KS3/4 WIDER CURRICULUM CHOICE - PERSONALISATION OR SOCIAL CONTROL?

A contemporary study of influences on Year 9 students' decision-making in an English comprehensive school

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KEY STAGE 3/4 WIDER CURRICULUM CHOICE, PERSONALISATION OR SOCIAL CONTROL?
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ABSTRACT

This research concerns tensions between 'personalisation,' a neo-liberal concept adapted by New Labour to empower and motivate students and 'performativity,' an aspect of governance whereby institutional effectiveness is monitored by statistical outcomes. Their ambiguous reconciliation in Personalised Learning (DfES 2004a) continues to develop in schools and colleges. A research focus on Key Stage 3/4 wider curriculum choice, one of five key but under-researched elements in this policy, provides the opportunity to explore this paradox. Involving an investigation into the recent experience of 14-15 year olds in an inner city English comprehensive school, the degree of equity afforded students in decision-making, based on teacher perceptions of students as achievers and underachievers may reveal conflicting values in the management of this process.

Taking an ethnographic approach to case study development, triangulation of method and source is used to test internal validity. Analysis of interview data from a range of pastoral staff provides outline images of the institutional management of student choice. A comparative statistical analysis using data from anonymous student questionnaires provides an independent account of the effects of this interpretation on the student stakeholder role. From the questionnaire sample, qualitative data from twenty student interviews offers further insight into the processing of decisions. Relying on respondent validation procedures throughout, for ethical reasons the identification of student interviewees as 'achievers' or 'underachievers' is retrospective.

Demonstrating how student access to the KS4 optional curriculum operates, the research reveals power differences firstly between the student cohort and 'gate-keeping' pastoral staff and secondly between individual students. While some evidence of social control through self-surveillance, implied through Foucauldian criticism of neo-liberal strategies (Rose and Miller 1992) may exist, the extreme social and economic deprivation of the area is used to justify this institutional interpretation of the stakeholder role through the moral imperative of social inclusion.

Key words

Curriculum choice, personalisation, personalised learning, performativity, equity, student voice, marketisation, governance, manipulation, social control, KS3/4 wider curriculum choice.

Abbreviations

(AfL) Assessment for Learning

(ASDAN) Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network

(BERA) British Educational Research Association

(CfBT) Centre for British Teachers

(DfES) Department for Education and Skills

(DCSF) Department for Children, Schools and Families

(EiC) Excellence in Cities Programme

(ESRC) Economic and Social Research Council

(GCSE) General Certificate in Secondary Education

(G+T) Gifted and Talented Students Programme

(KS) Key Stage- a cluster of year cohorts.

KS3 refers to Yrs. 7, 8, 9. (Ages 11-14 yrs.)

KS4 refers to Yrs. 10, 11. (Ages 14-16 yrs.)

KS5 refers to Yrs.12, 13. (Ages 16-18 yrs.)

(NCSL) National College for School Leaders

(Ofsted) Office for Standards in Education

(RQ) Research Question

(SATS) Standard Achievement Tests

(SEF) Self-Evaluation Form

(SRQ) Specific Research Question

(TLRP) Teaching and Learning Research Programme

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1. 1 Introduction

Indicating the circumstances under which the concept of personalisation, adapted from social welfare reform, became the basis for New Labour's education policy, Personalised Learning (Miliband 2004a), this section considers the tensions inherent in its structure. Aiming to facilitate the development of a student stakeholder role in schools while contributing to the improvement of educational attainment, Personalised Learning (PL) highlighted five areas for development, including the expansion of 'curriculum choice, particularly from the age of 14,' (Miliband 2004a, p.2).

This research will focus on the experience of Year 9 students (aged 14 years) during Key Stage 3/4 (KS3/4) wider curriculum choice, an important if under-researched topic, representing a universal element of student experience in English secondary schools. Toward the end of Key Stage 3 (Years 7–9) students are required to select a small number of courses, usually three or four from a wide menu of curricular opportunities which may be academic, vocational or a mixture of both. Popularly referred to as the 'options process,' student choice in this context is used to facilitate curricular input from new subjects and/or provide for early specialisation. Since the introduction of PL, the range and scope of 'options' has been increased, acquiring contemporary value in 'personalising' curricular content during Year 10 and 11, otherwise known as Key Stage 4. Research aims and objectives, clarified in the context of a research outline, are brought together in the research question.

1.2 Research Background

When the 1997 general election swept Tony Blair and New Labour to power, the incoming Prime Minister's claim of a new dawn in British politics with education at the heart of the government's agenda resulted in high, possibly over-optimistic expectations.

In education, despite five years of initiatives, Labour's flagship policy, the Standards Agenda, had run out of steam. By mid-2003 while national test results from fourteen years olds offered some encouragement, at ages seven

and eleven, primary education had missed its targets. August 2003 saw the proportion of A* to G grades falling for the first time since the introduction of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) examination, with 2.4% of candidates failing to achieve a minimum grade. Core subjects like English, Mathematics and Science were particularly affected by this decline. Furthermore the gulf between the highest and lowest achievers in England and Wales, already among the widest in the industrialised world, had increased. If this trend continued, Blair's extravagant claims for Labour as the guardian of high quality education for all might well be used against him.

In Parliament and the media the atmosphere was critical. Charles Clarke, Secretary of State for Education, was forced to apologize for GCSE failures. Meanwhile the Standards Agenda, criticized by Digby Jones, Director General of the Confederation for British Industry (CBI), was openly blamed by employers for creating a skills gap, the result of too many schools, mindful of education league tables, teaching purely to examination criteria. Further political inadequacies were implied through quality assurance issues such as inconsistencies in perceived levels of difficulty between A-level subjects and the value of GCSE qualifications, challenging the government on criteria it had so recently and successfully used to justify its existence – its public image as a trusted, compassionate and effective manager of education policy. Since this negative climate might erode public confidence in New Labour at home and Britain's place in the knowledge economy abroad, it could not be ignored.

