Personalisation of Education in Contexts

Policy Critique and Theories of Personal Improvement

Monica E. Mincu (Ed.)

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Edited by

Monica E. Mincu
University of Turin, Italy

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Picture taken on February 15, 2012 by Emeritus Professor Yukitsugu Kato at the Ooyaguti Elementary School, an open-space school (Ooyaguti-Kitamachi, Itabashi-Ku, Tokyo). A Math lesson of two 2nd classes together: "Triangle and Square". A team teaching and "my pace learning" lesson.

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PERSONALISATION, SCHOOL CHANGE AND (PERSONAL) IMPROVEMENT

CHRIS WATKINS

1. PERSONALISATION AND THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

Personalisation in the context of the classroom is an important ideal but one which also presents a serious challenge. This is because the dominant idea of a classroom is one where personalisation plays little part – reasons for this will be outlined. But the picture can be improved, since the practices for personalising learning in a rich way are available to us. The challenge is not one of simply adopting practices. It is foremost a matter of changing the context of the classroom. I will argue that the dominant idea of the classroom context generates a shallow view of personalisation that does not achieve important ideals. All the more, a changed view of the classroom is associated with a richer view of personalisation and the achievement of a wider range of goals.

THE CLASSROOM AS A CONTEXT

Classrooms are unique contexts – there is very little that is like a classroom. When one asks the question 'What situation that is not a classroom is most like a classroom?' the responses are often illuminating (Watkins & Wagner, 2000). Many people find the question difficult to answer, which may reflect the uniqueness of the classroom situation in our society. Teachers in primary schools are more likely to answer 'a family' than are teachers in secondary schools. The latter are more likely to offer situations such as theatre, or church, thereby reflecting the performance and audience aspects, and the traditional approaches to audience control. Teachers with these images of classrooms are more likely to engage in one-to-many interactions, expect to be listened to because of their role, and see their job as conveying a message. On the other hand, a different image was conveyed by one teacher who answered, 'an office'. He described a situation where everyone came in each day knowing their roles and working relations, and what they aimed to achieve. Again, a teacher who answered 'a restaurant' brought to attention her view of offering pupils a range on the menu, and indeed of changing the menu over time. Another teacher who answered 'an aeroplane' not only highlighted the physical aspects in her school where lines of desks were arranged in pairs, but also the role aspects of the hostess answering the call bell in this setting. Finally, a student teacher who wrote an essay likening classrooms to prisons, with no hope of alternative, failed the course!

Undoubtedly, classrooms are complex contexts. They are measurably the most complex social situation on the face of the planet. Teachers may be involved in a thousand or more interactions per day, many of them personally demanding. Classrooms are public places. In the classroom, teachers and pupils are highly visible to others, and public evaluations are frequent. Teachers may feel on stage,

and may use audience effects to affect others in the classroom. Classrooms events are multidimensional. Pupils – and teachers too – bring multiple concerns, interests and life experiences to the classroom, and the challenge for the teacher is to achieve ascribed goals in this complexity. Classroom events happen simultaneously, especially from the perspective of the teacher. And classroom events are unpredictable in a variety of ways.

Despite the uniqueness and complexity of classrooms, they are handled and created in ways that create strikingly similar patterns, and these patterns have recurred throughout the long history of classrooms on this planet. The earliest known classrooms were in Sumerian society around 3000 B.C. Their purpose was to train sons of the elite to become scribes. Many clay tablets survive, and some of these describe what classroom life was like! It was characterised by repetitive exercises, learning lists and teacher correction of learners' products. In this way the 'IRE cycle' (Initiation by teacher, Response by student, Evaluation by teacher) was born, still dominating the pattern of classrooms today (Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966). The approach to teaching and learning also displayed a view of knowledge as 'correct' and a view of teacher-learner relations reflecting hierarchical power. The classrooms were also associated with bad behaviour and punishments, while outside the classroom parents had already devised a method for enhancing their children's success – bribing the teacher (Kramer, 1963).

