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Research Associate Report

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Personalising the curriculum at 14–19

Common themes and unique features

Lessons learned from research in four contrasting secondary schools in the north of England

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Special series on **Personalised learning**

Contents

Introduction

In his article 'Fit for Purpose'[1], headteacher Derek Wise states that the term personalised learning is useful because it "points the way forward. It is a concept which is inspiring and potentially transformative".

Hargreaves[2] states: "Curriculum is perhaps the most obvious gateway for personalising learning. The 14–19 reforms have recognised that pupils need greater choice than they have been awarded since the introduction of the National Curriculum after the 1988 Education Reform Act."

The aim of this research is to investigate the interpretation of this potentially inspiring concept and to consider how it has supported the transformation of the curriculum and the educational experience offered in four secondary schools.

David Miliband, in his speech to the North of England Education Conference in 2004[3], stressed that personalisation "can only be developed school by school. It cannot be imposed from above". And…if this is the case, "individual school leaders will need a degree of confidence to lead personalisation in their own institutions."

By telling the story of four schools, we hope to show how the concept of a personalised curriculum has been simplified in each school to enable the development of systems that are tailored to the needs of individual pupils.

Dean Fink in 'Growing into it'[4] stresses: "There will be pitfalls and problems and not everything about personalised learning is going to work well." He urges his readers not to rush into personalised learning and encourages a problem-seeking rather than problem-solving approach in order to develop a "significant and sustainable change". The research consistently bears this advice in mind and considers carefully the process of personalisation in the different schools including consideration of the leadership, which brought about effective change, the partnerships which underpinned the process and the barriers to change which had to be overcome.

Background

Prior to the term personalisation being used within the field of education, the three of us booked a conference room at a local hotel and set about devising a new curriculum for our school. Five hours later, we left with a plan to create five curriculum routes at Key Stage 4. The link between what we had achieved and the personalisation agenda, as it emerged, became clear. The DfES's five components of personalisation included curriculum entitlement and choice, school organisation, and strong partnership beyond the school. Each of these is located within this study.

We were eager to learn from the experiences of other schools in personalising the curriculum; to identify common themes which could be shared and unique features which should be noted.

Is personalisation a personal thing or can we extract lessons and set up a model, or at least identify learning points that avoid the need to reinvent the wheel in other schools? Or is it the case that personalising the curriculum has to be approached in a unique way in individual schools, taking into account the very specific circumstances within which they work?

Context

Four schools were involved in the research project. They were selected or recommended because they were known to have taken steps to personalise the curriculum through the development of routes and pathways at Key Stage 4. Details of the four schools are included in Appendix 1.

Methodology

Data collection tasks were divided between the three of us. We worked in pairs for all visits and alternated the roles of interviewer and note taker.

The research methods comprised three distinct yet complementary approaches in order to triangulate the data. These were:

- **Semi-structured interviews with headteachers and/or senior leaders.** Leaders were asked to detail the personalisation process in terms of routes and pathways in their school. Approaches to leading and managing change and barriers to success were explored and headteachers and senior leaders were questioned about the impact of personalised routes and pathways. Interview questions are included in Appendix 2.

- **Pupil focus groups.** Pupils were led through a variety of tasks and discussions which allowed them to present an insight into and evaluation of their curriculum route. The schools selected a range of pupils from Key Stage 4 to include at least one pupil from each route and pathway. Questionnaires were also completed to allow individual views to be put forward. Pupils were rewarded for their efforts with book tokens. An example questionnaire is included in Appendix 3.

- **Questionnaires.** These were sent to a sample of parents across the four schools with stamped addressed envelopes included for their return. Response rates were relatively pleasing, with a 65 per cent return. Again, the sample of parents was taken from across the routes. An example questionnaire to parents is included in Appendix 4.

Findings

The story of four pupils following a personalised curriculum (pseudonyms have been used)

Charles Leadbeater[5] in his article for Demos (2004) asks: "In learning about personalisation – how can we put the learner at the heart of the education system?"

We came across a number of examples of how school leaders had put learners at the centre and had rewritten the education script (Charles Leadbeater: Demos 2004). It may be useful to describe, at this stage, a range of experiences of pupils that we came across in the four schools involved in the research. To what extent had the schools succeeded in "tailoring their curriculum to the needs, interests and aptitudes" (Miliband)[6] of these very different pupils?

Jimmy

Jimmy reached the end of Key Stage 3 in danger of permanent exclusion. He displayed challenging behaviour and did not cope well with a traditional classroom environment. He spent a significant proportion of Year 9 on fixed-term exclusion or at the school's inclusion unit.

As part of the personalised curriculum offered by his school, Jimmy followed a route in Key Stage 4 which included the study of maths and English GCSE, as well as a range of vocational courses. Jimmy opted for a hairdressing course at college and also undertook regular work experience at a local hairdressers. He studied for an Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) Youth Award at the local youth centre and worked closely with the youth worker. Time spent in a traditional classroom was minimal. Jimmy completed the course successfully and has gone on to study for an NVQ in hairdressing.

Jimmy stated: "At first, I was nervous about working away from school so much but I have had the chance to do work experience and go to college and can do GCSEs as well."

Julie

In a second research school, Julie's curriculum script required less rewriting. Julie studied a core curriculum of English and maths, as well as GNVQ Science. Julie enjoyed PE and was able to study for a Junior Sports Leader Award in addition to GCSE PE.

Julie is studying a half GCSE in IT and a half GCSE in French. She has the opportunity to study after school to extend either of these to a full GCSE. Julie also studied a half course GCSE in Religious Studies in Year 9 and completed the full GCSE in Year 10. She will embark on AS Religious Studies in Year 11. The curriculum route allows Julie to study in depth the subjects she enjoys and is confident in. Science, which was a weaker subject, can be studied in a more practical way with continued assessment and modular exams and the opportunity for frequent feedback to allow improvement. "I enjoy my science now. It is good to be able to get more qualifications in my own time."

John

John's school starts Key Stage 4 in Year 9, with KS3 SATs being completed at the end of Year 8. Individual subjects have their own approach to testing and there is a focus on tracking of individual pupils with a 'Praising Stars' target-setting system based on Fischer Family Trust figures, allowing careful monitoring of individuals. Subjects personalise what they offer to pupils like John. In

science, he may embark on a GNVQ course and then progress to complete the course or be guided into studying the sciences separately. In geography, he may study for a GCSE in Years 9 and 10 and progress to AS in Year 11. Other pupils may start a GNVQ and choose to continue the course or move to a full GCSE in Years 10 and 11. Pupils can be tested when ready in this model.

Jenny

Jenny's studies have been personalised through the 'lift shaft' model of timetabling employed at her school. This allows pupils to take up a subject and be examined at a level appropriate to the individual. There is a high level of individualisation in this school in terms of timetabling, which support the four established pathways. The pathways were personalised to allow pupils to both study courses appropriate to their ability and learning style and to be examined at an appropriate time. The lift shaft model allowed pupils to 'get off' at any level. Jenny, as a Pathway 4 pupil, followed an accelerated route. As a gifted pupil in English (achieving level 8), she had been able to complete an English Literature GCSE at the end of Year 10 and start AS in Year 11. "A small group of us had the chance to take GCSE early. I am looking forward to starting AS Level next year and will probably go on to do an English course at university." This school also abandoned the traditional role of form tutors as it implemented the personalised routes. Instead, staff were allocated a number of pupils with whom they would meet regularly to discuss choices and monitor progress.

Findings

Common themes

- In personalising the curriculum, all schools involved in the research had looked to vocational qualifications.

- All schools had taken advantage of the increased flexibility offered by the 14–19 curriculum to allow a personalised approach.

- One headteacher said that flexibility rather then personalisation summed up what they had done. This was a common theme across the research schools.

- All schools relied heavily on the use of data (pupil performance, prior attainment aptitude and attendance) to inform the personalisation process.

- Personalising the curriculum did not necessarily mean increasing choice for individual pupils. One headteacher explained: "Choice is a weak form of personalised learning."

- In most cases, personalisation of the curriculum had included an element of acceleration.

- Response to personalisation from pupils was consistently positive. Most pupils interviewed were very aware, not only of their curriculum route, but of how this fitted into the 14–19 curriculum map for their school. Pupils consistently said that following a personalised route had led to higher levels of motivation. Similarly, they said that behaviour was better in Key Stage 4 than in Key Stage 3 and that they enjoyed their studies more.

- Parents were aware of the level of personalisation and consistently agreed that their child had been motivated effectively by following a curriculum that "suited their needs".

- Leadership of personalisation had in all cases been staged, with an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach to change being adopted. One headteacher described the "journey towards personalisation", while another said "the climate for change had to be established." All heads had a distributive model of leadership with significant leadership of personalisation being taken on by one or more deputies and/or a member of the senior leadership team. "The deputies get on and make things happen".

- All schools showed some unique features of personalisation which took into account the specific circumstances within which they worked.

- Most schools had considered the location of study as well as the subject of study to be an important element of personalisation.

- The curriculum routes and pathways offered in the sample schools included a range of assessment methods from the 100 per cent portfolio continual assessment type offered by BTECs to the more traditional 80 per cent exam, 20 per cent coursework offered by the many GCSE syllabuses.

- All schools had approached personalisation from more than one perspective and had considered elements of David Hargreaves's nine gateways or Miliband's five components in personalising the curriculum experience for their pupils.

- The significance of the perspectives of personalisation varied from school to school with some emphasising pupil voice as being crucial, while others placed an emphasis on workforce development. In others, teaching and learning was a focus. In all schools, the development of partnerships had been key, as had the focus on the school organisation aspect.

The following tables summarise the curriculum approach to personalisation in the four schools and briefly cross-references to other aspects of personalisation. The tables also highlight some of the barriers and issues that faced the leadership teams as they sought to develop a more personalised approach.

