

Personalised Learning

A Policy Overview

This report introduces the concept of personalised learning; summarising its emergence as an educational policy and charting the development of a definition. Investment in personalised learning for the next three years will see schools continuing to develop next practice.

“Over the last few years personalised learning has become increasingly widespread in both early years settings and in schools. Personalised learning puts children and their needs first. The Children’s Plan sets out how we move to a more sophisticated approach to personalisation making it standard practice across the system.”

The Children’s Plan

Our understanding of learning is changing. Throughout the history of compulsory education Governments have sought to create systems that would enable all children and young people to be successful, achieve their potential and become active citizens, within safe and secure environments. In the past this was largely undertaken with little recognition of individuality, personal needs or aspirations. The system of the 20th Century was largely predicated on a 'one size fits all' model, comparable with the factory models of the previous century.

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Since the start of the 21st Century there has been a Governmental drive to create social systems with the citizen at their centre, challenging the 'old' model and developing systems that are more responsive to individual needs: **“a system that responds to individual pupils, by creating an education path that takes account of their needs, interests and aspirations.”** (DfES 2004b:7) In the education sector this is referred to as personalised learning following the emergence of the term in early 2004.

The personalised learning policy originates from shifts in the drivers of the national economy. As David Hargreaves notes: **“Customisation in business is where goods or services**

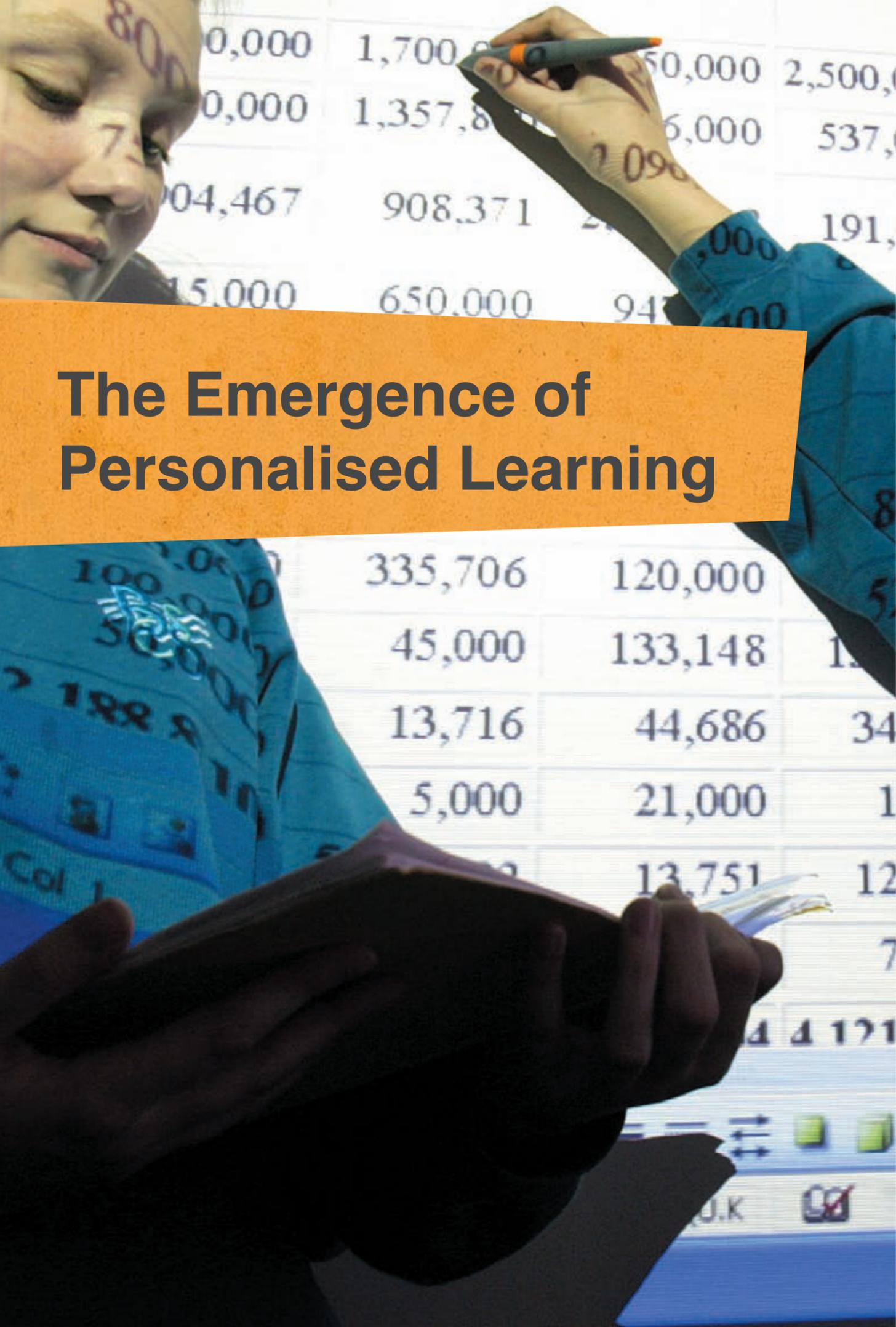
are tailor-made, in contrast to the mass production of good or services. Mass customisation means providing goods or services at the prices of mass production. Personalised learning is an educational version of this, and means meeting the needs of every learner more fully than we have in the past.” (Richards 2004)

