

Chapter 1

Choice and Voice in Personalised Learning

by
David Miliband*

David Miliband, UK Schools Standards Minister at the time of the London personalisation conference, presents his vision and policy agenda for personalisation of learning. He outlines five components of personalised learning to guide policy development. i) It needs assessment for learning and the use of data and dialogue to diagnose every student's learning needs. ii) It calls for the development of the competence and confidence of each learner through teaching and learning strategies which build on individual needs. iii) It presupposes curriculum choice which engages and respects students. iv) It demands a radical approach to school organisation and class organisation based around student progress. v) Personalised learning means the community, local institutions and social services supporting schools to drive forward progress in the classroom. He develops the importance of the concepts of "choice" and "voice" as fundament to the personalisation agenda.

This conference comes at an absolutely key time for public services in Britain. I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say it is the most important time for public services since the creation of the welfare state after 1945. Now, as then, the power of collective action is being tested: to liberate individual potential, or to be damned for costing too much and delivering too little.

The Government fought the 2001 election on its commitment to public services. Since then, change has been consistent. Investment has never

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grown faster; reform has never been more systematic; expectations have never been higher; and as the evidence has come in of rising quality in health, education and criminal justice systems, the prize of a public realm that promotes opportunity and security has rarely seemed closer. Yet the very enormity of effort means that the risks of failure, real or perceived, have never been greater. That is why those who believe that universal public service can never deliver have grown more shrill and more virulent in their denunciations of what is being done. They know we are at a key time – for our philosophy and theirs.

The politics and policy of this debate are intertwined. We should not shy away from that. Our focus today is policy; but the context is politics. Politics is not an intrusion into the debate about public services, but its necessary starting point. Politics itself should be a service to the public; and political debate frames the values, purpose, and shape of public services.

The social democratic settlement

The politics of the Government are simple: the social democratic settlement we seek aspires to make universal the life chances of the most fortunate. Collective services available on the basis of need, not ability to pay, are vital to that. In education, it means high standards of teaching available to all, shaped to individual need. Standing in the way are three great challenges: the challenge of equity and excellence; the challenge of flexibility and accountability; and the challenge of universality and personalisation.

We see the challenge of excellence and equity in many debates, from Foundation Hospitals to university funding to specialist schooling. In an unequal society, how can excellent provision serve the least fortunate, rather than the most? One answer is to say it cannot; excellence will always be monopolised by the well-off, so a social democratic approach should be simply to tackle poor performance.

I believe this is profoundly wrong. We must obviously tackle failure. But aside from the absurdity of trying to put a glass ceiling on the achievement of different services, excellence can be used as a battering ram against inequality. This is the experience of specialist schools and the Excellence in Cities and Leading Edge programmes in education. Excellence is a resource for a more egalitarian system, not a threat. It can do more than set an example; it can be a locomotive for improvement across the system.

The second challenge is how to combine flexibility in delivery with accountability for results. No one believes every community has the same

needs; but flexibility on its own can lead to poverty of aspiration and paucity of provision. The answer must be intelligent accountability: a system that both supports improvement and challenges the lack of it. This requires central and local government to speak up for the fragmented voice of the consumer, and make good the market failure that allows underperformance to continue. It requires public information on performance that commands the confidence of professionals and citizens. It demands central intervention to set minimum standards, with intervention in inverse proportion to success. And, it requires funding to be delegated to the frontline as soon as capacity exists there, giving full flexibility to meet local need.

But the focus of this conference and my focus today is the third challenge: the demand that universal services have a personal focus. My interest, or at least my starting point, is personal. In the late 1980s, I was a graduate student in the United States, and was taught by Charles Sabel, co-author with Michael Piore of *The Second Industrial Divide* (1990). Its argument was simple: the era of mass production would be superseded in the advanced economies by the age of flexible specialisation, products previously produced for a mass market now to be tuned to personal need. That revolution, fuelled by rising affluence and expectations, has not been confined to the world of business. It has found its way into social norms through the end of deference; its manifestation in public services is the demand for high standards suited to individual need.

