

Aims of the project

This research project set out to explore a collaborative learning journey towards what may now be recognised as the partnership-based component of personalisation. Specifically it explored the following key questions in relation to the development of partnership-based approaches to the delivery of personalised learning:

- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the leaders' leadership?
- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the teachers' teaching?
- What has been the impact of the experience of partnership on the students' learning?

Dimensions of the study

This was a study of how a group of four diverse schools and a further education (FE) college in West Berkshire took practical steps to build partnerships beyond their individual classrooms. The project considered the perspectives of the leaders, teachers and students who together experienced that journey, offering reflections on the lessons in partnership that have been learned *en route*.

The students were identified to take part in the programmes by staff within their 'home' school. The criteria for their selection varied from institution to institution, with a focus on the 'personalised' learning needs and profile of the individuals concerned. Those participating included:

- MLD students from the special school;
- students in the mainstream setting assessed as being vulnerable and/or at risk of exclusion;
- SEN students in the mainstream setting experiencing difficulties in accessing all curriculum areas; and
- mainstream students with specific interests in sport and recreation/leisure.

Summary of main findings

Findings emerged in relation to all three research questions, with outcomes relevant to leadership, teaching and learners. At each level, the research evidence provided support for the following findings:

- Operating within a partnership led to a broadening of leadership vision beyond individual institutions. This has encouraged leaders actively to seek further means of building

capacity within the partnership to extend and enhance its work

- Teachers deployed a greater range of teaching and learning strategies and engaged learning support assistants more in planning and using the strategies
- The students noted gains from the programme. The new courses were more motivational than their other options choices: increased confidence meant that they were now much more prepared to ask questions to clarify understanding in other curriculum areas

Background and context

The research was based on the first 18 months of a three-year DfES Innovation Unit Leading Edge partnership comprising a specialist sports college, a specialist performing arts college, a special school, a grammar school for the deaf and a further education (FE) college. The partnership built on an earlier sports college initiative designed to widen learning opportunities for students with special educational needs (SEN) through physical education (PE) and sport. It aimed to:

- raise standards of achievement, widen opportunities and increase the life chances of students with special educational needs across the family of schools involved in the project through the mainstream delivery of personalised 14-19

What are leaders, teachers and students learning from collaborative approaches to personalisation?

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learning programmes; and

- provide a model for the creative and joined-up delivery of specialist schooling at a local level.

We selected a strategy based on placing learners from the same

local area at the centre of a range of personalised learning programmes that involved partnerships beyond their individual schools and classrooms.

Teaching processes and strategies

Group composition

We created teaching groups comprising students from different schools and different year groups. These groups worked together, within and beyond the classroom, in different locations. One BTEC First in Sport group contained:

- Three Year 10 students from the sports college who opted for the course as part of their Key Stage 4 options choice process
- One Year 10 student from the sports college identified for the programme on the basis of curriculum interests and learning styles
- One Year 9 student from the sports college accelerated onto the programme because of curriculum interests and learning styles, but experiencing difficulties in accessing other curriculum areas
- Two Year 11 MLD students from the special school identified for the programme because of their very successful involvement in the earlier pilot sports college integration programme.

Personalised learning

Personalised learning programmes were designed around individual students' learning needs and preferences. As the head teacher from the special school put it: The distinctive aim of the Personalised Learning Programme is that rather than it just being, 'well, this group is going to be included', it's very much more a question of 'what's this young person need to get out of this course and what support do we need to give them to get it?'

Motivating students

All students involved in the programmes took part in a motivational seminar and team-building activity aimed at breaking down barriers to learning and achievement and raising expectations and self-esteem. Two celebrity sports mentors contributed to these events – a former Olympic silver medallist over 400m and a current Paralympic 800m gold medallist, who had a particularly powerful impact on the students.

Mentors

The support of adult mentors from outside the individual schools was particularly exciting and beneficial – particularly in view of

the sports 'celebrity' status of a number of the mentors that the partnership was able to attract to the programme.

Courses offered by the partnership

The partnership has developed a number of adapted, modular-style courses for students with a range of learning needs, in subjects including:

- PE;
- Dance;
- Design Technology;
- Drama;
- Humanities; and
- Leisure and Tourism.

The FE college role has been that of a provider of vocational programmes in Key Stage 4 through an enhanced Increased Flexibility Programme, including:

- National Skills Profile Leisure and Tourism modules (based at the sports college);
- a BTEC First Diploma in Sport (at the sports college);
- a vocational GCSE in Leisure and Tourism, supplemented by relevant units from the OCR Skills Profile (at the sports college); and
- National Vocational Qualification Level 1 courses in Beauty, Catering and Construction offered as part of the 'Increased Flexibility' Programme (at the FE college).

Collaboration

For example, two projects had developed between the sports college and the grammar school for the deaf – one involving a programme of professional development, the other an initiative involving the development of Mathematics software for students working below the average National Curriculum in Key Stage 3.

Leadership and professional development

The partnership leaders felt that participation in the partnership had cemented relationships and fostered collaborative approaches to professional development and, in one case, a common leadership development programme for both Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs).