Attempting to redefine the educational landscape and regain trust, the concept of 'personalisation' was introduced as Personalised Learning (PL) by Tony Blair at Labour's 2003 autumn conference. Crystallised into government policy, the final version appeared as a consultation document from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES 2004a) entitled 'A National Conversation about Personalised Learning,' to be interpreted locally and implemented nationally from September 2004. Claiming descent from earlier neo-liberal marketisation strategies begun under the Conservatives, PL was justified by social democratic credentials (Miliband 2004b). Through the implicit extension of the stakeholder role in service provision to include students as well as parents, it was intended to create a 'more customer-

friendly interface with existing services' (Leadbeater 2004a, p.2). Suggesting a 'third way' for 'public service delivery' to overcome 'the limitations of both (socialist) paternalism and (conservative/capitalist) consumerism' (Miliband's preface in Leadbeater 2004a, p.11), 'personalisation' had emerged from Demos, a government 'think tank' (Leadbeater 2004a, 2004b, 2005) 'as a new mode of governance' complementing 'existing bureaucratic and market-driven modes of governance' (Hartley 2009, p.427). The application of this 'very elastic concept' (Hartley 2007, p.637) having 'eluded an agreed definition' (Hartley 2009, p.428) relied heavily on the 'stakeholder' role where, by putting 'citizens at the heart of public services,' they had 'a say in the design and improvement of the organisations that serve them' (Miliband 2004b). In this way a sense of civic ownership and responsibility would be fostered.

In its final version, PL had five elements - assessment for learning (AfL), a range of teaching techniques facilitated by ICT, KS3/4 wider curriculum choice previously known as 'Key Stage 4 options', workforce reorganisation and the institutional development of community links. Attempting to lure middle class parents and children away from private education would possibly prevent a further 'creaming off' of talent and thereby improve the performance of state schools. Meanwhile the juxtaposition of 'personalised' with 'learning' resulted in a subtle but significant change in emphasis from the concept of 'personalising learning', later envisaged by Leadbeater, Hargreaves, Brighouse and West-Burnham. While PL would still be used to 'tailor education to individual need, interest and aptitude,' this would only be done in order 'to fulfil every young person's potential' (Miliband 2004b), presumably to achieve more.

Based on contemporary expectations of continued economic prosperity, where education would provide increased numbers of qualified workers to meet a similar anticipated expansion in middle class occupations, New Labour intended, as a socially democratic rather than socialist government, through raised attainment and extended consumer choice, to keep middle class families within the state system. Where attainment standards fell, the principle of parental choice meant that 'failing' schools, increasingly unpopular with middle class parents, might be caught in a downward spiral to the detriment of

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local, less socially and geographically mobile communities. Thus the five elements of PL were completely justified in restoring the government's image at home and abroad and the reputation of state education across the social spectrum.

1.3 The research problem

Such multifunctional policies as PL are frequently beset by conflicting values. By its very nature tension exists between 'personalisation' suggesting a universal acceptance of stakeholder choice and a widespread and sustained improvement in educational achievement. To be effective the latter relies not only on heightened student motivation but also lengthy and sustained application in partnership with other stakeholders and service providers like teachers, school managers, further education colleges, universities, employers, parents and peers. Meanwhile the resolution of this tension between official interpretations of personalisation in PL and the means used to raise achievement levels provides a focus for research.

Applying social democratic concepts like 'equity' and 'student voice,' critical to PL to motivate the workforce (the teaching profession) and encourage stakeholder participation (by parents/voters and students/future voters) personalisation was underscored by a universal entitlement to 'choice' (Miliband 2004b). Making these concepts and policies 'universal' rather than the privilege of a few encapsulated what was 'new' (Miliband 2004b) in Labour's policy. Flexibility surrounding the 'stakeholder' role would become normal in state education - an observation confirmed by Sebba et al (2007, p.15). However, the expansion of students' 'sphere of private freedom' (Leadbeater 2004a, p.89) intended to empower through perceived ownership, would inevitably be limited only by the quality of personalisation involved (Leadbeater 2004a, p.20). Meanwhile the government (DfES 2004a, p.4) anticipated that by tailoring the 'curriculum and teaching methods to meet the needs of children and young people' PL would encourage further creative development, meeting 'with great success' in raising student achievement. To ensure co-operation revised strategies would be needed to control the situation.

As an external means of regulating and auditing school performance, previous governments had increasingly applied the dual control of inspection and 'data-driven auditing' through the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) inspectorate and the publication of education 'league tables,' leading to the development of a sometimes damaging 'audit culture' (Wilkins and Wood, 2009, p.283/4). From 2004 these procedures would be modified and developed to ensure conformity, devolved through 'intelligent accountability' 'ensuring effective and on-going self-evaluation in every school combined with sharper edged, lighter touch external inspection and an annual school profile to complement performance table data' (Miliband 2004a, p.3).

This reliance on school data and institutional performance in national league tables reflected an increasing dependence on 'performativity' - 'a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change - based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)' (Ball 2003, p.216) as a measure of school performance. As such improving or maintaining institutional performance has become a goal in itself for many schools which must at times override stakeholder rights.

This overdependence on statistics to evaluate the quality of education has been criticised as a backward step educationally by Fielding (2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008) believing that 'personalisation' shaped by 'performativity' exists not to benefit students but to manipulate their motivation (2006a, p.349) in meeting national and international league table agendas (p.350). Thus for Fielding (2006a) performativity influencing the whole state education system has the potential to produce 'totalitarianism.' In 2004 however, the government was similarly constrained (Wilkins and Wood, 2009, p.284) given its pre-election promises.