Studying images of classrooms over the intervening 5,000 years, I see some recurring features:

– Walls separating this context from the rest of life;
– Room layouts which separate individual learners from each other;
– Signs and symbols of teacher power in relation to learners;
– A view of teaching as telling and learning as listening;
– Uniformity of treatment of learners;
– Much importance given to conventional texts;
– Behaviour by learners which disrupts the preferences of teachers.

In recent centuries too, the classroom is noted for its constancy in the face of change (Cuban, 1993). International studies of today's classrooms (Hiebart, Gallimore, Garnier, Givvin, Hollingsworth, & Jacobs, 2003) show how such patterns recur. In very different country cultures of our world, the culture of classrooms is remarkably similar, with no country displaying a pattern which is distinct on all features.

Thus, classrooms are most often handled in a way which reduces their complexity. Teachers may be the immediate architects of this, but the wider phenomenon cannot be attributed to them as individuals – it is a cultural matter, where the dominant culture of the classroom is created and maintained by a wider system of forces, at the same time influencing teachers and their view of what is important in classrooms (Huberman & Marsh, 1982).

The simplified approach through which the complex context of the classroom is handled depends on routinisation, and this is reflected in a range of phenomena

such as the idea of 'rote learning', the great importance which is claimed for classroom rules, the considerable emphasis on planning for 'lessons' and 'resources' which 'work' for almost any context or classroom. The mechanical approach to classrooms probably reached its peak in the regimentation of the early 19th century 'monitorial schools', when schooling for all became a reality. The culture of industrialisation brought mass education with the message 'one size fits all'.

The wider system of forces continues to create a culture which influences the picture in classrooms. When government policies on education emphasise 'delivery' of the curriculum, and testing focuses on narrow forms of 'performance', with rewards for high-performing schools and punishments for low-performing schools, then the classroom reverts to the mechanical style of its earlier form, especially when government also attempts to micro-manage the teaching process. All this has been in evidence in England in recent years, more so than most other countries, including its immediate neighbours of Wales and Scotland. In such conditions, policy talk of 'standards' leads to standardisation, the idea of a 'common entitlement' leads to centralisation, and the form of 'accountability' becomes characterised by performativity and accountancy.

Hence, it is perhaps even more surprising that in this context, a policy emphasis on personalisation is introduced seeming to recognise that really 'one size fits few' (Ohanian, 1999).

PERSONALISATION AS POLICY – HOW WILL IT BE UNDERSTOOD?

The concept of 'personalising' is not new, nor new to education, having been written about for forty years (Kong, 1970; Peck, 1970). Personalised learning has been developing as an instructional model since the mid-1970s (Jenkins & Keefe, 2002). What is new is that a policy focus has now emerged. In UK, personalisation as an education policy was introduced as part of a larger 'big idea' for public services, as privatisation was in the 1980s and 1990s. In launching this idea, the Government Minister suggested that it overcomes the limitations of both paternalism and consumerism (Miliband, 2004a). And one of the main architects of policy thinking suggested that personalisation was needed because previous approaches of bureaucracy and markets have resulted in public services becoming more machine-like, more like a production line producing standardised goods (Leadbeater, 2004b). These policy-writers view personalisation as a new script for public services.

It may be informative to consider what general understanding of the term 'personalisation' exists in society at large. A search of web pages in the UK shows that the largest number of mentions of the term is of personalised registration-plates for cars, followed by personalised gifts and personalised t-shirts. This finding provides a cultural warning to educators – that personalised learning could be reduced to the commercial version: add a small identity marker to a mass-produced product and call it personalised. Some analysts (Hartley, 2008) suggest that the provenance of personalisation policy is

marketing theory, but this is based on a partial reading of the official sources: those sources also appealed to learning theory and organisational change theory. Nevertheless the concept is large and that can create difficulties for public understanding of policy.

What do teachers understand by 'personalisation'? In conferences and school meetings I sometimes ask the assembled teachers two questions. The first is 'Have you heard or read or seen the term 'personalised learning'?'. 100% of participants respond 'Yes'. The second question is 'On the occasion(s) when you heard the term 'personalised learning', was it clear what was meant by the term?'. 100% respond 'No'. I present this finding as a great opportunity, because it means that we do not have to spend time asking what government is telling us to do now, but that we should generate change locally. And here it becomes possible to forge a connection between the policy architects and teachers' experience, in that a sufficiently rich view of personalisation is about changing the script of the classroom away from production-line methods. This was effectively summarised by one teacher when considering the question 'What is the problem to which personalisation is the solution?' He replied 'depersonalisation'.

'PERSONALISED LEARNING' – HOW WILL IT BE UNDERSTOOD?

If schools see that the challenge is for them to regain a creative role in combating the phenomenon of depersonalisation in schooling, they may be prepared to accept a change in the script of the classroom. But they are not always immediately aware of how to go about it. Here again some other understandings of personalisation have their effect. I enquire with teachers whether personalised learning has ever happened to them, in any context or period of their own learning. Some teachers have no examples to offer, while most offer examples which take 'personal' to mean 'individual'. They mention examples when they experienced one-to-one teaching, and rarely mention any experiences of their own learning in classrooms. This re-emphasises the risk that a shallow version of individualising might emerge, and the script of the classroom would not change. Nevertheless, when I go on to enquire with them whether they have ever witnessed something of personalised learning happening in a classroom, their examples portray some of the key principles, such as active and collaborative approaches with a strong emphasis on being learner-directed. Teachers considers these experiences as rare, special and inspiring. In fact, this helps to re-emphasise two things, the motivation to move in that direction, and the forces which may be encountered.

In England, some of the forces which have contributed to depersonalised learning may be traced back to other policies, but there is a long-standing cultural issue which affects any discussion of learning, and has affected those policies: it is that we rarely talk about learning. Instead, other themes hijack the conversation (Watkins, 2003). Foremost amongst these are:

1. *Teaching*. Phrases such as 'teaching and learning policies' or 'teaching and learning strategies' are used more and more, but closer examination suggests that they might better read 'teaching and teaching', since the real attention given to learning is minimal. This example alerts us to the way that matters of learning are regularly attributed to features of teaching.
2. *Performance*. 'Performance' is not learning, though it may develop from learning. In some eyes, the goals of school have been reduced to measurable outcomes of a limited sort: performance tables, performance pay, performance management. But high levels of performance are not achieved by pressurising performance.
3. *Work*. This is the dominant discourse of classroom life – 'get on with your work', 'home work', 'have you finished your work?' But it can lead to a situation of meaningless work, as when people talk about being 'on task' without assessing the learning quality or engagement.

When we come to talk about personalised learning the hijack can be clear. For example, one writer suggests that learners 'should be able to tell their own story of what they have learned, how and why, as well as being able to reel off their qualifications, the formal hurdles they have overcome' (Leadbeater, 2004b, p. 81). The first part describes a new personalised script for learners. But the ministries and administrators who implement policy often distort the focus, so the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) introduces personalised learning in the voice of a (fictional?) teacher: 'I really stretch each of my pupils. I pitch their work carefully so that they can do it but still find it challenging. Then I can decide exactly how to tailor the next stage' (DfES, 2004a, p. 2). Here the focus lays upon personalised teaching and personalised work. On other occasions it becomes personalised performance, as when the Minister states that a key process is assessment for Learning that feeds into lesson planning and teaching strategies, sets clear targets, and clearly identifies what pupils need to do to get there (Miliband, 2004b).

Researchers who understand these issues in talking about learning and their implications for classroom change have warned. They consider that it will need considerable resolve to prevent discussion of Personalised Learning losing its focus on learners and learning and slipping back into over-simplified consideration of teaching provision and associated systems (Pollard & James, 2004).

One more recent development creates a further hijack of personalised learning, and is indicated in the view of this term which is emerging in the UK. Taking as an indicator the 100,000 UK web pages which use the term:

– 36% are associated with 'individual';
– 35% are associated with ICT/web/e-learning;
– 17% mention the classroom, mostly in passing.

The proportion which mention individuals and groups in classrooms, without ICT, web etc is just 0.3%. So we are at risk of the dominant interpretation of personalised learning becoming individual learning with ICT.

Much ICT software brought into classrooms embodies a narrow conception of learning. 'Teaching machines' of the 1960s claimed to offer a personalised route, but the offer was one of limited choice through a prescribed programme of pathways. This conception survives today. But even by the 1990s, ten years' work analysing the introduction of technology into the classroom showed that learning gains occurred when teachers extended their traditional views of teaching and learning – from instruction to knowledge construction (Apple Computer, 1995). Today the same point is made about personalised learning, highlighting a danger that Virtual Learning Environments will be used to give a personalised technological veneer to current methods of teaching rather than making the difficult but necessary shift from an instructivist teaching model to constructivist (Apple Computer, 2006). But today it still remains the fact that large claims are made for the role of technology (Cuban, 2003) despite minimal evidence (Oppenheimer, 2004).

DOES PERSONALISATION EQUAL INDIVIDUALISATION?

Remembering that personalisation is a policy for a range of different public services, its implementation may be different in those services. If a public service has as its point of contact an individual – as in individual health – then the notion of individual choice may be salient. In these circumstances the challenge is to move from a 'one size fits all' script to a 'one size fits one' script. However, in education – and indeed for services such as community health – the form of organisation is a collective, handled through the process of school. Thus, the solution to the 'production-line' problem may not be individualisation. Here the script 'one size fits all' needs to change to a 'many sizes in one' script that allows for multiple interpretations, promotes interactions and builds interdependence. Such a change would represent a rich response to the current problems, and a rich interpretation of a UK government statement which could be interpreted in a range of ways. The central characteristic of such a new system will be personalisation – so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system (DfES 2004b). The challenge for teachers is how they might achieve this in classroom.

The Classroom is the Key Context

Increasing evidence points to the fact that the classroom is much more important than the school for the key purpose of pupils' learning. In research on 'school effectiveness', it has been recognised that classrooms have a major impact on the measured performance of pupils, and explain much more of the variation in performance data than do schools. For Cuttance (1998), recent research on the impact of schools on student learning leads to the conclusion that 8–19% of the variation in student learning outcomes lies between schools with a further amount of up to 55% of the variation in individual learning outcomes between classrooms within schools.

In addition, studies of school effectiveness and school improvement indicate that the classroom effect is greater than the whole school effect in explaining students' progress (Stoll, 1999). So there is good reason to focus on the classroom, also in light of the findings that school leadership explains only 3 to 5% of the variation in pupil test scores across schools (Leithwood & Lewin, 2005).

Studies of the influences on student learning point to key classroom variables. One review of research (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1994) examined 11,000 statistical findings: the two most important factors were classroom management and metacognitive processes. Another study (Marzano, 1998) showed that student beliefs about their personal attributes, about others, how the world works and what is important in life combined with the metacognitive as the key drivers of learning in classrooms. So we focus on the classroom because learning is local and this is the site of most effect. Within the classroom we focus on the management and processes which have an impact on learners' beliefs and on learners' thinking.

Three Versions of Classroom Learning and Personalisation

I now outline three different versions of what could be meant by personalised learning in a classroom context, and summarise some relevant research. Each version represents a different answer to the two key questions about personalised learning:

– What view of the person is this?
– What view of learning is this?

This style of analysing classrooms is rare in the literature, exceptions being Collins, Greeno, and Resnick (1994) and Getzels (1977). For each version I indicate the classroom practices and the research base covering a number of decades. Then I argue that these different versions can be seen as distinctly different classroom contexts, varying from shallow to rich versions of personalisation.

The Individualised Teaching Classroom. Telling Tailored to the Individual.

In this version the term 'person' equates with 'individual', though no further understanding of the person is sought. The concept of learning is the dominant one of being taught. So the process of personalisation is about making the mode of 'delivery', i.e. the teaching – whether by a person or a mechanical substitute, particular to the individual.

In classrooms, there has never been a system whereby one teacher teaches thirty pupils individually, so the focus shifts from the teacher to resource-based learning and to forms of technology. An early example, Personalised System of Instruction [PSI], can be traced to the simplest view of the person and of learning – behaviourism. Features included:

(1) The go-at-your-own-pace feature, which permits a student to move through the course at speed commensurate with his [sic] ability [sic] and other demands upon his time. (2) The unit-perfection requirement for advance, which lets the student go ahead to new material only after demonstrating mastery of that which preceded it. (3) The use of lectures and demonstrations as vehicles of motivation, rather than sources of critical information. (Keller, 1968).

The message here seems to be self-instruction of a traditional type, using texts and tasks designed by the teacher. Applications of the model have been seen in universities since the 1960s, and in some cases led to the adoption of large-scale introductory PSI courses, but these were suspended amidst conflicting perceptions from participants and observers (Friedman, Hirschi, Parlett, & Taylor, 1976). In an example where PSI had been used for eight years, student grades, overall satisfaction, and perceived effort were generally similar to those from a lecture-based course (Ocorr & Osgood, 2003).

In school contexts there have been other resource-based schemes which promote individual pathways through them. These schemes often find themselves inhibited by the view of teaching which is dominantly held by teachers, policy-makers and others – that the teacher is there to 'teach', not to help learners through a resource system.

Most units designed within a PSI framework have emphasised lower-order knowledge acquisition. As such, they may sustain a depersonalised, decontextualised, primarily written approach to knowledge, which is regularly found in classrooms and schools. The emphasis on testing in order to allow progress through the scheme reflects a view of assessment based in traditional views of learning. It is the idea of procedural display: 'I show you' and then you are tested by being asked to display 'Show me' (Bloome, Puro, & Theodorou, 1989).

Numerous other approaches such as Individually Prescribed Instruction and Individually Guided Education attracted considerable investment but disappeared without trace. This may be understood in terms of the fact that they did not address and therefore did not change two key things about classrooms:

– The view of learning in operation: a simple view of transmission;
– The power relations in teaching and learning: low agency for learners.

Systems such as PSI suggest that this version of learning and personalisation do not provide responsive environments of the sort that policy-makers indicate, since learners adapt to it rather than it adapting to them. Active and collaborative components are not a feature: overall the person is treated as a detached individual, a consumer of the programme. The research summarised above suggests that the mere addition of some tailoring to what remains a predefined programme is unlikely to significantly alter the script of classrooms. Such consumerist notions seem to ignore the fact that learning is not like shopping. And these notions are ineffective for improving engagement: on occasions when attempts to 'improve motivation' have been derived from this view, for example

by the addition of monetary incentives, these have been ineffective in improving performance (O'Neil, Abedi, Miyoshi, & Mastergeorge, 2005).

This shallow version of personalised learning – individualised teaching – does not create a new classroom context but continues the long-standing dynamics of classrooms. Learner identities remain passive, and there is no new script for the classroom. To create effective change it is necessary to review the conception of learning – and the conception of the person.

The Personalised Inquiry Classroom.

In this version, the person is seen as an active interpreter of their world, and learning is seen as a process of actively building understanding. The term 'personal' may emphasise different understandings which different learners construct, in part reflecting the different meanings they bring. So the process of personalisation is about engaging with the variety of meanings learners bring, and helping them to construct new understandings through a process of inquiry and investigation. Social processes may be referred to, but as a route to individual outcomes.

In a classroom, practices might include adapting the curriculum to learners' questions, supporting them in planning learning, engaging and addressing multiple interpretations, and promoting learner review of the process. Elements such as these are sometimes summarised as *choice and voice* (Watkins, Carnell, & Lodge, 2007).

In classrooms, pupils might exercise choices affecting what they learn, how they learn, how well they learn, and why they learn. This would be in support of improving their enquiries rather than for its own sake. Even young children accept limits of choice: 'I want to make my own choices...sometimes' (Daniels & Perry, 2003).

When learners are given opportunity for self-direction, there is:

– Increased intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000);
– Higher learner engagement (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004);
– Improved performance (Guay & Vallerand, 1997);
– Stronger orientation towards learning (Meece, Herman, & McCombs, 2003);
– Fewer reports of disruptive behaviour.