The resultant trend is a move away from the industrial economy to a knowledge economy where it is essential to equip citizens with a wide range of personal, social, thinking and learning skills.

Since 2004 there has been significant investment to support schools in establishing approaches that embed personalised learning in the school culture. There is now a wide range of case studies illustrating how schools have embedded personalised learning through local and national strategies.

Publications such as 'Pedagogy and Personalisation' (DCSF 2007b) emphasise the need to establish a shared language for discussing pedagogy to transform learning and teaching, while major research programmes like 'The Making Good Progress' pilot (DCSF 2007a) are trialling new personalised teaching and learning strategies to raise rates of progression throughout the Key Stages.

Like historical shifts in educational philosophy, the widespread implementation of personalised learning is being driven by Government through policy changes and forms a part of an agenda that places the citizen at the heart of public services. Personalised learning is already regarded as much more than an initiative; rather it is considered as a fundamental catalyst for transforming schools, enabling **“world class schools providing excellent, personalised teaching and learning [where] at every stage, children and young people will have opportunities to grow and develop, and their individual needs will be addressed by the complete range of children's services.”** (DCSF 2007:55)



The Emergence of Personalised Learning

“To build a successful system of personalised learning, we must begin by acknowledging that giving every single child the chance to be the best they can be, whatever their talent or background, is not the betrayal of excellence, it is the fulfilment of it.”

Miliband 2004

The idea that learning should be ‘personal’ gradually entered the educational policy debate in the UK with the new millennium, and in 2001 the government made explicit that each child should **“be educated in a way and at a pace which suits them, recognising that each is different, with different abilities, interests and needs.”** (DfES 2001:20)

A few years later, the ‘Every Child Matters’ green paper (DfES 2003) gave another relevant contribution to this emergent theme, setting out a series of reforms to better integrate services across a local authority. At the heart of these reforms was a desire to organise services around the needs of children and young people.