Key features of personalised curriculum routes and pathways

	Features	**Other elements**	**Barriers**
School A	- Four pathways offered, each with a distinctive core. - Vocational Science offered as an alternative to traditional GCSE on most pathways. - Separate sciences offered to most able students. - Choice of five vocational courses to personalise the experience, including Art and Design, Business, Leisure and Tourism, ICT and Creative Arts. - Half GCSEs used to meet entitlements and increase flexibility. - Out-of-hours learning allows some half GCSEs to be studied to full awards. (MFL and ICT). - Technology-based courses were offered at the local college. - Some courses involved acceleration, for example, RE. GCSE started in Year 9, completed in Year 10. AS courses started in Year 11. - Key Stage 3 has been revised so that Key Stage 4 courses can now begin in Year 9. This increases the flexibility to personalise. - Different subjects have different approaches to personalisation and there is personalisation within subjects as well as across the curriculum.	**School organisation** The school day was changed to allow greater flexibility. Workforce roles have evolved. LSAs were used creatively and learning managers (non-teaching) support pupils' learning in a targeted way. **Partnerships** Local business links have supported the extension of vocational courses. Links with the local college support some courses and have enabled early college transfer for a small number of students. **AFL** Praising Stars database is used to set challenging targets and monitor progress. **Teaching and learning** - Five ASTs are linked to departments across the school to support improvements in teaching and learning. - A Learning to Learn programme has been devised and the school has focused on devising '10 aspects of a good lesson'.	- Convincing staff that new courses and new approaches to study are valid. - Educating teachers about the data and making them confident enough to predict forward at an early stage. - Impact on some subjects, for example, modern languages, which without careful management could be squeezed from the curriculum.

	Features	**Other elements**	**Barriers**
School B	▪ Five pathways are offered, each with a distinctive core and differing option choices. ▪ Vocational courses are included in all pathways. These include Vocational Health and Social Care, BTEC Retail, Performing Arts, Languages, Business and Digital Applications. ▪ Work-related courses at college are a key feature on two of the pathways. NVQ courses in Construction and Hair and Beauty are offered. ▪ Two pathways are recommended to each pupil. They have a choice within this. ▪ Pupils have the opportunity to study out of hours to extend their range of qualifications.	**School organisation** ▪ The school is an extended school and is working towards a staggered working day. ▪ Twilight learning opportunities extend the qualification range. **Partnerships** ▪ Links have been made with other schools in the area to allow cross-school delivery of courses. Courses delivered are usually linked to schools' specialisms. ▪ A strong partnership has been developed with the sixth form college. ▪ Strong partnerships with external agencies were seen as essential to help keep disaffected learners in education. ▪ Offsite providers were key to the success of the routes, therefore strong links with local colleges and educational music companies etc, were seen as essential. **AFL** Assessment for learning has been identified as a whole-school priority and staff had received training on how to use data effectively. **Teaching and learning** The performing arts specialism had helped to provide the focus on teaching and learning and in sharing good practice. Creativity is a key theme in supporting improvements in teaching and learning.	▪ There is clearly a need to personalise further and in particular to have a sixth pathway to cater for less able pupils. ▪ The personalised curriculum led to a teaching skills mismatch and resulted in three teachers being made redundant. ▪ There was reluctance from some teaching staff to change types of courses and methods of delivery. ▪ Initially, parents' lack of knowledge of different courses and providers led to mistrust.

	Features	**Other elements**	**Barriers**
School C	- Five curriculum routes are offered at Key Stage 4. Each has a distinctive core. - One route includes disapplication from science in the core. - Four of the routes include a strong vocational element including courses in vocational ICT, Health and Social Care, Business and a BTEC Design course. - Route 5 includes significant offsite learning, with courses being delivered at the local youth club and college. - Half GCSEs are used to meet entitlements and statutory requirements and as a way of increasing flexibility in the curriculum. - There are some elements of acceleration: pupils on Route 5 take maths and English GCSEs at the end of Year 10.	**School organisation** This was seen as key to the personalisation process. A review of the role of adults other than teachers led to the creation of new roles. For example, pastoral administrators and inclusion support workers to support pupils on personalised routes. **Partnerships** "Effective, meaningful partnerships are essential." - The school has developed these with the youth service, college, Connexions and a number of local businesses. - The school has looked not just to traditional partnerships but also to new ones which extend horizons, including partnerships in Europe and beyond. **AFL** The school has a very effective data system which gives quality information and allows appropriate routes to be recommended to pupils. AFL has been a focus for training through the secondary strategy this year. **Teaching and learning** Senior leaders focus on teaching and learning. The teaching and learning group and curriculum monitoring systems support the dissemination of good practice. A model lesson for the school has been established.	- Getting the right level of personalisation is difficult. The school still needs to find appropriate routes for a minority of pupils. - Reluctance to change is an issue. The climate for change had to be established. - Work/life balance was an issue as the change implemented led to greatly increased workloads for some teachers and leaders. - There is a need to avoid complacency in thinking that you have got the curriculum right. It requires constant review and development.