Arguing that continued reliance on performance tables in education suggested a more business-like approach to the management of 'public sector organisations' (such as state education), bringing them 'into line with the culture, ways of working and ethical aims of the private sector' (Turner-Bisset 2007, p.194), 'performativity' according to Perryman (2006, p.150) relates to

institutional 'efficiency and effectiveness,' 'measured according to an input/output ratio,' quoting Lyotard (1984, p.88). Generating accountability in the teaching profession, performativity permeates every aspect of their work through sanctions and self-regulation using performance management. Normalised into measures of school effectiveness, statistical data from external examination results and Ofsted inspection reports has become the accepted indicator of effectiveness, essential for the marketisation of schools to parents in the wider community.

At this point the purpose of combining neo-liberal economic principles with democratic freedoms (Hall 2003) becomes clear. While the importance of 'performativity' (the measurement of school performance) and 'marketisation' (making the school attractive to potential consumers) reflects business rather than education values (Hartley 2009, p.432) intended to make the product (education) more responsive to user requirements, it is also central to the development of multiple layers of covert social control. Through a process whereby 'the performances [of individual subjects or organizations are used to] serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection, as such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement' (Ball 2003, p.216). Thus institutional contributions to learning can be measured, directly or indirectly by statistical representations of effectiveness determined by that same government. Further pressure is applied when teachers are expected to improve results from a broader social and ability spectrum of students. Finally the publication of statistical data in the media is used by governments to instigate a renewed sense of responsibility among teachers and managers as stakeholders in the continued existence of their own institution.

Coinciding with the introduction of Personalised Learning, 'a radically revised inspection framework,' proposed by Miliband (2004a) in 'Personalised Learning: Building a New Relationship with Schools,' placed 'self-evaluation at the centre' (Wilkins and Wood, 2009, p.288) of the inspection process. Relying on reflexive, covert strategies to control professional practice, the

Self-evaluation Form (SEF) would be used to monitor institutional progress against criteria laid down by DfES (2004b). Replacing extensive Ofsted inspections with shorter, less frequent visits, school data would be used to 'confirm (or otherwise) the conclusions of school managers' (Wilkins and Wood, 2009, p.288). Using Rose and Miller's (1992) interpretation of governance, delegating responsibility for 'surveillance' to the school management teams through the SEF reflects similar strategies used in PL to control the student role through reflective dialogues with powerful authority figures. Although assessment for learning (AfL), personalised teaching and learning strategies and KS3/4 wider curriculum choice rely on self-knowledge, contrary to Milliband's claims (2004b), the degree of equity experienced by students in negotiating suitable outcomes may vary, shaped by the impact of these controls on teacher subjectivity.

To test the validity of these assumptions it is essential to examine a working example. Although AfL and varied teaching and learning strategies provide a personal focus, inconsistencies in classroom interpretation and application (Courcier 2007) might render them unsuitable for this purpose. The processes involved in managing Key Stage 3/4 wider curriculum choice may be more stable, given its traditional role in student experience. Moreover having the potential to motivate, provide opportunities for reflection and self-appraisal combined with elements of negotiation, this aspect of personalisation and PL provides a suitable focus the research question (RQ): 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?'

1.4 Research aims objectives and outline

As a teacher working in comprehensive education for some time, an interest in personalised education programmes grew from my role as Gifted and Talented (G+T) Students' Co-ordinator as part of the Excellence in Cities (EIC) Programme (1999-2007). A broader interest in Personalised Learning came from reading official guidance.

Taking place in an inner city, co-educational, multi-cultural, 11-16 comprehensive school over a one-year period, the research will address the

quality, nature and purpose of personalising learning for student stakeholders through an investigation into KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. The investigation will begin with informal interviews recorded with a range of pastoral staff involved in the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, asking Specific Research Questions (SRQs):

SRQ 1. What meaning does personalisation have in this inner city school today?

SRQ 2. How is KS3/4 wider curriculum choice managed?

SRQ3. In the school context, how much freedom of choice and voice is afforded to students in the management of a Personalised Learning strategy like KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?

SRQ 4. How, if at all, does the management of underachievers' experience of KS3/4 differ from the norm?

Addressing issues of performativity, data from these interviews will also ascertain:

SRQ 5. What is the school's current record on student attainment?

SRQ 6. What problems does this school face in meeting future targets?

SRQ 7. How useful/ successful are current interpretations of student choice and voice during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice strategy in motivating students?

In addressing the research problem:

SRQ 8. How, if at all, does the school reconcile the philosophy behind 'personalisation' with the performativity agenda?

Using triangulation of source and method, a student perspective on these issues, to test the internal validity of this qualitative evidence, will be provided from questionnaire data with clarification from a subset of informal student interviews. Exploring the relative importance of influences on student choice

and the degree of student satisfaction with different out-comes, student data from both sources will be used to answer the questions:

SRQ 9. What is the student experience of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?

SRQ 10. How does this evidence compare with the pastoral managers' views?

Retrospectively, Form Tutor identification of 'achieving' and 'underachieving' students from current teacher assessment data will be used to assess the effects of performativity on different students' freedom of choice, answering the question:

SRQ11. How does the experience of underachieving students differ from that of normally achieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?

1.5 Research importance

The importance of this research topic fluctuates with legislative change, despite its importance for students. Selecting GCSE and vocational diploma courses at the end of Key Stage 3 (11-14 years) however still marks an important rite of passage for thirteen and fourteen year olds, since shaped by a number of factors, student choice may determine future careers.