The government’s early exploration of personalised education culminated in David Miliband’s 2004 speech in Belfast, during which the former Schools Minister outlined his vision of personalised learning: **“High expectation of every child, given practical form by high quality teaching based on a sound knowledge and understanding of each child’s needs.”** (Miliband 2004) The Secretary of State for Education and Skills of the time, Charles Clarke, emphasised that; **“The central characteristic of (the) new system will be personalisation – so that the system fits to the individual rather than having the individual having to fit to the system.”** (DfES 2004b:4)

Subsequent publications further clarified the nature of personalised learning:

The Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners, published by the DfES in 2004, focused on assessment for learning, linking it to innovative uses of ICT to collect and analyse pupil data, enabling systematic and accountable feedback. (DfES 2004b)

The shift in relationship between services and the consumer was further explored by the Design Council and Innovation Unit in 2005. In his introduction to the Learning Environments Campaign Prospectus, Mike Gibbons notes: **“Now, it is widely recognised that education, or rather learning, must be done by people throughout their lives and that schools must equip them to do that. The push for personalisation is creating a system that fits the needs of the learner, rather than vice versa.”** (The Design Council 2005:12)

The follow-up to the original Five Year Strategy, the *Five Year Strategy for Children and Learners: Maintaining the Excellent Progress* stressed the importance of closing attainment gaps and tackling disadvantage through personalised learning. (DfES 2006a)

Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More Choice for Parents and Pupils (DfES 2005a) and the *14-19 Education and Skills White Paper* (DfES 2005b) highlighted the importance of extended services offered in schools through links with providers in the local community, in order to expand provision and allow pupils to access extra support following interests and aptitudes, learning at a pace and in a style that suits them.

In December 2006 the *Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group* undertook a seminal independent study to establish a clear vision of what personalised learning and teaching might look like in the future. The ‘*2020 Vision*’ led by Christine Gilbert looked in particular at what personalised learning means in practical terms. The review is based on an extensive study drawing upon evidence from consultations, visits and an extensive knowledge bank. **“Personalising learning means, in practical terms, focusing in a more structured way on each child’s learning in order to enhance progress, achievement and participation.”** (DfES 2006:3)

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(DCSF 2007:6)

challenging the able as well as ensuring no child falls behind... Our expert groups told us that the best way to achieve world class standards is a system in which all children receive teaching tailored to their needs and which is based on their ‘stage not age’.” (DCSF 2007:56)

Most recently “*Personalised Learning – A Practical Guide*” was published with the aim of supporting school leaders, School Improvement Partners, and teachers examine critical features of personalised learning and teaching and to reflect on their priorities for future progress (DCSF 2008)

By 2007 the term ‘personalised learning’ was well established. The publication of the *Children’s Plan* in the same year saw the personalised learning agenda come to the forefront of strategic thinking for schools. Underpinning the Children’s Plan is a principle that places each child, young person and family at the heart of the system, and that **“services need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families, not designed around professional boundaries.”** (DCSF 2007:6)

The Children’s Plan sets ambitious targets for embedding personalised learning in school: **“personalised teaching and learning will become the norm in every early years setting and classroom, stretching and**

Personalised Learning Defined



“Put simply, personalising learning and teaching means taking a highly structured and responsive approach to each child’s and young person’s learning, in order that all are able to progress, achieve and participate. It means strengthening the link between learning and teaching by engaging pupils – and their parents – as partners in learning.”

(DfES 2006:6)

In 2004 David Milliband characterised personalised learning by stating that it was not a return to child centred theories that separate pupils to learn on their own, potentially creating a license to let pupils coast at their own preferred pace of learning, and nor was it the abandonment of a national curriculum. Rather, he provided a rationale for personalised learning that would make the best practices universal. He suggested the approach would be to raise standards by focusing teaching and learning on the aptitudes and interests of pupils. In this way our best schools tailor education to ensure that every pupil achieves the highest standard possible.

Later in 2004, the DfES proposed a definition of personalisation and personalised learning: **“Personalisation puts citizens at the heart of public services and enables them to have a say in the design and improvement of the organisations that serve them. In education this can be understood as Personalised Learning - the drive to tailor education to individual need, interest and aptitude so as to fulfil every young person’s potential”.**

(DfES 2004a:4)

The DfES went further to articulate five key components of personalised learning:

1. Assessment for learning is considered one of the biggest drivers for change and the use of data and dialogue to diagnose every student's learning needs. Essentially, this is about knowing the strengths and weaknesses of individual students

2. Teaching and learning strategies that develop the competence and confidence of every learner by actively engaging and stretching them and build on individual needs.