When learners are not given opportunities for self-direction:

– Learners choose less challenging tasks (Boggiano, Flink, Shields, Seelbach, & Barrett, 1988);
– Students depend on others for evaluation (Boggiano & Katz, 1991);
– Student problem-solving is less effective (Boggiano et al., 1993).

Reviews of this field note the change in style of the teacher's planning. Students can be encouraged to assume some responsibility for school learning with less rather than more instructional mediation. This is not to suggest that teachers avoid planning. Rather it suggests that teachers avoid over-engineering, through gradually released control of certain processes and objectives (Corno, 1992).

Such a moderated version of personalised learning – meaning-making by many – creates a changed classroom context with more balanced power relations between teachers and pupils, and a view of knowledge as open to revision and actively constructed. The culture of enquiry and investigation accommodates multiple roles and perspectives. Learner identities are more active. This version of personalisation will lead to more effective learning and better performance. Some examples of this have been termed 'communities of learners' (Brown & Campione, 1994), but the relations between learners have not yet become significantly changed. The classroom has yet to become a learning community.

The Personalised Community Classroom.

In this version, the person is seen living at the centre of a web of relationships and contexts, and learning is seen as fundamentally social, the means by which people join communities and become who they aim to be. Here the personal is necessarily social and the person is seen as developing through interaction with others. Thus, the process of personalisation is about building participation through belonging and collaboration, so that learning advances the collective knowledge and, in this way, supports the growth of individual knowledge. Key processes of interpretation, interaction and interdependence are promoted, and these contribute to becoming fully human.

In a classroom, practices might include (Watkins, 2005):

1. Building affiliation
   getting to know each other;
   telling the story we bring, appreciatively;
2. Creating a community agenda
   eliciting the questions brought to the theme;
   helping learners plan intentional learning;
3. Community activities for learning
   reciprocal teaching;
   development of dialogue;
   jigsaw tasks;
   reviewing how the community is learning;
   group goals for assessment;
4. Community governance
   classroom reviews, 'the classroom we want';
5. Community climate
   development of trust and pro-social behaviour;
   helping each other to learn;
   bridging to other communities.

Through these sorts of processes, pupils become more active and engaged as they create knowledge resources for each other, they learn more about collaboration, and regularly are involved in taking the consequential products of their learning

beyond the classroom walls. In summary, students are crew, not passengers. Various research studies reflect this.

When classrooms operate as learning communities (Watkins, 2004):

– People feel part of a larger whole (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, & Schaps, 1995);
– Diverse contributions are embraced (Elbers, 2003);
– Engaged enquiry emerges (Engle & Conant, 2002);
– Students help each other learn (Schaps & Solomon, 1990);
– Productive engagement develops, with an orientation to learn (Crawford, Krajcik, & Marx, 1999);
– Students show better knowledge, understanding, application and transfer (Brown & Campione, 1994);
– Discourse of the discipline develops (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996);
– Conceptions of learning are richer (Lamon, Chan, Scardamalia, Burtis, & Brett, 1993);
– Learning together becomes understood (Hogan, 2001).

I argue that this version – building collective understanding – has changed the classroom in such a way that the term 'transformed' may be used. The form is not one that is known to the earlier versions. The classroom context now has distributed power relations between all participants. Knowledge is now seen as a joint enterprise, created through mutual effort, in which diversity is treated as a resource. And when time is allocated to review the working of the classroom, it may now deserve the title of a learning community. Learner identities are collaborative, participative and link to communities beyond the classroom. This version of personalisation will lead to better performance and to greater social cohesion and equity. Its effects are more likely to transfer to other contexts and continue after school, where the skills of team working, effective participating and reflective learning are crucial.

