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Research Associate Summary report

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Resource

Student-focused strategies: supporting achievement

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Introduction

Every headteacher is committed to ensuring that every child in their school achieves their full potential. This research collects the thoughts from secondary school headteachers regarding the student-focused strategies that have had the greatest impact on achievement. It explores what they understand 'personalised learning' to be and pulls together some common threads regarding effective leadership interventions.

Methodology

This research sought to capture the views of five secondary headteachers on their schools' implementation of personalised learning approaches. Semi-structured interviews were used over a three-month period in 2009, following completion of a questionnaire that required the heads to identify, and rank in order of significance, strategies they had employed to raise standards. The sample does not claim to be representative of the wider secondary school population but offers a small-scale perspective on the strategies deployed within a group of secondary schools.

Findings

The findings have been divided into two sections. The first is concerned with what the headteachers understood by the term 'personalised learning' and what the implementation of this has meant for their school. Section 2 is concerned with the strategies headteachers had found useful in raising standards within their schools.

Section 1: What did school leaders understand by the term 'personalised learning'?

The school leaders interviewed, for the most part, did not recognise a single agreed national definition of the term 'personalised learning' but they did identify the following to be common themes:

- curriculum innovation
- impact on teaching and learning
- increased knowledge of students resulting from tracking systems for academic performance

Personalised learning and the curriculum

The headteachers addressed the issue of defining personalised learning by talking about the strategies they had used in their schools. At the heart of their approach was a desire to move away from what they perceived to be the inflexibility of the original national curriculum. Curriculum innovation was predominantly aimed at Key Stage 4 (KS4) students and was largely focused on the introduction of vocational (particularly BTEC) courses or courses that were perceived to be more accessible, relevant and engaging for students.

In practice, the greatest reported impact was on GCSE pathways. It was in offering a greater number of pathways that these headteachers considered they were personalising the curriculum. Curriculum innovation was often driven by the need for greater academic success but additional impact was expressed in terms of engagement, motivation and attendance and, for one headteacher, raising the expectations of teachers and students: 'The personalised learning agenda is also the vehicle for changing people's expectations.'

Teaching and learning

The majority of the headteachers interviewed acknowledged that personalised learning had benefited classroom teaching and that curriculum innovation and a focus on teaching and learning went hand-in-hand. For example, one head observed that, 'personalised learning is also about the way the focus in lessons has changed from teaching to learning'. The key elements for these headteachers in defining high-quality teaching and learning were: assessment for learning; planning for progression; differentiation and students taking ownership of their own learning.

Knowledge of students

These headteachers recognised that a deep awareness of their students and their needs was crucial to raising standards, although it was not clear whether this was driven by personalised learning or the headteachers' commitment to school improvement or a combination of both. Improved tracking of academic performance was found to be of substantial value because it enabled heads to monitor progress, plan interventions, enrich learning conversations with students and change the mindset of teachers and, consequently, raise teacher and student expectations.

Section 2: Effective strategies

The interviews with these headteachers also sought to identify the strategies they had employed and found effective. A number of strategies, drawn from the making good progress project (DfES, 2006b) were presented to them in a pre-interview questionnaire. These interviews showed that the strategies headteachers valued most were:

- student tracking, using this performance data for:
 - dialogue with colleagues about student progress, including their accountability for this
 - target-setting
- curriculum innovation

These strategies are discussed in relation to the reference in the 2020 vision (DfES, 2006a:20) and the view of the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT, 2008) that the triad of assessment for learning (AfL), student voice and learning to learn would be most significant in raising standards.

Of the three strategies, AfL was recognised by headteachers as having the greatest impact, although it is worth noting that they often described the activity of AfL without using the term itself. All the headteachers could see the value of student voice in raising attainment and all recognised it to be a point for development within their school plans.

Conclusions and implications

It was clear from the interviews that headteachers were leading their schools in embedding the practices outlined above before the advent of personalised learning as a policy initiative. What is more, these headteachers had adopted the personalised learning agenda because they could see its value as a lever for change. Indeed, personalised learning became a catalyst for improvement because it aligned with these headteachers' personal and moral imperative of reducing the attainment gap.

Three implications for school leaders may be drawn from the report's findings.

1. School leaders need to consider policy developments in terms of how these will inform change and developments that are right for their school, given its context and phase of development, and use aspects of these strategies that are likely to have the greatest benefits.
2. Policy initiatives can lend significant weight and credence to developments and these may serve to mitigate barriers such as staff resistance.
3. School leaders might consider how effectively the strategies that underpin personalised or student-focused learning outlined above are deployed within their school and where there is scope for further improvement.

These headteachers acknowledged that the journey of personalised learning had influenced their schools but that there was still work to be done, and that there was some validity in the view that a personalised approach to learning, though not on its own, could have an impact on social justice and the lack of social mobility.

References

DfES, 2006a, [2020 Vision: Report of the Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group](#), Nottingham, Department for Education and Skills Publications

DfES, 2006b, [Making Good Progress: How can we help every pupil to make good progress at school?](#) Consultation document, Nottingham, Department for Education and Skills Publications

Specialist Schools and Academies Trust, 2008, [Curriculum design: disciplined innovation in practice](#), London, Department for Children, Schools and Families

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