Since 2004, research into wider curriculum choice has fallen into two main categories – that which is government funded and independent research. The former, reflecting official concerns about changing aspects of strategic policy, provides a subjective analysis of influences on student decision–making. Independent research falls into two further sub-categories, largely determined by the type of data collected. Quantitative studies may be concerned with 'in house' subject marketing or the social/employment effects of student decisions, while interpretivist projects, though valuable, limit their analysis of decision making to micro home/school contexts, failing to connect with wider aspects of education policy. Thus while independent research linking personalisation with wider curriculum choice and 'performativity' appears

lacking, the growth in government funded research into this topic as an aspect of marketisation in education appears to have flourished.

Intended as an assault by Conservative governments in the 1980s on the 'sameness' of comprehensive schools, marketing was intended to raise attainment through institutional competition. School examination data was then collated and published to inform parental choice. However, the premise underlying this neo-liberal strategy has been challenged by Reay (2008, p.644), quoting Gibbons et al. (2006), because 'there is little evidence [from research] of any link between choice and achievement, while there is evidence that increased competition has resulted in greater stratification.' Nevertheless the principle of parental choice has continued, becoming a significant and enduring feature of English state education. Thus school managers in the 1990s became obliged to reconsider the market value of KS3/4 curriculum choice through the introduction of vocational options. Competition between examination boards fuelled this trend. Meanwhile a QCA directive in 2000, reducing the compulsory content of National Curriculum to a core of Mathematics, English and Science, encouraged the development/revival of further vocational and academic courses.

A major 'personalising' trend emerged at this time through the Excellence in Cities Programme. Aiming to enrich the educational experience of very able but possibly underachieving inner city students, curriculum development for Gifted and Talented (G and T) students offered access to a wide range of challenging courses. Early access at KS4 to KS5 AS level courses was encouraged by the Curriculum 2000 initiative. For more able children, skill based approaches to learning like Critical Thinking emerged. At the same time, social competence programmes set up by the Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDAN) were used to personalise learning for the less able, raising students' self-esteem. With the demise of the Standards Agenda in 2003, a new education policy could incorporate these developments into a second marketisation phase (Hartley 2008, p.369) targeting students.

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The stakeholder role in Personalised Learning (DfES 2004a) could be notionally extended to students where, as one of its five principles, KS3/4 wider curriculum choice anticipated 14-19 Curriculum and Qualifications Reform (DfES 2004c). Endorsed by Miliband (2004b) since 'clear pathways through the system' offering 'significant curriculum choice' 'particularly from the age of fourteen' (p.9) might improve student motivation, its importance was underlined as one of Hargreaves' (2004a, p.1) nine 'gateways,' providing an important management strategy nationally in the 'customisation' of education (p.5). Claiming it had huge potential for 'enhancing student commitment to learning' (p.6), providing 'stretch, incentives to learn, core skills and specialist vocational and academic options' (Miliband 2004b), investment in KS3/4 decision-making assumed greater importance in localities. Monitored by Ofsted, the development of this student/stakeholder role in wider curriculum choice might eventually have national significance in addressing the problem of underachievement. A functional transformation had therefore taken place.

Meanwhile KS3/4 wider curriculum choice had another valuable role in the constructivist development of PL nationally. Where competition between schools had apparently failed to raise attainment sufficiently, co-operation over curricular options provided opportunities for repairing such deficiencies. Thus 'networks of schools or teachers' (Hargreaves 2004a, p.10) could 'facilitate the transfer of knowledge and [presumably good] practices' (p. 2) through a wider range of KS3/4 options, providing an even greater range of opportunities to benefit local students. Praising the flexibility of extending 'the range of learning pathways for young people' in this way, Gilbert (2006, p.19) in Ofsted's 2020 Vision made clear connections between extended curriculum choice,14-19 education policy reforms and widening participation in higher education. Reinforcing this view, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) publication 'Personalised Learning - A Practical Guide' (2008, p.41) extolled the range of vocational diplomas available as 'specific pathways,' resulting from 'collaboration between schools and colleges' so that young people can benefit 'from an increasingly personalised curriculum.'

Thus KS3/4 wider curriculum choice provides an important contemporary and developing research topic, critical to student engagement with Labour's education policy (Attwood et al. 2007, p.2). Moreover an investigation concerned with the extent to which equitable empowerment of underachieving students is affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda may act as an indicator, providing a microcosm for independent evaluation of not only the effectiveness of Personalised Learning (DfES 2004a) but the purpose and effectiveness of New Labour's education policy as a whole.

1.6 Outline of the current work

<u>Chapter 1.</u>The concept of personalisation is introduced in the context of New Labour's self-conscious 'failure' to manage education policy successfully during its second term in office. Aiming to raise educational achievement, Personalised Learning (PL) (Miliband 2004a) involved the extension of neo-liberal marketing strategies evidenced through an audit culture. Using performativity and self-evaluation as a way of maintaining institutional progress, personalisation, based on social democratic principles was used to engage students in the management of their own education. Tension between personalisation and performativity is addressed by a research focus on KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, a strategic element of PL.

<u>Chapter 2.</u> Official and literary analysis of personalisation and Personalised Learning provide a context for this research. The political importance of a successful global image challenging underachievement, the national debate ensuing from this perceived crisis, the effect of performativity on student stakeholder empowerment and the limitations of personalisation in local schools lead onto a discussion about the purpose of neo-liberal strategies in a post-modern culture. This chapter concludes with a summary of current research into this policy.

<u>Chapter 3.</u> A mixed methods approach to research in a deprived but not underachieving inner city comprehensive is explained and justified. Taking an ethnographic case study approach, Critical Discourse Analysis is used to analyse interview data from a range of pastoral managers, the internal validity

of which is assessed against quantitative data from anonymous student questionnaires. Clarification of student response is provided through informal interviews with a subgroup of these students. To ensure trustworthiness in this ethical investigation, respondent validation measures operate throughout.