This requires strategies that:

- / Actively engage and stretch all students;
- / Creatively deploy teachers, support staff and new technologies to extend learning opportunities;
- / Accommodate different paces and styles of learning.
- / Recognise that the multiple intelligences of pupils require a repertoire of teaching strategies.

3. Curriculum entitlement and choice that delivers breadth of study, personal relevance and flexible learning pathways through the education system thereby enabling students to acquire the skills to fulfil their own potential, by ensuring they have the capability and accept the responsibility to take forward their own learning. Ultimately curriculum choice engages and respects students.

4. A student-centred approach to school organisation, with school leaders and teachers thinking creatively about how to support high quality first teaching and learning resulting in 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.

5. Strong partnership beyond the school will drive forward progress in the classroom, removing barriers to learning and supporting pupil well-being thus engaging the community, local institutions and social services; who in turn can support schools to drive forward progress in the classroom.

Personalised learning is intrinsically linked to the Every Child Matters agenda and the 2003 white paper supports personalised learning by highlighting the importance of extended services offered in schools through links with providers in the local community, in order to expand provision and allow pupils to access extra support following interests and aptitudes, learning at a pace and in a style that suits them.

In 2006 the DfES 'Personalised Learning website' had refined the definition of personalised learning to reflect a language of 'tailoring': **"Personalised Learning is about tailoring education to individual need, interest and aptitude so as to ensure that every pupil achieves and reaches the highest standards possible, notwithstanding their background or circumstances, and right across the spectrum of achievement"**

In December 2006 the '2020 Vision' report placed personalised learning at the heart of the recommendations, **"We believe that personalising learning and teaching must play a central role in transforming England's education service."** (DfES 2006:5) The report reflects earlier thinking by highlighting that educational services should be designed around the needs of each child with the expectation that each learner shall achieve high standards. This requires teachers to use their skills and knowledge to engage children and young people as partners in learning, acting quickly to adjust their teaching in response to pupils' learning. The expert group went further to suggest that a sharp focus is needed on the essential knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes which children and young people require in order to thrive in a changing world. This all leads to the creation of a system whereby the learning experience ensures that during their school years, children will grow from relative dependence on their parents and teachers into mature learners, with the skills to adapt to changing demands.

At present the strength of the Government's commitment to personalised learning is demonstrated through the level of funding made available to schools; over £1Bn 2005-08 and in the 2007 Children's Plan the Government has committed £1.6 billion for personalised learning and supporting special educational needs between 2008-11, defining personalised learning as practice that puts children and their needs first and that it has the expectation of participation, fulfilment and success at its heart.

Personalised Learning in Practice

“The distinctive feature of the pedagogy of personalisation is the way it expects all pupils to reach or exceed expectations, fulfils early promise and develops latent potential. Personalised lessons are stretching for everyone. At the heart of personalisation is the expectation of participation, fulfilment and success.”

(DCSF 2007:64)

In his publication for the National College for School Leadership (NCSL), John West-Burnham stresses that personalised learning is about a new culture of learning and teaching that is an effective way of realising the vision of the learner-centred school. He suggests that **“it also offers powerful models to transform and enhance the quality of the working lives of the adults in schools.”** (West-Burnham 2008:7)

Personalised learning means high quality teaching that is responsive to the different ways students achieve their potential. This means each school will need to determine its own plans to deliver personalised learning most effectively, and how best to invest their resources and deploy their staff to cater for the learning priorities of their pupils and according to their own circumstances. Personalising learning should be learner centred and knowledge centred and assessment centred.

