Nottingham, DfES
- Gilbert Review, 2007, *2020 Vision Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group*, London, DfES
- Johnson, K, 2004, *Children's Voices: Pupil leadership in primary schools*, Nottingham, National College
- Leithwood, K, Day, C, Sammons, P, Harris, A & Hopkins, D, 2007, *Seven Strong Claims about Successful School Leadership*, Nottingham, National College
- National College (National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services), 2006, *Narrowing the Gap*, Nottingham, National College
- National College, 2007, *Leading Personalised Learning in Schools*, Nottingham, National College
- QCA *14-19 Learning* ([www.qca.org.uk/14-19/6th-form-schools?68\\_246.htm](http://www.qca.org.uk/14-19/6th-form-schools?68_246.htm))
- Reynolds, D, 2008, *Schools Learning from their Best: The Within School Variation (WSV) Project*, Second draft, Nottingham, National College
- Sergiovanni, T, 2001, *Leadership: What's in it for school?*, London, RoutledgeFalmer
- Sims, E, (2006) *Deep learning*, SSAT (Specialist Schools and Academies Trust)
- Soles, G, Keeble, R & Jefferies, S, 2007, 'Time to get personal', *Ldr*, issue 28, September, Nottingham, National College
- Southworth, G, 2004, *How Leaders Influence What Happens in Classrooms*, Nottingham, National College

The National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services is committed to excellence and dedicated to inclusiveness. We exist to develop and inspire great leaders of schools, early years settings and children's services. We share the same ambition – to make a positive difference to the lives of children and young people.

Membership of the National College gives access to unrivalled development and networking opportunities, professional support and leadership resources.

©2010 National College for Leadership of Schools and Children's Services – All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced without prior permission from the National College. To reuse this material, please contact the Marketing and Communications Team at the National College or email [publications@nationalcollege.org.uk](mailto:publications@nationalcollege.org.uk).

Triumph Road  
Nottingham NG8 1DH  
T 0845 609 0009  
F 0115 872 2001  
E [enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk)  
[www.nationalcollege.org.uk](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk)