

Standardised Testing and Personalised Education – Government Style

In their own inimitable way the government are taking on the term 'Personalised Learning'. But their meaning is not one that home educators would often feel happy about.

In an interesting twist on the governments understanding of 'Personalised Learning' a report by the BBC on the 9th of January¹ the government announced their intention of ending SATs and introducing a broad battery of individualised tests. If these reforms are fully adopted some high achieving pupils could face a battery of five sets of individualised tests in seven years as opposed to the current two.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, said in an interview on the BBC radio 4 today programme² that the constant rounds of testing in schools were already overloading children and in particular that they were pushing out any opportunity for them to be creative. He believes that children are being "hurried on" and put into the market too early. He said, "One of the examples of a hurried culture is hurrying to get children into the market, to get them into the adult world rather than giving them the time they need." He believes that this is currently a worsening trend.

However the government stressed that tests were, "a non-negotiable part of school reform" and that, "They provide valuable objective evidence in the core subjects, helping inform further improvements to teaching and learning,"

In addition to which it seems that having our children for five days a week and setting homework besides, is not enough so Ministers are also planning several schemes to stretch the most able students.

Firstly they aim to introduce an extra personal tuition scheme costing £6 million, targeting 10,000 high flying pupils. Tutoring may take place out of hours in school, at home or at drop-in centres.

The second scheme will cost £65million³ and will identify up to 800,000 gifted pupils who will be eligible for e-vouchers worth up to around £80 each to purchase extra help. This scheme is expected to start next September. Gifted is defined by the government as "developed to a level significantly ahead of their year group – or with the potential to develop those abilities".

It seems probable that these reforms will create more teaching to the test and, if it is possible, even less time for creative learning and personal development.

It appears that the government are introducing a kind of grammar school education tacked onto the comprehensive system in the form of extra tuition at evenings and weekends. One teacher responding to the initiatives on the official Teachnet Newlsetter commented, "As I understand it, we give the pupils a test when they enter the school (just after age 11, I think), and those who pass, benefit from lessons with their peers, rather than with those who are not so gifted or talented. Perhaps we could set up a pilot school on this basis. I wonder what we would call such a school?"

The government reacted to these comments with a classic piece of spin assuring readers that the scheme was "not about selection". Which sounds like a riddle starting with the question "when is selection not selection?"

In another scheme the government are targeting poor readers with a 10 million pound project to provide individual tuition following a study which shows improved motivation and achievement when children are taught one to one⁴.

What is so striking about all these new measures is that they come despite claims that schools are doing an excellent job now. If this is so then why the constant reforms?

1 www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,2-2537632,00.html

2 news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6216443.stm

3 news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6214407.stm

4 news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/6121880.stm