Until recently, the debate in the UK has been polarised into an argument between advocates of market solutions and those who favoured a planned approach. Our purpose in Government is to provide a new choice for those who are not satisfied to rely solely on the state or the market. In education we know that planned systems can be tolerant of under-performance – bureaucratic and inefficient. But we also know that in the 1990s nursery vouchers failed to stimulate supply and instead created chaos. Meanwhile we know parental choice in schools can be valuable in itself and a spur to parental engagement. But we also know it is a very slow way of putting pressure on underperforming schools to improve, and in any case few parents want to choose a school more than twice – one primary, one secondary – in a pupil's career.

So we need to do more than engage and empower pupils and parents in the selection of a school: their engagement has to be effective in the day-by-day processes of education. It should be at the heart of the way schools create partnerships with professional teachers and support staff to deliver tailor-made services. In other words, we need to embrace individual empowerment within as well as between schools. This leads straight to the promise of personalised learning. It means building the organisation of schooling around the needs, interests and aptitudes of individual pupils; it

means shaping teaching around the way different youngsters learn; it means taking the care to nurture the unique talents of every pupil. I believe it is *the* debate in education today.

The five components of personalised learning

Personalised learning is not a return to child-centred theories; it is not about separating pupils to learn on their own; it is not the abandonment of a national curriculum; and it is not a license to let pupils coast at their own preferred pace of learning. The rationale for personalised learning is clear: it is to raise standards by focusing teaching and learning on the aptitudes and interests of pupils. Personalised learning is the way in which our best schools tailor education to ensure that every pupil achieves the highest standard possible. Our drive is to make these best practices universal. There are five key elements to doing so.

First, a personalised offer in education depends on really knowing the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. So, the biggest driver for change is *assessment for learning and the use of data and dialogue* to diagnose every student's learning needs.

We know from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, responsible for the inspection of schools in England), the power of assessment for learning to provide structured feedback to pupils, to set individual learning targets, and to help plan lessons according to individual needs. Ofsted tells us that just four out of ten secondary schools use assessment for learning well, so we know there is still much to do. Embed these practices in all schools and we will achieve a step-change in achievement. That is why the Pupil Achievement Tracker¹ is now at the heart of our drive to ensure critical self review of performance in every school.

Second, personalised learning demands that we develop the competence and confidence of each learner through *teaching and learning strategies that build on individual needs*. This requires strategies that actively engage and stretch all students, that creatively deploy teachers, support staff and new technologies to extend learning opportunities, and that accommodate different paces and styles of learning.

This is not a crude reductionism to specific learner “types”. It is recognition that the multiple intelligences of pupils require a repertoire of teaching strategies. It is also about students acquiring the skills to fulfil their

¹ The Pupil Achievement Tracker (PAT) software allows schools and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to import and analyse their own pupil performance data against national performance data.

own potential, by ensuring that they have the capability and accept the responsibility to take forward their own learning. This is something that impressed me on a visit to George Spencer Technology College in Nottingham, where I saw students attending learning-to-learn lessons to help them become effective and e-literate learners – on their own and in groups.

Third, *curriculum choice engages and respects students*. So, personalised learning means every student enjoying curriculum choice, a breadth of study and personal relevance, with clear pathways through the system. In primary schools, it means students gaining high standards in the basics allied to opportunities for enrichment and creativity. In the early secondary years, it means students actively engaged by exciting curricula, problem solving, and class participation. And then at 14-19, it means significant curriculum choice for the learner.

This is the importance of the Tomlinson working group on 14-19 education,² with the long-term goals for all students of stretch, incentives to learn, core skills and specialist vocational and academic options. It is a future already being charted by diverse groups of schools, colleges and employers across the country, for instance, in the Central Gateshead 6th Form which offers a common prospectus, a wide range of academic and vocational courses, and a choice of movement for students across participating institutions. There is a group of schools in Nottingham that is working with local media companies to provide students with a multi-media programme that combines in-school delivery with real life experience of the industry.

Fourth, personalised learning demands *a radical approach to school organisation*. It means the starting point for class organisation is always student progress, with opportunities for in-depth, intensive teaching and learning, combined with flexible deployment of support staff. Workforce reform is a key factor. The real professionalism of teachers can best be developed when they have a range of adults working at their direction to meet diverse student needs. It also means guaranteed standards for on-site services, such as catering and social areas. Only if we offer the best to pupils will we get the best. And it means a school ethos focused on student needs, with the whole school team taking time to find out the needs and interests of students; with students listened to and their voice used to drive whole school improvement; and with the leadership team providing a clear focus for the progress and achievement of every child.