	Features	Other elements	Barriers
School D	▪ There are 17 strands of learning which fit into 4 curriculum pathways. ▪ Acceleration is a key feature of the routes with the most gifted pupils being able to sit exams early and embark on AS level courses during Key Stage 4. ▪ Open University models are used in the sixth form. ▪ The school has devised what it calls a lift shaft method of timetabling: ie, in some subjects lessons are timetabled across Years 10, 11, 12 and 13 to allow pupils to study and take exams in a particular subject when they are ready. ▪ Two of the pathways include vocational qualifications including Pathway 3, where pupils follow predominantly work-related courses such as engineering at the local college. An Accountancy Technician course is offered on the enhanced vocational pathway (number 4). Other vocational courses include Hair and Beauty, Hospitality and Catering, Equine Studies and Performing Arts. ▪ The curriculum is highly individualised.	**School organisation** ▪ The timetable has been amended to include the lift shaft system. ▪ A half-day staff preparation development slot has been built in. Workforce reform has been significant. ▪ There are three times more teaching staff than before personalisation. ▪ Form tutors' roles have been abolished and new learning co-ordinators now work with pupils. **Partnerships** ▪ Strong relationships have been developed with a range of agencies. ▪ The federation of two schools has supported the personalisation process. ▪ We have strong links with the local college and training providers. ▪ Links with local businesses support our fast-track engineering scheme. Pathway days have been identified across partnerships to facilitate effective timetabling. **AFL** Data is used effectively and the school has focused on self-motivation and self-review. **Teaching and learning** The development of thinking skills has been introduced alongside personalising the curriculum.	▪ Initial perceptions of some parents meant that they were reluctant to allow their children to follow a vocational pathway. ▪ Cost has been an issue. Some of the courses require a high staffing and resources input. ▪ Lack of common approaches and procedures and lack of clarity in line management across partnerships has been a problem. It is difficult to establish integrated work patterns between schools and other providers. ▪ A culture of change had to be established amongst the staff.

Findings – pupil voice

What does a personalised curriculum look like and feel like to the pupils?

- In all but one example, personalisation for the pupils has continued to mean studying the core subjects of maths, English, science, PSE, PE and ICT. In one school, a curriculum route involved disapplication from science to allow a double vocational option to be studied.

- In all four schools in the sample, personalisation has meant the introduction of vocational courses. These courses included GNVQ Science, GNVQ Leisure and Tourism, Business, Health and Social Care and BTEC courses in design, retail and performing arts.

  Pupils following these courses said they enjoyed them because you "get more trust from the teachers", you are "more independent" and the courses involve time out of school – "more trips out", as one pupil described it. "There are less exams and you get continual feedback."

- The element of choice was important for pupils in all the schools included in the study. Pupils were asked to compare their Key Stage 4 experience with that of Key Stage 3. They were unanimous in their view that Key Stage 4 provides a more positive experience than Key Stage 3. "I learn more because I do lessons that I choose," and "people are more settled in lessons because they have chosen their own interests."

- In all schools included in the study, pupils were very aware not only of their own curriculum route or pathway but also of how this route fits into the curriculum map for their institution. One pupil, following a predominantly vocational, continual assessment-based route, stated: "I enjoy Key Stage 4 because there are less exams to do. The work is set at my level." Another pupil said: "I like exams, so chose to do 10 GCSEs."

- In two of the four schools, personalisation included the opportunity to study in extra-curricular time. For example, in one school vocational ICT could be taken as an extra-curricular option. In another, performing arts could be studied after school. The response from pupils was again overwhelmingly positive. One pupil who had been offered this option claimed: "You have more control over the qualifications you get in the future."

- Pupils overwhelmingly said that they enjoy learning beyond the classroom – a significant finding in designing programmes of study for individual subjects, as well as informing the curriculum overview for 14–19. It was evident in all schools in the sample that this element of personalisation could not have been achieved without the element of strong partnerships beyond the school.

  School leaders in the sample had unanimously shown a commitment to collaboration with partner schools, with colleges, with work experience providers and with the youth service. One pupil said: "I go to college twice a week to do a hairdressing course and have applied to go there next year." Another pupil explained: "I work with a youth worker at the youth club every day."

- The questions which returned the most disparate responses were the ones linked to methods of assessment. Clearly, if not obviously, some pupils like courses that are assessed by exams while others do not. It is important, therefore, that in personalising the curriculum and devising routes and pathways, a range of assessment methods are included.

Findings – parent voice

- Parents of pupils following a personalised curriculum consistently felt that their children enjoy the courses that they follow at school. "The curriculum is very appropriate to my son; it enables him to pursue his interests to the full."

- Parents were confident that the curriculum route would lead to success and that there is a clear idea of where the course might lead. "The subjects chosen give a broad basis and allow for change in direction," and "the curriculum is appropriate for my child as the subjects taken are what she later wants to proceed with."

- Parents felt well informed about the curriculum routes and pathways and most agreed or strongly agreed that their child had received a good level of support when choosing courses. "The guided choices evening was very informative," and "we had guidance interviews with the head of year, which was useful in explaining about the vocational courses."

- The majority of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child has a positive attitude to school.

Amongst the positive responses, there were individual concerns expressed by parents. These included a desire for more advance information about the content of courses and the inevitable request for more continual updates once the courses have commenced so that "I could offer parental support which is targeted rather than any current nagging."

What are the key elements of schools' curriculum practice?

Headteachers and senior leaders described what the routes and pathways looked like in their school.