Chapter 4. Evidence from teacher interviews reveals the singular nature of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice management in the research school. Official claims of complete stakeholder satisfaction for 210 students in their immediate access to first choices in the KS4 optional curriculum are contradicted by student questionnaire data. Evidence from student interviews tends to confirm this fact, although this sample, as volunteers, may not be representative of the year cohort.

Chapter 5. Answers to the research question (RQ) about the resolution of tension between personalisation and the pressure on schools to raise achievement begin to emerge. The Headteacher is able to justify performativity in personalisation in terms of students' subsequent social and economic inclusion. The commodification of education provides qualifications necessary for these students to progress to further levels in education and thereby gain satisfactory employment. Since poverty, culture and 'habitus' still tie them to this locality however, the degree and quality of their social mobility is often constrained.

Chapter 6. This study provides evidence of opportunities for student manipulation during preparation and delivery of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. This is tempered by institutional interpretations of the inclusion agenda and the personal values of both the Headteacher and KS 3 manager. Thus the system provides further opportunities for choice until student voice and choice becomes commensurate with institutional perceptions of individual ability.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The present literature review provides a research context for this study. Focusing on Personalised Learning (PL), a social democratic political strategy, based on neo-liberal principles, academic insight into these conflicting values will be useful in separating rhetoric from reality. It should then be possible to ascertain the meaning and efficacy of key concepts like personalisation, performativity, equity, empowerment and the stakeholder role. Considering the global and national imperative of challenging underachievement, the impact of personalised education on local and individual situations will be addressed, impinging on the research question (RQ) 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?'

2.2 The global importance of underachievement

In 2003 the 'knowledge economy' had value far beyond the UK, making educational failure catastrophic in international economic terms. The globalisation of markets and products, the unrelenting availability of information and IT technologies, and increasing global dependence on the internet for knowledge and business products meant that for the British government, failure in education was not an option. Thus as key managers in the 'knowledge economy' Blair and New Labour would be vulnerable to any real or perceived criticism.

Such fears are explained by the Economic and Social Research Council's (ESRC website) interpretation of the knowledge economy - that 'in today's global, information-driven society, economic success is increasingly based upon the effective utilisation of intangible assets such as knowledge, skills and innovative potential as the key resources for competitive advantage. The term 'knowledge economy' is used to describe this emerging economic structure and represents the marked departure in the economics of the 'information age' from those of the twentieth century industrial era.' Thus with

media outlets constantly offering government activity to immediate international scrutiny, in 2003 Labour feared that details of any failure like losing position in international education league tables would rapidly spread, reducing the UK and Labour's political standing at home and abroad. Financial as well as political consequences might follow. Thus the pressures of performativity would shape education policy at every level.

Using Ball's definition (2003, p.216), 'performativity' operates as a system of social control throughout education, from teaching groups to government policies. The development of marketisation strategies, reliant on statistical data produced by national tests such as Standard Achievement Tests (SATS), percentages based on GCSE and Advanced Level General Certificate in Education (A level GCE) grades, as a means of measuring student progress, 'with the requirement to compete against other providers for resources' (Hartley 2008, p.367) reinforces business values (Turner-Bisset 2007, p.194). Thus the performance of participants is measured so that institutions can be held accountable by the publication of their position in league tables (Hartley 2007, p.632). Similarly the need to be successful dictates economic and political strategies for survival between schools and among governments. Justified by necessity, Miliband's PL rather than Leadbeater's personalisation appears to dominate education.

Although 'performativity' aims to challenge underachievement through the efforts of teachers and the culture of schools nevertheless, despite fluctuations in education policies, underachievement persists. Ball et al (2002) quoted in Angus (2006, p.370), explaining this phenomenon, argued that for many students the decision to succeed educationally has to be 'active.' For some children this 'is much more problematic because they and their families lack the social and cultural resources and supports that are generally available to, say, middle class people.' Angus (2006) meanwhile notes that 'students who need the most support' may now (because of 'performativity') become 'disillusioned, ignored, and even denigrated by the school system' (p.370). Recent evidence from thirteen case study schools researched by Sebba et al (2007 p.63) confirms that in using PL the learning needs of

underachieving students from the 'middle' (i.e. not on the gifted and talented register or suffering from recognised learning difficulties either) were often neglected while the 'disaffected' (and possibly disruptive) were clearly targeted (p.64). Self-esteem can easily be damaged in small communities like schools. With a heightened role in the expression of children's identities, negativity can become exacerbated when the agenda is purely concerned with league tables. Thus 'performativity' may aggravate low self-esteem, giving rise to labelling and thereby perpetuating the problems of inequality some politicians seek to overcome.

The concept of equity, often relating to fairness or an intervention to correct perceived inequalities, is frequently linked to diversity, inclusion and person–centeredness. Providing an 'essential component of the "social bases of self-respect"' (Meuret 2006, p.392) education has a key role in securing social mobility. It may therefore be 'coveted by all' so that its equitable distribution 'has become a major political issue' (p.393.) For New Labour in 2004 educational equity meant 'high standards of teaching available to all,' 'shaped to individual need' where 'excellence' could be used as a resource for a more egalitarian system (Miliband 2004b). Intending to close the achievement gap evidenced in 2003, the degree of equity afforded by personalisation was intended to increase numbers of suitably skilled and qualified workers to fill future vacancies in the knowledge economy. However research by Sebba et al (2007) may suggest that the reverse is taking place.