In 2004 David Hargreaves initially proposed that the process of personalisation could be understood as a variety of perspectives afforded by a series of gateways. By 2006, a need for simplification led Hargreaves to articulate a

synthesised version of his model, aggregating the gateways in clusters on the basis of the relationships between them, a process which resulted in the definition of four 'deeps' (Hargreaves 2004):

- / deep learning
- / deep experience
- / deep support
- / deep leadership

The work of Michael Fielding (Fielding 2008) highlights the importance of rethinking structures and curricula to take full account of relationships and human dignity. According to Fielding, schools need to create informal and formal opportunities in which pupils' voices can be heard openly, and where students and teachers can work together as researchers and practitioners to develop an exploratory and personalised pedagogy.

The 2020 Vision report makes a number of relevant recommendations in relation to personalised learning. At a strategic level the report suggest that personalised learning becomes a clear area of entitlement and a possible remedy for social injustice in education and proposes that the government should ensure that assessment for learning is embedded in schools. In May 2008 the AfL strategy was launched which sets out a series of approaches to establish AfL at the heart of a manageable and school-wide system of assessment.

The advice in the 2020 Vision Report to Local authorities advocates the development of plans that influence capital projects (such as Building Schools for the Future) to ensure that design supports the personalisation agenda through innovative uses of space based on sound pedagogies.

At the level of the practitioner, schools should be committed to personalising learning and be ready to report on how effectively this commitment is being fulfilled. They should be making use of existing curriculum flexibilities to ensure that provision and the related formative assessment support personalised learning. Schools should engage parents and carers in their children's education, making all the relevant information available to them and using technologies to build meaningful connections.

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The review also advocates the introduction of a 'learning guide' in all secondary schools, which has formed the basis for the announcement on 'personal tutors'. This role aims to ensure that all pupils have at least one person who is aware of their learning needs, who agrees targets and monitors progress meeting them regularly, helping them in the definition of an individual learning plan.

Critically, at all levels in the system the educational workforce should update its professional standards to take into account personalised learning, ensuring that teachers and service providers in the schools are supported and can rely on professional development strategies that nurture their ability to personalise learning. (DfES 2007)

The recent 'Personalised Learning – A Practical Guide' (DCSF 2008) presents a useful source for translating a schools' ideas about personalised learning into the real experiences children and young people have. At the heart of this resource is the pedagogy of personalised learning, which underpins 9 other aspects of personalised learning.

The emphasis is to raise standards by focusing teaching and learning on the aptitudes and interests of pupils, remove any barriers to learning and provide appropriate intervention. The intention is that each learner will understand how they progress by knowing where they are now and where they want to be; with teachers providing the interventions to help learners reach their goals. These goals should be set as targets that stretch the individual; engendering a sense high expectation and broadening personal horizons.

The 2020 Vision Report echoes this thinking: **"In personalising learning, teachers use their understanding of achievement data and other information about their pupils to benefit particular groups, for example, the gifted and talented, by matching teaching and opportunities for learning more accurately to their needs."** (DfES 2006)

There is a need to challenge the pedagogical paradigm of the last century **“...the basic format of students in rows facing the teacher remains stubbornly persistent.”** (The Design Council 2005). Many pupils report that their experience of school is still marked by long periods of time listening to teachers or copying from the board or a book. Personalising learning involves changing – and challenging – such routines. (DfES 2007) It is only through these strategies that we might achieve what Mike Gibbons at the innovation Unit describes as **“...a personalised system that engages the curiosity and develops the talents of all out young people so that they achieve their potential.”** (The Design Council 2005:11)

As the Children’s Plan states:

“In the best schools in the country, excellent classroom practice has already established a pedagogy and culture of personalised teaching and learning. Our new approach in schools – which looks at progression across stages – means we will focus on every pupil, in every year group, not just those at the end of key stages and in the middle of the ability range.”

In practice this means working with schools to create a culture of high aspiration for all children, regardless of their background, gender, ethnicity or ability.



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