Personalisation had included:

- disapplication from science for small cohorts of pupils to allow them to study vocational ICT as part of their core curriculum

- the introduction of vocational science as part of the core for some pupils

- the study of one vocational course as part of the core for some pupils – this could then be combined with traditional GCSEs

- the opportunity to study in extra-curricular time for formal qualifications

- the use of short course GCSEs to extend choice and personalise within routes and pathways

- the study of vocational and applied GCSEs to personalise the curriculum on more academic routes

- the acceleration of courses for some more able pupils to allow them to start AS courses early

- the acceleration of courses for some lower ability pupils in order to increase the level of motivation and to allow the study of a related GCSE in the second year of the course

- partnership with local colleges and other providers to support the delivery of some curriculum routes

- consideration of where study takes place, not just what is studied, so that pupils learn in the workplace, a college environment, a youth club or in areas of their school other than the traditional classroom

In personalising the curriculum at Key Stage 4 there have been implications for Key Stage 3 and the post-16 phase:

- In one school, Key Stage 3 had been condensed to a two-year programme of study. Pupils take SATs at the end of Year 8, with some going on to AS level during Year 11. This school had to win the cultural battle of establishing that it is "OK to start but not necessarily complete GCSE courses". Pupils, for example, might start a GCSE geography course, completing a piece of coursework during Year 9, but not continue with this subject into Year 10.

- In personalising provision, a rethink of post-16 courses was often required. Pupils embarking on AS levels during Year 11 progress to A2 during Year 12.

- One school found that pupils that had followed a vocational curriculum at Key Stage 4 struggled to meet the demands of traditional AS and A2 level courses, but often were successful with the AVCE or applied approach, which was better suited to their learning style. In this school, the routes and pathways system follows through to Key Stage 5. There is a natural break at the end of Year 11, after which pupils follow a sixth form route which has been recommended to them. Again, "personalisation rather than choice".

The role of leadership

How did headteachers and the senior teams in the schools in our study lead the curriculum to these levels of personalisation?

In developing a curriculum that comprises routes and pathways, there are a number of leadership implications. Set out below are findings relating to:

- why the schools embarked on change
- factors supporting change
- barriers encountered and how leaders overcame these

Why the schools embarked on change

Not all of the schools gave the same reasons. However, each identified one or more of the following as catalysts for innovation:

- **The drive to raise standards.** The drive to raise standards and achievement was a recurrent theme in the research. Leaders in all four schools had identified personalisation as a strategy for raising standards. One senior leader claimed that "the introduction of personalised routes and pathways was a way of addressing the stagnation in our results." A headteacher said: "Recommended routes was the next logical step in raising levels of achievement, ensuring that learners follow a curriculum which is suited to them."

- **The opportunity for innovation and flexibility created by the 14–19 curriculum.** All headteachers and senior teams in the study have responded to the flexibility provided by the 14–19 framework. "We scoured the legislation to identify opportunities to create a more flexible curriculum."

- **The formation of new partnerships.** In two of the four schools in the study, heads and leadership teams had been influenced by the development of collaborative partnerships. In the case of one school, this involved a learning partnership with another secondary school and the appointment of an executive principal. The challenge of devising a curriculum which would meet the needs of pupils across two contrasting schools was significant. "The opportunities offered across the two schools was also significant." In another sample school, a partnership with a newly formed sixth form college led to "a raising of aspirations and clear progression for routes from 14–19". The recognition of the value of partnership beyond the school was evident in the work of all leadership teams. For instance, they had all recognised and taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the Increasing Flexibility programmes being run by local colleges. "Vocational facilities and courses are being developed on different sites. Pupils study NVQs in engineering and accountancy at the local college."

- **A change in organisational circumstances.** A change of personnel in the senior leadership team proved to be a catalyst for change in all of the schools, with a new head or deputy bringing a different perspective to the existing curriculum in school.

- **Underachievement in one curriculum area.** This sometimes acted as a catalyst in the personalisation process. "I identified underachievement in science and asked how can the curriculum be modified to suit the needs and learning styles of more of our pupils." The outcome was personalisation within the science curriculum with vocational GNVQ/dual award and triple science courses being offered on different pathways.

- **Challenges set following an Ofsted inspection.** Although no school would wish to be put into special measures, "it focuses the mind, draws in resources and removes complacency". "Ofsted initially set a challenge to improve results to 60 per cent five A*–Cs in three years. We achieved this and looked to improve further."

Factors supporting change

The schools between them identified the following factors that supported change:

Leadership styles

- All headteachers in the survey used a distributive leadership model.

- One or more deputies took on significant leadership of personalisation: "The deputy took a lead in implementing the new routes".

- There was evidence that a no-blame culture existed within all of the schools, which enabled middle leaders to innovate: "It is important to trust the heads of department."

- There were "soft line management systems to ensure shared vision and approach", which also supported middle leaders in the drive to innovate. These were characterised as being less overtly accountability-driven than conventional line management relationships.

Breadth of leadership experience

- The headteachers exhibited a professional confidence in leading the change:

    o Each played a role at a national level beyond their school through involvement with NCSL, QCA and SSAT. This gave them extended networks and learning opportunities.
    o School leaders all showed a commitment to collaboration with partner schools, colleges, work experience providers and the youth service. This was built from existing partnerships and helped to create new ones.

- The headteachers in the survey schools had the confidence to make wholesale change because it felt right for their school. One headteacher described the personalisation process as follows: "Make the school fit the child through devising a curriculum, investing in resources and training and development of staff and in linking with the community to enable pupils to succeed."

Leading and managing change

- Leaders had adopted an evolutionary rather than revolutionary approach to change, with a clear staging of the personalisation process: "The climate for change had to be established". This included enabling middle leaders to lead the new curriculum model by, for example:

    o selling the benefits of a personalised approach
    o promoting the use of visits to other schools to see alternative practice

- A deputy in one of the schools emphasised the importance of creating a culture of confidence: "We have confidence-based leadership: staff are confident that the senior leadership team can take the school forward."