While underachieving students present a natural target for attainment raising policies like PL, they may find their entitlement to student voice is often denied (Smyth 2006 p. 279) through the pressures on schools to achieve more. Their views may be overlooked through poor attendance, lack of confidence or inadequate communication skills. A possible explanation is found in Vandenbroeck's interpretation of 'relativity' (2007), challenging Leadbeater's vision of the student as stakeholder negotiating his/her way through an education system where 'negotiation is depicted as the ultimate "good"' (p.28). Pointing out (p.29) that 'dominant ideas' focussing on 'negotiation, self-expression and verbalisation of the self' reinforce 'white, western, middle class norms,' leaving many minority groups feeling marginalised, even

excluded, Vandenbroeck argues that in the process of marginalisation, such groups are thereby 'made individually responsible' (p.29) for their own educational failure. Finally admitting that there is no real perspective on equity today because 'globalisation and travelling discourses on individuality and autonomy have affected visions on children, families and the role of the state in most late industrial societies' (p.32) Vandenbroeck concludes that although neo – liberal agendas like personalisation have taken the place of traditional ones, 'equity' will not lead to equality through social mobility since it depends so heavily on negotiation, which is biased, he believes, towards the middle class.

Although a person–centred approach has the potential to address educational problems like underachievement, the success of a 'performativity'-driven solution like PL may be technical rather than fundamental. The pressure on schools to achieve more may over-ride all other agendas, especially if for example Ofsted had deemed a particular school as being in need of 'Special Measures.' The 'voice' of underachieving students, representing the weakest elements in the education system, may not be heard. While underachievement might for example be caused by non-attendance beyond the student's control, his/her learning might still be marginalized in the name of personalisation as damage limitation to improve institutional performance. For schools in crisis such strategies have little to do with personalisation and everything to do with survival.

2.3 The national debate on personalisation in education

As a management strategy commonly used to engage the workforce, setting out the 'big picture' involves some degree of visionary engagement to achieve change with consensus. Thus endorsing Leadbeater's view (2004a) that personalisation would contribute to the revitalising of the face-to-face welfare services including education, this is possibly what the government did (DfES 2004a) to engage teacher support for PL.

The initial academic response from some quarters was positive since Hargreaves (2003) already shared Leadbeater's enthusiasm for change. His vision was for the 'transformation' of education through the development of

intellectual, social and organisational capital built on networks of learning communities. Following 'a series of conversations with some 250 leaders in specialist and affiliated schools' through the National College for School Leaders (NCSL), he identified nine 'interconnected' gateways (Hargreaves 2004a, p.1) based on principles of personalisation, as a means of 'fleshing out' PL. These were curriculum choice, workforce development, school organisation and design, student voice, mentoring, learning to learn, assessment for learning, the use of new technologies and student advice and guidance (2004a).

Brighouse, in his foreword to the publication by de Freitas and Yapp (eds.) (2005), praised personalisation for its radical reinterpretation of education. He felt the investment of interest in education through the stakeholder role would improve the quality of product offered by schools and colleges. For him, education would now be shaped to meet the students' learning needs, replacing the historic requirement on individuals to adapt to a uniform, established and inflexible education system (p.vii). Thus personalisation would make every student feel special and as a result 'more confident' in the future so 'that their potential' (presumably to achieve more) 'is enormous' (p.ix), echoing the philosophical views of Leadbeater (2004a, p.25).

West-Burnham (2005), presenting a management position, expanded Brighouse's arguments. Emphasizing the revolutionary potential of personalisation, based on the quality of service it offered 'to individuals' (p.9), he drew a distinction between 'personalising learning' and the government's policy of PL, arguing that the former challenged 150 years of 'social norms and professional practice' (p.9). Confirming that personalisation included 'fundamental assumptions about the ethical status of the individual' which demand respect, he endorsed Leadbeater's claims (2004 p.6) that personalisation would revitalise services. West–Burnham concurred with Hargreaves (2004a, p.16) that personalisation made education more efficient (p.11) because 'customisation' is 'designed around a pupil's needs' (p.12) and therefore a 'morally driven strategy' (p.18). Recognising the value of 'deep personalisation' in education, West–Burnham foresaw the day when

autonomous learners might have opportunities for knowledge creation through investigation, experience and reflection.

For economic reasons, however the emergence of this 'ideal type' of education seemed unlikely since PL represented a 'supply' rather than a 'demand-led' service (Hartley 2007, p.365). Its purpose in raising student achievement had been reinforced by Ofsted through Gilbert's *2020 Vision* (2006, p.13). Deep personalisation would always be limited by the needs of performativity, the law and the practicalities of timetabling since 'schools and teachers' do not 'prescribe the content, pace and control of the curriculum,' but the state, 'with most estimates showing state prescription at least up to age 14, of 90 per cent of what is an age-related curriculum.' This situation is likely to continue since deep personalisation might also 'shatter' the 'unifying function' of education 'in society, to initiate the young into the common culture, as Lawton (1975) and others have argued' (Campbell et al. 2007, p.138).To date, significant evidence of its widespread existence is reserved for 'Students as Researchers' projects. Opportunities for independent learning in this way are controlled even at KS5 by the narrow demands of university entrance rather than the broader based International Baccalaureate Diploma system possibly anticipated by West-Burnham.

Miliband justified Personalised Learning (PL) (DfES 2004a), not to be equated with individualised learning, which occurs when students using ICT follow individual learning programmes (Miliband 2004b) but similar to differentiation, as an 'innovative' strategy because it extended beyond the classroom. Representing a strategic approach to reform 'tailored' to 'individual (learning) needs' (Hartley 2009, p.428) as well as a type of 'learning' or 'pedagogy' (p.427) in the spirit of Every Child Matters' (DfES 2003). PL aimed to make 'universal the life chances of the most fortunate' (Miliband 2004b). Having a different emphasis from that found in Leadbeater, Brighouse and West Burnham, the interpretation of personalisation found in PL dictated that 'student choice' and 'voice' would be subordinate to educational 'excellence' where this meant 'raised achievement' resulting from 'high standards of teaching' (Miliband 2004b). Thus its political function remained constant. Labour's public image was still tied to national agendas of targets and

education league tables, reinforced through the SEF and the policing role of Ofsted (2004c). Some of the differences between the personalisation of education and PL had been noted.