² The Working Group on 14-19 Reform, chaired by Mike Tomlinson, was established in Spring 2003 and following consultation with a wide variety of partners and stakeholders, published its Final Report, “14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform”, also known as the Tomlinson Report, on 18 October 2004.

Fifth, personalised learning means the *community, local institutions and social services supporting schools* to drive forward progress in the classroom. There is already real innovation:

- At Grange Primary School in Long Eaton, the building of a stronger partnership with parents through regular communication about each child's progress, so that parents gain the confidence and knowledge to provide effective support at home.
- At Millfields Community school in Hackney some of the effect of creative thinking about how best to support learning beyond the school day – by offering students a breakfast club, an after-school club and a Saturday school that teaches an accelerated learning curriculum – can be seen in the outstanding improvement in attainment at age 11.
- In different areas of the country, Creative Partnerships are bringing together schools and local artists and creative institutions in a systematic and structured relationship to enrich the educational offer through the expertise of professionals without teaching qualifications but with real ability to contribute to the learning experience of young people. The same is happening in the more than 100 museums and galleries working systematically to raise achievement and enjoyment.
- Across the country, schools and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) are anticipating the demands of the current Children's Bill, trying to ensure that the most vulnerable young people have integrated support from a range of professionals, all dedicated to supporting educational achievement as the best hope for the future of the child.

So, there are five components of personalised learning. They are a challenge to Government, to schools, and to the wider community. But they are massively in the interests of pupils.

There is then the question of how to see them developed. The demand is there: parents want education that is right for their children. Open enrolment and specialisation broaden the scope for parents to express a preference for a school that they think suits their child's needs. But the model of consumer choice is insufficient – not irrelevant but insufficient – to make it happen. The challenge is to ally choice with voice: voice for the pupil, voice for the parent. That is the new frontier for education. Personalised learning aims to engage every parent and every child in the educational experience.

Choice and voice

Over thirty years ago, the American sociologist Albert Hirschman published his classic study *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in*

Firms, Organizations and States. His opening comment – that the book “has its origin in an observation on rail transportation in Nigeria” – may seem a far cry from personalised learning. But the book has a key lesson for the debate about how to raise quality in public services. Hirschman’s argument is simple: that while competition and customer exit are vital to the process of economic renewal and progress, “a major alternative mechanism can come into play either when the competitive mechanism is unavailable or as a complement to it”.

That mechanism is consumer voice. For Hirschman, voice is the attempt to change from within, rather than escape, a particular institution – be it a shop or a school. Its traditional association is with the world of politics rather than economics. And its association in politics is with argument and debate in political parties and voluntary organisations. It assumes collective deliberation, usually in draughty halls or smoke-filled rooms.

The magic of Hirschman’s book is two-fold. First, its simple proposition is that the dichotomy of choice and voice is a false one. The market sphere offers voice as well as choice, the political sphere choice as well as debate. Second, the arresting idea that choice and voice are strengthened by the presence of the other: the threat of exit makes companies and parties listen; the ability to make your voice heard provides a vital tool to the consumers who do not want to change shops, or political parties, every time they are unhappy.

A key difference in public services is that supply is limited – for example places at a school. Education needs drive the supply side and government has a responsibility to stimulate it. But personalised learning also needs an active demand side – and that means voice as well as choice. We can and must combine the empowerment of parents and pupils in choices about schools and courses and activities with their genuine engagement in the search for higher standards. This is exemplified in our efforts to develop a personalised offer for a particular group of pupils – those in the top 5-10% of the ability range who are the gifted and talented.

Gifted and talented provision

Bright students have too often been confronted by the very British mentality which says it’s wrong to celebrate success and worse still to actively encourage it. The bright student was too often embarrassed by being labelled a “smart-Alec”; the result was at best day-dreaming, at worst frustration leading to trouble. The dominant culture fell into the trap of believing that “ordinary” children did not have extraordinary talents. There was no vocabulary, never mind systematic tailored provision, to advance the case. This is a clear case of personalised learning being sadly absent.

Recently, there has been a step change. We are getting better at celebrating success; better at challenging a culture of low aspirations; better at responding to the unique needs of our brightest students. And vitally, we are doing so by focusing our support in our most disadvantaged areas, because whilst potential is not linked to class, the support and opportunities needed for it to thrive too often have been.