Knowing the pupils

- It was evident that all schools had listened to the pupil voice. Pupils were involved in self-evaluation processes which informed curriculum decisions, for example, through focus groups and questionnaires.

- Schools were confident in their use of pupil data, both quantitative and qualitative, which informed the design of personalised routes and pathways. "We know our pupils well and were able to tailor the curriculum to match their interests, abilities and aptitudes."

- A pupil-centred approach was seen as being necessary for the effective leadership of a personalised curriculum. The senior leadership team "spend time with pupils". Leaders need to know their pupils well in order to devise a curriculum which is tailored to their needs. The curriculum must be wide-ranging, flexible and responsive to the changing needs of cohorts. "We include a special programmes route which changes year on year, depending on the needs of the particular cohort of pupils".

Barriers encountered and how leaders overcame these

What were the problems and pitfalls in implementing the personalised curriculum?

1. Leaders adopted a more flexible approach to school organisation, overcoming organisational inertia and making the most of opportunities to create alternative solutions:

   - Timetables were restructured. For example, the lift shaft method adopted by one school, which enabled pupils to begin a course when they were ready in terms of their learning rather than their age.

   - Leaders ensured that the school workforce met the demands of the new curriculum, for example, by reviewing existing roles and matching these to new demands, whilst making the most of emerging paraprofessional roles.

   - Meeting the financial cost of the personalised routes was achieved through:

     o changes in school organisation and employment of the workforce
     o strong partnerships beyond the school, for example with further education colleges which enabled the pooling of skills and resources
     o bids to organisations such as the Learning and Skills Council and Connexions

2. Leaders recognised that no institution in isolation could deliver the extent of change that was needed. To resolve this capacity issue, they used:

   - their partnerships to develop offsite learning, for example in local youth centres and further education colleges

   - a collaborative approach involving senior leaders from partner institutions developing common pathways and the use of agreed standard operating procedures to support them, for example the need for consistent behaviour management approaches across the partnership

3. Leaders recognised the need to change attitudes and win support in order for curriculum pathways to be a success.

   - They publicly valued vocational learning and faced the challenge of establishing curriculum routes, which would be perceived by pupils as non-hierarchical. "We recognise the unique qualities and learning styles of each individual and value and encourage their talents with equal esteem."

   - In the early stages, schools felt that a lack of awareness from parents and the perception of pupils, parents and staff to the changes provided the biggest challenge. In all cases, leaders had faced up to this challenge, in part, by playing to their strengths – developing vocational courses linked to their specialism and in curriculum areas in which middle leaders were responsive to change. The end of GNVQ courses has prompted leaders in the schools to look

at alternative ways of personalising provision. Many had considered BTEC qualifications, while others had looked to Applied GCSEs.

- Personalisation in these contexts did not necessarily mean more free choice for pupils. Leaders developed a curriculum sufficiently broad enough to enable each child to be guided onto a pathway for success, achieved through dialogue between parents, pupils and teachers. One school refers to the personalised system as 'guided choices'. "The term options is no longer applicable to what we do."

Successes

Headteachers and senior leaders reported the following statements relating to the successes of the personalised curriculum routes and pathways in their schools:

Achievement

- Personalisation has supported the raising of achievement and "getting the best for our pupils".

- More pupils are going on to the sixth form.

- Personalisation has allowed us to give more time to critical GCSEs for the pupils who need it.

- Young people and staff feel valued. Pupils have a chance to succeed on all the routes and have increased their self-esteem. "Pupils' confidence and progression to post-16 courses have improved."

Behaviour and ethos

- Personalisation has created a positive atmosphere. "There is a focus on achievement rather than behaviour. It has had a positive impact on standards."

- Personalised routes have meant that pupils have avoided permanent exclusion and all have obtained qualifications.

- "The personalised routes system has had an impact on ethos and led to positive improvements in behaviour. The personalised curriculum is only one of a range of developments including, for example, behaviour and learning strategies which have had an impact on the ethos of the school."

- Attendance has improved. Exclusions have decreased and behaviour referrals are dropping. "There have been no permanent exclusions since the pathways were introduced." "Route 5 has allowed us to legitimise what was once seen as alternative."

Engagement

- "Pathway 3 [for disaffected pupils] has meant that we have lowest level of NEETs [students not in education, employment or training] in the town."

- Pupil engagement is higher than it used to be.

- Feedback from parents, pupils and staff is outstandingly positive.

Pupil voice

The pupils we interviewed as part of the research process were very positive about the curriculum they were following. Feedback from questionnaires showed that:

- Over 80 per cent of the pupils included across the schools felt positive about their curriculum.

- Only 3 per cent had negative feelings about what they were doing at Key Stage 4.

- Over 80 per cent of the pupils felt that they will succeed at what they are doing.

- Some 97 per cent said they felt that they behaved better and were more motivated by the personalised Key Stage 4 curriculum than they had been at Key Stage 3.

- About a quarter of the pupils questioned worked with adults other than teachers on a regular basis. This included learning support assistants and learning mentors, college lecturers and youth workers. The pupils felt positive about the contributions these adults made to their learning.