In this early phase, Leadbeater's commitment on the government's behalf to 'protecting, even expanding the sphere of private freedom' (Leadbeater 2004a, p.89) was clearly evident. Personalisation, characterised by five levels of user control, participation and understanding shaped the quality of self-determination experienced by service users. Thus (p.20) 'shallow' personalisation 'offers modest modification of mass-produced, standardised services to partially adapt them to user needs', while 'deep' personalisation 'would give users a far greater role – and also far greater responsibilities – for designing solutions from the ground up'.

Claiming that the ultimate aim of personalisation 'should be to take it further and deeper', not 'to sustain existing, often outmoded, forms of provision' but 'to disrupt these models and find new, more adaptive solutions' (p.25), Leadbeater saw personalisation as an on-going process, progressing from shallow to deep, changing the role, structure and function of education, by extending the boundaries of personal freedom and responsibility. By providing users 'with a more customer-friendly interface with existing services,' 'shallow' personalisation would allow them a greater voice 'in navigating their way' (p.21) through a system of pathways. In the realisation of more effective services responsive to client needs, users would achieve 'self-organisation' or 'deep personalisation', as 'co-designers and co-producers of a service' (p.23). In education, by creating a body of mass participating stakeholders (students), responsiveness to individual needs would improve motivation, ensuring excellence and equity for all (Leadbeater 2004b, p.6). By some magical quality (2004a p.25) personalisation would he believed, trigger an upward spiral of student attainment. However this process is partly explained by the progressive development of 'personalisation.'

From Miliband's five Personalised Learning strategies (2004a), enlarged into Hargreaves' nine gateways (2004a) and clarified from an Ofsted perspective by Gilbert (2006, p.12), this progression is summarised in Table 2.1.

Personalised Learning	Hargreaves' Gateways	Gilbert's 2020 Vision
AfL	AfL	Using data on pupils' learning for target-setting, tracking progress and supporting further achievement.
Teaching and learning styles	Learning to learn	Pioneering and evaluating approaches to learning how to learn
		Using timetables flexibly to allow, for example, weeks devoted to intensive study or themed project work.
		Establishing curriculum teams of staff and pupils to develop plans for improving learning and teaching.
KS3/4 wider curriculum choice	Curriculum choice	Increasing curriculum breadth by delivering some lessons remotely using video conferencing.
	Student voice	Engaging pupils as active partners, with responsibility for participating in designing their learning and providing feedback.
	Student Advice and guidance	Designing approaches to engaging and raising the achievement of underachieving groups.
	Mentoring	
Community Links	School organisation and design. Greater use of adults other than teachers to extend the range of skills and support for pupils.	
	New technologies	Using ICT to enhance collaboration and creative learning
Workforce reform	Workforce development	

Table 2.1 The progressive development of Personalised Learning

Personalised Learning could be justified and monitored through Gilbert's vision indicating how Leadbeater and Brighouse' claims should operate. While Miliband provided opportunities for a student/stakeholder role and Hargreaves developed it, Gilbert's strategy was to harness it, engaging students with performativity and personal achievement agendas. While it could be argued that such teacher/student interaction involves students in their own learning and therefore contributes to personal development, this approach is nevertheless teacher led and Ofsted directed, unlike deep personalisation. Alternatively KS3/4 wider curriculum choice could provide opportunities for creative student involvement, motivating students to work harder and more

frequently. In this way the government might still deliver its pre-election promises.

Recognising the very positive potential of personalisation in education, Fielding (2006a, 2006b, 2007) praised it as 'a much needed return to concerns for the wider, human purposes of schooling' (2006a, p.348). Arguing that contrary to what was needed, Miliband's interpretation of personalisation (PL) was unacceptable, implemented 'without the kind of serious theoretical attention that one would expect of a proposal that has such a pivotal place in government policy' (2008, p.58). Using the logic of philosopher Andrew Macmurray to substantiate his criticisms (2006a, 2006b, 2007), Fielding suggested that while we all engage in two broad types of relations – the functional and the personal - the former exists to achieve simple goals and the latter 'helps us to become ourselves in and through our relations with others' (2006a, p.351). Thus the 'functional' and the 'personal' are interdependent since 'the functional provides a concrete basis' for the personal or emotional.

Meanwhile the functional needs the personal in order to achieve its aims. Applying this philosophy to government policy, Fielding argued that unlike PL, education (the functional) 'is only legitimate in so far as it is personal' (p.352). Developing Macmurray's philosophy into a 'four-fold typology' of schools: the impersonal, affective, high performance and the person-centred (see Table 2.2), Fielding (2006b, 2007) concentrated on the last two. Pointing out that although the ideal of a person–centred school might have been possible under personalisation, the pervasive influence of 'performativity' meant that high performance schooling would always dominate. Regarding PL as a backward step educationally (2006a, p.349), Fielding perceived a manipulative element in the way it motivated students. Unlike personalisation, he felt PL was not altruistic but existed to encourage improvement in league tables (p.350).