One particularly effective structure for promoting and sustaining professional development was the practitioners' steering group, where teachers delivering the programme across the partnership of schools met to discuss curriculum delivery. Participants

believed this offered an excellent organisational model for the wider dissemination of best practice in teaching and learning.

The findings

Lessons for leaders

- Operating within a partnership led to a broadening of leadership vision beyond the separate, individual institutions. This encouraged leaders to actively seek a range of ways of building capacity within the partnership to extend and enhance its work
- There were significant improvements in the way the tracking of student progress across institutions was organised:

“We now have new ways of looking at value added by partnership work across the institutions. This is itself an incentive for further collaboration”.

Head teacher

- A wider and deeper ‘partnership dividend’ emerged from the work of the partnership. As it did so it acted as a platform for further innovation, including spin-off projects relating to professional development at both leadership team and departmental levels and to subject-based improvement initiatives. For example, two head teachers planned joint leadership team development programmes, based on their experience of the partnership
- Different schools within the partnership collaborated at different rates according to, for example, their perceived state of readiness. Whilst this did not reflect lack of commitment to the partnership, it did impact upon participation, e.g. different levels of student involvement in courses
- Establishing a practitioners’ steering group, where teachers delivering the programme across the partnership met to discuss curriculum delivery, offered an excellent organisational model for the wider dissemination of best practice of teaching and learning
- Flexibility and forward planning were key to organising timetabling and transport provision so that personalised provision was fully realised. Leaders recognised that such logistical structures should not obscure the ‘need to get on with it’

Lessons for teachers

- Both mainstream and special school teachers noted significant learning gains for all the students that went beyond the course-specific elements of the programme, leading to greater self-confidence and enhanced independence.

“I thought initially that it would only involve one or two students, but it has really mushroomed and I’ve begun to see

all sorts of opportunities for our students. It was then that I became determined that we were going to make it work”.

Head teacher



- The special school teachers noted a particularly wide range of benefits for students with multiple learning difficulties, in particular improvements in behaviour, levels of attendance, reading age and leadership and other related skills. These had in turn supported improved attainment in other curriculum areas
- Mainstream teachers reported that they used and deployed learning support assistants more widely to support students’ learning. They also developed their own teaching repertoire, particularly in relation to differentiation and communication of learning objectives. They became more aware of students’ preferred learning styles as part of the lesson planning and review process.

“The real benefit of this programme is that it provides real opportunities at grassroots levels to break down the barriers that exist between the teaching of those children who are ‘special’ and of those who are ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’”.

Head teacher

Lessons for students

The students also noted gains from the programme, including:

- the courses were more motivational than their other options choices, largely because of the variety of learning styles employed by teachers;
- participation on the programme had increased their all-round confidence as learners; special school students felt that working in the mainstream school had increased their confidence and encouraged them to follow their studies further than they otherwise would have considered;
- relationships with both their teachers and their peers were better on these programmes than in other curriculum areas as this comment showed:

“I come here and I mix with the sports college students and that’s good fun - and I’m making new friends. I used to be quite shy, nervous of meeting new people and nervous of them and their opinions. And now my confidence has gone up and I want to go on to college, once I’ve finished my BTEC, and do carpentry”.

Special school student

- increased confidence meant that students were now much more prepared to ask questions to clarify their understanding in other curriculum areas; and

- it was interesting and enjoyable to work with students from other schools on a regular basis, and there had been no sense of tension or resentment.

The special school teachers noted a particularly wide range of benefits for the MLD students on the programme. In addition to the above, they identified:

- improvements in behaviour
- improvements in levels of attendance
- improvements in reading age which were greater than expected
- related skill gains, resulting in approved attainment in other current areas, and in particular, the application of ICT and literacy
- the development of leadership skills; for example, one of the Year 11 students on the BTEC First in Sport programme voluntarily ran a lunchtime basketball club for students at the school

Research methods

The research drew on the participants' direct experience of the programme and their records of planning and delivering the programmes. Findings were based on the following research activities carried out specifically in relation to the project:

- semi-structured individual interviews with head teachers, the FE college principal, and senior leaders from the partnership schools;
- a focus group interview with teachers delivering the programmes;
- a focus group interview with a cross-section of students experiencing the programmes; and
- pre- and post-course attitudinal surveys of students following the personalised learning programmes using the PASS Programme initially developed by Sandwell and Dudley LEA.

The PASS programme covered a number of areas including:

- feelings about school;

- perceived learning capacity;
- self-regard;
- attitude to teachers;
- attitude to attendance; and
- response to the curriculum.

Conclusion

For school leaders about to embark on such a learning journey, there are three key learning outcomes from the partnership:

- Start with a clear focus or theme for the collaborative project, but set it within the context of a shared vision for longer-term growth
- Allow collaboration to grow organically and move in new directions: the indirect gains of the process may be at least as significant as the original focus of the partnership
- Develop opportunities and structures for practitioner-based dialogue and innovation exchange: this is the real dividend of partnership approaches to the delivery of personalised learning
- Creating time and opportunity for collaborative groups to meet is essential

The lessons in partnership we have learned so far will now continue to shape the learning journeys being followed both within and across the schools involved.

Suggestions for further reading

Hargreaves, D, 2004, *Personalising Learning: next steps in working laterally*, London, Specialist Schools Trust

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