

# Personalizing Learning

---

Transforming education for every child

John West-Burnham  
and Max Coates

**HAWKER BROWNLOW**  
•  
E D U C A T I O N

# Contents

<b>About the authors</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
Max Coates and John West-Burnham	
<b>1 Understanding personalization</b>	<b>9</b>
John West-Burnham	
<b>2 A changing world</b>	<b>22</b>
John West-Burnham	
<b>3 Understanding learning</b>	<b>31</b>
John West-Burnham	
<b>4 A new model of the curriculum</b>	<b>46</b>
John West-Burnham	
<b>5 Learning styles</b>	<b>57</b>
Max Coates	
<b>6 Assessing personalized learning</b>	<b>69</b>
Max Coates	
<b>7 ICT and personalization</b>	<b>79</b>
Max Coates	
<b>8 Leadership for personalization</b>	<b>94</b>
John West-Burnham	

## **Case studies**

<b>9</b>	<b>Philosophy of education: a holistic curriculum</b> Ian McKenzie	<b>108</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Creating a learning-centred school</b> Greg Barker	<b>113</b>
	<b>References and acknowledgements</b>	<b>125</b>

# Introduction

---

Personalizing learning is emerging as a dominant theme in the reconceptualization of the way in which education is provided. It is a component of the rethinking of the values and ethos underpinning the delivery of public services. At the heart of the personalization debate is recognition of the concept of a *service* provided to *individuals* to meet their specific and personal needs. This represents a profound change from the prevailing orthodoxy of people having to fit into the systems and structures of a bureaucratic system as best they can. It is difficult to be precise about the origins and motivations behind this change. A range of factors can be proposed: increasing dissatisfaction with the public sector; consumerism becoming the dominant factor in our culture; a genuine desire by professionals to enhance the quality of the services they provide; and the loss of a deferential and acquiescent public prepared to be pathetically grateful for any service.

Individual teachers and school leaders have long sought to respond to the needs of the individual learner. In fact, virtually every school's aims or values statement is couched in terms of aspirations for individual success and achievement. However, the reality is very different for most young people in schools. Schools are, by definition, generic experiences; in almost every respect schools are organized in terms of standardized experiences:

- an identical curriculum is delivered to all;
- there is automatic chronological cohort progression, irrespective of individual development;
- the emphasis is on the teaching of the class;
- the school day is standardized and regulated.

Of course there are very good reasons for this approach in terms of efficiency and equity. But it is a denial of the reality of people's lives. At no other time in a person's life is the individual subordinated to the generic as is the norm in schools; in fact choice, diversity and personal freedom are seen as the fundamental criteria for a civilized and meaningful life.

This book argues for the personalization of education through a reconceptualization of the nature of learning, the status of the curriculum and the role of teachers and schools. In essence it advocates a movement from schooling the student to educating the learner. It is very important at the outset to distinguish between personalizing learning and individualized learning: the latter carries with it implications of a solitary activity and, as will be demonstrated, personalizing learning is about enhancing learning relationships to optimize the learner's engagement and success. Equally we have taken note of Hargreaves (2004) stricture and refer to personalizing learning rather than personalized learning. The latter implies a misplaced degree of confidence in achieving a very demanding outcome. The fundamental nature of 150 years of social norms and professional practice are being challenged by this.

As authors we are very aware of the care and commitment that teachers demonstrate on a daily basis in supporting the learning and development of young people. We know that right through the education system teachers go to enormous lengths to support individual students – often far in excess of any reasonable professional expectation. Equally we are aware that in many aspects of life in schools the principles of personalization are known and understood, notably in special education and in early years' provision. Our thesis is that young people should not have to depend on the integrity and altruism of individual teachers but rather that the system should be designed around them; hence the use of 'transforming' in our title.

Chapter 1 offers a discussion of the various factors that have led to the current debate about the nature of personalization. Chapter 2 provides a detailed rationale for personalization, while Chapter 3 develops a model of learning to reinforce the rationale. Chapter 4 argues for the curriculum as a process rather than as content. Chapter 5 uses learning styles to develop the focus on the individual. Chapter 6 examines the implications for assessment and Chapter 7 shows how ICT can support the personalization of learning. Chapter 8 considers the implications for our understanding of school leadership.

We are very grateful to Hazel Pulley, Ian McKenzie, Greg Barker and Sharon Cousins for providing material to illuminate key elements of personalization. Many of the ideas in this book were developed in sessions with two National College for School Leadership programmes: the New Visions Programme and the Executive Leadership Programme. We are grateful to all colleagues for the debates and development of ideas. Ingrid Bradbury made the production of this book possible through her expert management of the manuscript.

*Max Coates  
John West-Burnham*

# Chapter 1

---

## Understanding personalization

John West-Burnham

The emerging debate about the personalization of learning has its roots in discussions about the nature of education that are as old as the concept of education itself. In essence, the discussion centres on the status of the individual in the educational process – to what extent should the individual fit the system or the system the individual? This tension is at the heart of almost every theory about the structure and content of any education system, and it includes a wide range of fundamental assumptions about the ethical status of the individual, the nature of society, the understanding of the learning process and the nature and purpose of organizations. The interplay of these variables provides one way of explaining the enormous variety of approaches to the process of educating a person both over time and across cultures.