Managing Personalised Classroom Learning

Changing the script of classrooms depends crucially on teachers, their professional vision and how they see classrooms fit for the future rather than for the past. If these elements are not enhanced, the old script will remain. As we move away from the shallow views of personalised classroom learning, it helps to be clear that the teacher's role becomes more one of managing an environment and its resources, helping learners to build inquiries, promoting collaboration and focusing on learning. The criteria for judging teacher effectiveness shifts from that of delivering good lessons to that of being able to build or create a classroom learning community (Prawat, 1992). When such changes are made, teachers operate differently in relation to:

– The balance of power – from teacher to more shared in the community;
– The function of content – from material to be covered to knowledge to be examined;

- The role of the teacher – from sage on the stage to guide on the side;
- The responsibility for learning – from the teacher to the learners;
- The purpose and process of evaluation – from performing and proving to learning and improving (Weimer, 2002).

But alongside such implications for teachers, there are also implications for how teachers are treated:

> All this 'personalisation' will come to naught if I and my colleagues who share students do not have the authority to act upon our conclusions about an individual or a group of students. … If we must always ask for permission or refer every change to higher authorities, there is no 'personalisation' (Sizer, 1999, p. 47).

These points lead us back to consider the function of the school in building the sort of climate and organisational conditions which are likely to support teachers in their role which in turn contributes to a richly personalised classroom environment.

Personalising Schools? The School as a Community

Some schools operate more as communities than others. This difference makes a difference to a range of behaviours and capacities as learners. A study of 11,794 16 year-olds in 830 secondary schools (Lee & Smith, 1995) revealed that students' gains in achievement and engagement were significantly higher in schools with practices derived from thinking of the school as a community, rather than the common form of thinking of the school as a bureaucracy. Similarly for primary schools: those where students agree with statements such as 'my school is like a family' and 'students really care about each other' show a host of positive outcomes. These include higher educational expectations and academic performance, stronger motivation to learn, greater liking for school, less absenteeism, greater social competence, fewer conduct problems, reduced drug use and delinquency, and greater commitment to democratic values. (Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996).

When students' sense of school membership is high, their patterns of behaviour outside school are also affected, for example significantly lower drug use and delinquency. So schools that are experienced as communities may enhance students' resilience (Battistich & Hom, 1997).

Parallel processes operate for teachers. The sense of community amongst teachers has been shown to relate to the achievement of pupils, and this in turn relates to the style of pedagogy which teachers lead in their classrooms (Louis & Marks, 1998). And when teachers take collective responsibility for students' academic success or failure rather than blaming students for their own failure, there are significant achievement gains (Lee & Smith, 1996).

How school operates has a significant effect on teachers' beliefs about changing their classrooms. When teachers feel professional efficacy, many benefits follow.

Forces Against a Rich View of Personalised Learning

There is a range of dynamics which could serve to make the creation of a rich version of personalised learning more difficult in classrooms. The first is inertia, because to change the script of classrooms is to go against the dominant trend and the pattern which has existed for some time Personalised learning challenges the mutual accommodations which often grow up in routine teacher-pupil classroom practices and calls for high expectations, positive responses and new forms of learner-aware pedagogy (Pollard & James, 2004).

So teachers themselves may feel beyond their comfort zone at first, and for some this can be a reason to retreat. But there are wider forces too. Returning to the points which stimulated recent interest in personalised learning, if education has become more machine-like, more like a production line producing standardised goods, it is necessary to analyse the forces which create this picture, and in that light devise the changes which need to be made for education to become more personalised in its best sense. It would seem a necessity to review current forces such as:

– Prescription of curriculum and teaching methods;
– Emphasis on individual achievement in performance tests;
– Making teachers responsible for student performance;
– Talking of teaching as 'delivery';
– Although the forces indicated here do not determine practice in an individual classroom, they do influence the wider climate of classrooms and the patterns of learning and non-learning we see in them.

Nevertheless, the development of a rich version of personalised learning has the potential to make a significant contribution to changing the script of the classroom for the 21st century. Achieving that change requires us to maintain a rich view of the person (one we would be happy to apply to ourselves) and a rich view of learning (which would apply to the best of our own learning). With these ingredients we can fight for a version of personalised classroom learning which creates real change.

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Chris Watkins
Institute of Education
University of London