Forty per cent of the pupils were involved in some offsite learning or learning outside the traditional classroom. Again, there was positive feedback and it was clear that an effective personalisation strategy has been to rethink the method and location of the delivery of the curriculum. Some pupils we questioned had been switched to maths because it was taught in the youth club rather than in the maths classroom.

Another positive element which emerged from the pupil focus group work was the clear ideas about progression held by many of the pupils. They could, in many cases, see where they were going:

- Some 75 per cent had a clear idea of progression at the post-16 phase and could see a link between their personalised route and what they wanted to do next. On the other hand, the leaders need to be very aware of the 25 per cent of pupils who were unclear or unsure.

- Similarly, feedback on the guidance and support offered along with the personalised timetable was very positive. Some 65 per cent of pupils felt they had good quality guidance and were supported well by adults in the schools. Again, the 35 per cent who were unsure about the guidance or felt that it was inadequate need to be addressed.

Analysis: lessons to learn

The main lesson we learned from carrying out the research is that, although it poses a challenge for leadership, the personalisation of the curriculum is a worthwhile process in secondary schools: "One size fits all is no longer acceptable."

The elements of personalisation probably exist in most secondary schools in England; the key to personalising provision is for school leaders to revise the way that they use or put these elements together. Partnerships with colleges, for example, have traditionally been used to facilitate an alternative curriculum for a handful of pupils in Year 11 who are in danger of being excluded from education. In the research schools, the opportunities offered by these college courses have begun to be viewed in a more positive light; in a proactive rather than in a reactive way. "It is not just the disaffected pupils who can benefit from the vocational experience offered by our partner college."

Partnerships and a multi-organisational approach are essential to providing a truly personalised curriculum experience. The development of meaningful partnerships allows schools to utilise a range of settings to deliver education, to broaden the range of courses and assessment methods on offer, to extend the range of personnel involved in delivering the curriculum and supporting the pupils, and to explore different methodologies:

- A senior leader in one school stated: "Many pupils benefit from learning in a setting which is not a classroom."

- One head emphasised: "We have found that pupils respond to the more flexible approach adopted by youth workers."

- In one school, the deputy head pointed to success in the following aspects of personalisation: "Workforce reform has allowed us to set up a vocational wraparound on Pathway 3 [vocational pathway] and it is exciting to see Pathway 3 pupils continue to further education and training, often in the college they attended during Year 10 and 11."

Final thoughts

It is perhaps interesting, at the end of this report, to consider why personalisation has worked in the schools that we studied. To some extent, this has to be evaluated in a qualitative way, although recent Ofsted reports and improved standards support their moves.

The personalisation of the curriculum at Key Stage 4 supports the establishment of an achievement ethos in all the schools. Pupils are following courses where they can succeed. For pupils who learn practically, personalisation allows a practical curriculum, while for pupils who prefer continual assessment and feedback, these methods of assessment have been incorporated. Gifted pupils can be accelerated onto higher level courses at an early stage and pupils who are motivated to do so can extend their studies beyond the traditional school day. This is a far cry from the 9am to 3.30pm diet of GCSEs delivered by teachers in traditional classrooms, which has often been the norm since the implementation of the Education Reform Act in 1988.

The key has been to do this in a non-hierarchical way so that pupils on one pathway are not seen as inferior or superior to pupils on another. Skills and talents are equally valued across the routes. Where core curriculum courses are studied – ie, the bottom line or non-personalised part of the curriculum – more pupils increase their opportunity to succeed because this is a limited part of their curriculum. In other words, pupils who are weaker at traditional, academic-type courses have a greater chance of succeeding if they are only following two or three of this type of course rather than a full diet of them. Consequently, results in maths, English and science have shown improvement across the study schools.

This factor also consolidates the role of many more traditional subjects in the secondary curriculum. The concern that personalisation may mean the loss of subjects such as history and geography has proved to be unfounded. Indeed, such subjects play a key role in personalising the experience for pupils at Key Stage 4.

Personalisation is purported to be inspiring and potentially transformational. In carrying out this research we were indeed inspired by the creative way in which the personalisation agenda had been implemented in the study schools. The voice of the pupils was particularly inspiring; to hear 14- and 15-year-old pupils speaking so positively about what and how they learn was one of the lasting impacts of the research. The level of consciousness they displayed about how their curriculum had been personalised to meet their needs was also significant; pupils had been involved in the personalisation process and were fully aware of what was happening in their school. This appeared to contribute to the success of the curriculum routes and pathways. In other words, it is only by knowing what other pupils are doing and how this is different to their own experience that individual pupils can recognise and value their personalised experience.

The implementation and development of routes and pathways has also been transformative, particularly in terms of the ethos of the schools we studied. The establishment of an achievement culture was a recurring and powerful theme. The schools are on their way to implementing a curriculum which meets the needs of all of their pupils rather than merely offering a diet which a majority find acceptable.

The future

It was apparent in all of the schools that none of the leaders felt that the personalisation process was complete. One head said: "There is a long way to go." Another senior leader explained: "We are considering a sixth route for next year. The question now is how can we personalise what we offer post-16."

Key Stage 3 had already been targeted in one of the study schools and others were looking at how the one-size-fits-all model can be adapted through curriculum design in Years 7, 8 and 9. As researchers, it would be interesting to revisit the schools in two years' time to investigate how they have continued on their personalisation journey and to evaluate the extent to which it is possible to implement a truly personalised curriculum across the whole of each of the schools.