- Schools in our toughest areas had the least provision. That is why the Excellence in Cities programme³ has a strand devoted to Gifted and Talented provision. It now reaches over 150 000 students in 2 000 public primary and 1 000 public secondary schools.
- Provision did not sufficiently develop the learning capacity of bright students. That is why we now expect there to be a trained Gifted and Talented co-ordinator in every participating school, ensuring that the top 5-10% are identified by ability, and that they receive a tailored teaching and learning programme and complementary out-of-school study support.
- Provision in London was particularly weak. That is why we have introduced London Gifted and Talented as part of the London Challenge (a policy partnership programme to address the problems and challenges faced by education and young people in the capital). London's strength depends more than ever on its education system: it needs to develop a coherent regional approach across all 33 London boroughs built on bottom-up collaboration and an innovatory e-learning platform that benefits pupils and teachers alike.
- National leadership was absent. That is why we set up the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth at Warwick University, which now delivers summer schools, e-learning provision and learning networks to the 28 000 members of its Student Academy.
- Teachers were under-engaged. That is why the professional arm of the National Academy brings support staff, teachers and head teachers together to collaborate on best practice in the teaching and learning of gifted and talented students, and to use these strategies to improve provision for all students; it is why we are developing quality standards for classroom teachers; and it is why Ofsted now takes gifted and talented provision seriously in their inspections.

³ Excellence in Cities (EiC) is a targeted UK government programme of support for schools in deprived areas of the country.

We have started to break down old divides, and unleashed talent which in previous years would have been hidden forever. But we have only started. I want to ensure all gifted and talented students gain from personalised learning. The goal is that five years from now:

- Gifted and talent students progress in line with their ability rather than their age.
- Schools inform parents about tailored provision in an annual school profile.
- Curricula include a gifted and talented dimension, and at age 14-19 there is more stretch and differentiation at the top end, so no matter what your talent it will be engaged.
- The effect of poverty on achievement is reduced, because support for high-ability students from poorer backgrounds enables them to thrive at school and progress to our leading universities.

In five years' time, the impact of gifted and talented provision should be as important for school pupils in widening opportunities, removing barriers to excellence, and putting learners in control as the establishment of the Open University in the late 1960s was to university students – as radical in its conception, as wide in its reach. It should be a future in which society is based on talent, not held back by an old boys' network based on who you know; a future in which students do better because education is tailored to their needs.

And what is the moral of the story? First, that fragmented demand will not always produce coherent supply. Second, we have to trust pupils to make choices, but also recognise that we must listen to them as well as empower them. Every member of the Student Academy chooses courses and activities that they prefer. Those that are not attractive will not thrive. But we do best when we listen to student voice in the creation of student choice. That is what the National Academy is doing in its programmes for the gifted and talented, and although perhaps the more challenging task is listening to the average student less certain about their needs, that is what an increasing numbers of schools are doing in their Student Councils.

Conclusion

The Welsh Labour politician Aneurin Bevan used to say that the freedom to choose was worthless without the power to choose. This is the power of personalised learning. Not a false dichotomy between choice and voice but acceptance that if we are to truly revolutionise public services then people need to have both. Because students are not merely educational

shoppers in the marketplace; they are creators of their own educational experience. Their voice can help shape provision, both as a means of engaging students in their own learning – the co-producers of education – and as a means of developing their talents – using their voice to help create choices.

We want to take this programme forward. We need to develop and communicate the benefits of personalised learning. Our greatest resource is in our schools but national dialogue, as in this conference, can help. There are two key strands. We need to develop a common language and clarity of concepts among professionals. But we must also listen to pupils. The new frontier in business is not flexible specialisation but personal experience. We must not get left behind.

The prize is immense: an education system based on need, an education system where choice is available for the many not the few; an education system where the system is moulded around the child, not the child around the system; an education system that identifies the true potential of every child and then gives them the means to achieve it. It is what every parent wants for their child, and as the eminent historian and social critic R.H. Tawney said, it should be what Government wants for every child.

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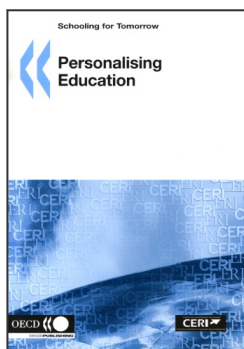
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