In many ways the debate about personalization can be seen as the latest attempt to restructure the relationship between a range of variables in order to produce an education system that is perceived to be appropriate to a given time and context. In one sense all education systems can be seen as an attempt to reconcile three imperatives: equity, efficiency and excellence (the three 'Es').

- Equity is the dominant imperative in most democratic societies to ensure that access to education is not compromised by poverty, social class, gender, race or learning disability.
- Efficiency refers to the pressure to maximize outcomes (however defined) while minimizing costs – essentially the more for less debate.
- Excellence describes the extent to which an education system is perceived to be achieving high standards of performance.

Much of the deliberation by the state, since the mid-nineteenth century, about the provision of education can be seen as an attempt to optimize these factors. Equally, different cultures have tended to emphasize one of the components at the expense of the others. For many they are in fact irreconcilable – equity and excellence are often seen as mutually exclusive; efficiency will often militate against the other two. Educational policy makers and professionals have long sought to achieve an optimum balance but, almost invariably, the balance is skewed. The reality is shown in Figure 1.1 – equity, efficiency and excellence are only achieved for a minority – the extent to which the three circles overlap might be seen as a judgement on the extent to which a society has achieved a measure of social justice.

For the purposes of this discussion, social justice might be seen as the extent to which a society is inclusive in terms of access to wealth, status, power and, in particular, the levels of

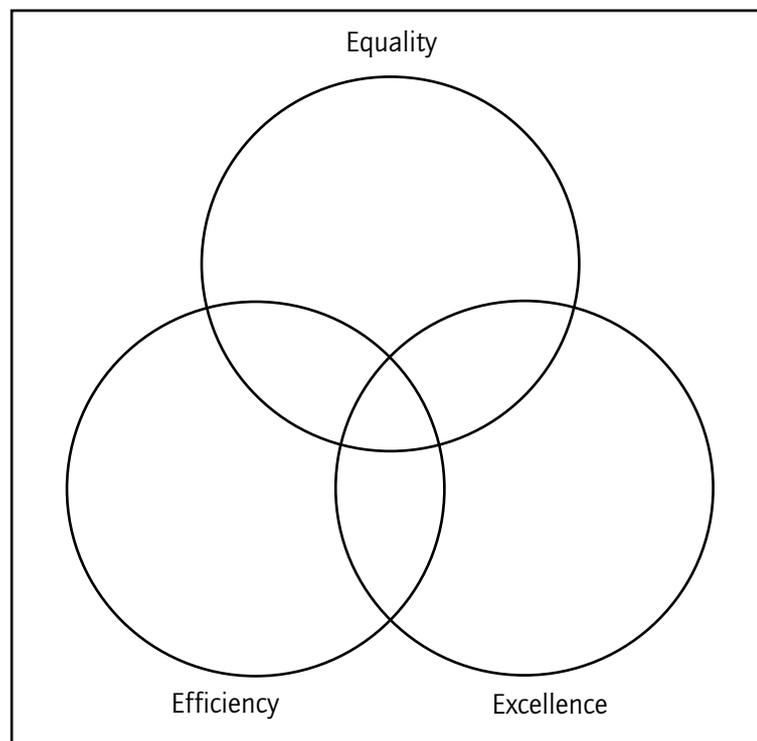


Figure 1.1 Social justice in education systems

participation in all aspects of being a citizen. An obvious example is the right to vote. The extension of the franchise is seen as a key indicator of the extent of democracy and the relative levels of potential social justice. Rawls (2001) captures the central importance of education both as a right in itself and as the means of securing a just society.

*16.2 If citizens of a well-ordered society are to recognize one another as free and equal, basic institutions must educate them to this conception of themselves, as well as publicly exhibit and encourage this ideal of political justice. This task of education belongs to what we may call the wide role of a political conception. In this role such a conception is part of the public political culture: its first principles are embodied in the institutions of the basic structure and appealed to in their interpretation. Acquaintance with and participation in that public culture is one way citizens learn to conceive of themselves as free and equal, a conception which, if left to their own reflections, they most likely never form, much less accept and desire to realize. (page 56)*

A society that does not promote equity, efficiency and excellence in its education system is unlikely to be perceived by *all* its citizens as promoting democracy, justice and fairness – the fundamental criteria for a good life in our current understanding.

Reconciling equity, efficiency and excellence has to be the goal of every policy maker in a democracy. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that, in many education systems, attempts to do so at both macro and micro level are failing. As the cost of education continues to rise, there is not a commensurate increase in measurable performance. The socially disadvantaged continue to be systematically marginalized by the structure of school systems. As standards rise, so the debate about excellence is redefined to reinforce elitist models of achievement.