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Appendix 1 – The four schools involved in the study

School A

An 11–18 comprehensive school with 2,000 pupils on roll. The school has 8.4 per cent of pupils with SEN and 1.5 per cent with statements of SEN. The percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more grades at A*–C at the end of Key Stage 4 was 52 per cent in 2002, 46 per cent in 2003 and 74 per cent in 2004.

The school is a specialist technology college.

School B

An 11–16 comprehensive school with 1,300 pupils on roll. The school has 23 per cent of pupils on the SEN register and 2.1 per cent with statements of SEN. The percentage of pupils achieving 5 or more grades at A*–C at the end of Key Stage 4 was 22 per cent in 2002, 27 per cent in 2003 and 32 per cent in 2004.

The school is a specialist performing arts college.

School C

An 11–18 comprehensive school with 1,300 pupils on roll. The percentage of pupils on the SEN register without statements is 5.6 per cent, while the percentage with statements is 2.5 per cent. The percentage of pupils who achieved 5 or more grades at A*–C was 60 per cent in 2002, 58 per cent in 2003, 67 per cent in 2004 and 74 per cent in 2005.

The school is a specialist business and enterprise college.

School D

An 11–18 comprehensive school with 1,900 pupils on roll. Some 8.7 per cent of pupils have SEN and 2.0 per cent have statements of SEN. The percentage of pupils who achieved 5 or more grades at A*–C was 52 per cent in 2002, 53 per cent in 2003 and, 52 per cent in 2004.

The school is a specialist technology college.

Appendix 2 – Semi-structured interview

➢ Tell me about the 14–19 curriculum at your school.

prompts
- organisation of curriculum
- routes and pathways
- elements of personalisation
- unique features

➢ How did the curriculum evolve?

prompts
- historical context
- internal/external catalysts
- role of leadership team
- role of headteacher

➢ What are the key successes of the curriculum?

prompts
- what works well?
- impact on standards
- impact on ethos
- what has changed for the better (pre-post comparison)?

➢ What guidance runs alongside the curriculum?

- use of assessment data
- options/choices process
- role of PSHCE
- Connexions
- parental involvement
- unique features

➢ The DfES identifies five components of personalised learning (one of which is curriculum entitlement and choice). How, if at all, have the other four of these supported the personalisation of the curriculum at your school?

1. assessment for learning
2. effective teaching and learning strategies
3. school organisation
4. sharing partnerships beyond the school

➢ Tell me about the negative aspects of the curriculum

- areas which have not worked
- barriers which had to be overcome
- obstacles to change (staff, pupil, parent perceptions)

➢ Does the term personalisation have relevance to what you are doing?

- if so, how?

Finally, completion and confirmation of school context information (ie, background information on school).

Appendix 3 – Evaluation of the curriculum

Unsure/neutral ⟷

I enjoy what I study at Key Stage 4	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I do not enjoy what I study at Key Stage 4
Key Stage 4 is better than Key stage 3	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Key Stage 3 was better than Key Stage 4
I feel like I am going to be successful at the end of Key Stage 4	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I feel like I am going to fail at the end of Key Stage 4
I work with adults (other than teachers) at school	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I work with teachers only (no other adults) in school
Some of my courses are offsite (away from school)	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	All of my courses are school based
I enjoy learning outside the classroom	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I do not enjoy learning outside the classroom
I feel like I had enough help when choosing my courses	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I did not get enough help to choose my courses
I have a clear idea of what I will do at the end of Year 11 – the next step	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I have no idea what I will do at the end of Year 11
My courses involve a lot of variety (doing different things/learning in different ways)	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	Most of my courses are taught in the same way
I behave better in Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	My behaviour is worse than in Key Stage 3
I feel that I am well suited to what I study	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I do not feel than I am well suited to what I study
I like courses that are assessed by exams	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I do not like courses that are assessed by exams
I like courses that have continual assessment (portfolios/coursework)	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	I do not like courses that have continual assessment

Appendix 4 – Questionnaire to parents

Which of the following has your child experienced at Key Stage 4 (ie, Year 10 and 11)?

Please tick

- Study of traditional subjects (English/maths etc)
- Study of 'new' courses (eg, courses related to work etc)
- Work experience (one- or two-week block)
- Regular work experience (eg, weekly)
- Visits out of school (for one day)
- Residential visits (staying overnight)
- Learning out of school (eg, local college)
- Working with adults other than teachers
- Producing portfolios or folders of work for assessment

Please state whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
My child enjoys the courses he/she follows at school					
My child is confident that he/she will succeed					
My child has a clear idea of where courses might lead					
I feel that what my child does at school is well suited to his/her needs					
There are a range of choices available to suit my child					

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I was given sufficient information about choices available to my child					
My child received a good level of support when choosing courses at Key Stage 4					
My child has a positive attitude to school					

Please indicate which of the following you or your child received to help him/her make the decision about Key Stage 4 choices.

Individual interview

Connexions adviser input

Booklet

Parents evening

Discussion with teacher

How do you feel the curriculum (what your child studies) is appropriate to him/her as an individual?

_____

_____

_____

How could the curriculum be improved for your child?

_____

_____

_____