Thus Fielding predicted school agendas entirely given over to their place in educational league tables (the functional) would become impoverished places where the quality of care, moral values and opportunities offered to children (the personal) would decline. This he argued was completely contrary to what

1.	2.	3.	4.
Schools as **personal** organisations	Schools as **affective** communities	Schools as **high performance** learning organisation	Schools as **person – centred** learning communities
Intellectual animus **Mechanistic**	Intellectual animus **Therapeutic**	Intellectual animus **Organic**	Intellectual animus **Personal**
Organisation type **Mechanistic Organisation**	Organisation type **Affective Community**	Organisation type **Learning Organisation**	Organisation type **Learning Community**
Form of Unity - **Exclusive**		Form of Unity - **Inclusive**	
Ontological Standpoint **The negative excludes the positive** *The functional marginalises the personal*	Ontological Standpoint **The positive excludes the negative** *The personal marginalises the functional*	Ontological Standpoint **The positive is subservient to the negative** *The personal is expressive of the functional*	Ontological Standpoint **The negative is subservient to the positive** *The functional is expressive of the personal*
Contemporary strength **Intellectual Capital**	Contemporary strength **Emotional Capital**	Contemporary strength **Organisational Capital**	Contemporary strength **Holistic Development**

Table 2.2 Fielding's Typology of Schools (2007, p.395)

was needed: 'If schools are to continue to exist well into the 21st century they need to be more fulfilling, more creative and more humanly attentive places than they have been thus far' 'both for those who teach in them and for those who are required to attend them' (p.350). In the name of personalisation, high performance functionality, subordinating the personal to the functional, would always prevail, inhibiting the development of deep personalisation (Leadbeater 2004a, p.25) whenever it conflicts with pressure to meet government targets (Fielding 2006a, p.350).

Believing this sinister permeation of education by 'performativity' would eventually undermine the democratic possibilities of active citizenship, Fielding maintained that personalisation and 'performativity' were in tension to the point of incompatibility. Expressing concerns that by accepting PL at face value 'we are in serious danger of sanctioning intellectual assumptions and energetic developments that serve to secure us more comfortably to purposes we abhor and practices we may come to regret' (2008, p.58) he dismissed PL

as a form of 'totalitarianism' (2006a) supported by technical neo-liberal jargon that provides only 'the kind of vocabulary' people want to hear' (2008, p.60).

The shadow of powerful government provides another element in this paradox through the 'enablist' vision of society (Barber 2004). Based on the supposition that personalised state services can compete successfully with the private sector, Barber claimed that personalisation would check the drift towards private education or health insurance schemes. Arguing that personalisation through the 'enabling state' (Barber 2004) would 'reassure the middle classes' eventually luring 'them back into the state sector' (Harris and Ransom 2005, p.579) this reversal of trends would mean that public services, no longer be reduced to offering 'a safety net for those who can't afford anything better' (Barber 2004), would become stronger through their 'universality and diversity' in 'responding to the needs and aspirations of their customers' (Barber 2004). Personalisation in the 'enabling state' would be bold, efficient and confident, increasing personal choice, only limited – paradoxically – by a powerful 'enablist' government. Thus freedom of choice, even the choices themselves, could be defined and controlled by governments, reinforcing Fielding's image of a totalitarian system.

Alternatively, Leadbeater (2004a, p.20) claimed that deep personalisation would transform society into a mature democracy by shifting the locus of responsibility for quality assurance away from the state and placing it firmly in the hands of users. He wanted services to be more responsive to individual need in order to make life-chances more equitable. Even Miliband (2004b), in his preamble on social democracy, claimed personalisation would 'make universal the life chances of the most fortunate.' Surprisingly in education, these aims were expected to find fulfilment in PL, facilitated perhaps by the 'conceptual vagueness' of personalisation (Hartley 2008, p.378). However while 'enablism' is imbued with the potential to allow certain values but discourage others, Miliband's five principles were not negotiable. Therefore PL rather than personalisation fits into a narrow 'enablist' culture. Mostly confined to Barber's speeches (Carter and Franey 2004), the concept of

'enablism' points towards wider economic strategies implicit in Personalised Learning.

Aiming to make this reform acceptable to potential consumers (parents and students) while enlisting the support of those required to implement it (the teaching profession), the personalisation of education presented by Miliband (2004a and b) and Leadbeater (2004b) seemed logical, offering a modernising solution to a persistent political problem with potentially far-reaching consequences. Based on three major assumptions - firstly that 'markets' could 'replace planning as regulators of economic activity' and that education could be 'regulated according to market principles,' exponents of PL also assumed that extending the stakeholder role to include students 'as active agents seeking to maximise their own advantage' would almost automatically eliminate 'the passivity and dependency' (Rose and Miller 1992, p.198) currently endemic in state education.

The stakeholder role would combine the motivation for students striving 'to optimise their own quality of life and that of their families' (p.198) with a sense of responsibility. In this way while the personalisation of welfare services generally would reduce delinquency in society (Leadbeater 2004a, p.82), Personalised Learning would have a similarly calming effect on students, thereby raising educational attainment (DfES, 2004a, A National Conversation about Personalised Learning). As a neo-liberal strategy however seeming to operate 'according to an ethical code' that was 'beyond good and evil' (Rose and Miller 1992, p.187), PL would nevertheless be vulnerable to Foucauldian criticism since 'personal autonomy is not the antithesis of political power, but a key term in its exercise, the more so because most individuals are not merely the subjects of power but play a part in its operations' (p.174). Thus it could be argued that developing the student role into that of a 'stakeholder' provided opportunities for manipulation.

Although Miliband refrained from actually identifying students as stakeholders in their own learning, this role was implied through the title of his speech (2004b). Using the names of Piore and Sabel (1984) as international experts, 'embodying neutrality, authority and skill' (Rose and Miller 1992, p.187) to

justify his claims, Miliband applied their theory of 'flexible specialisation' to 'personalisation' in education, as a means of demonstrating how PL would work. Claiming that 'products previously produced for a mass market' like state education were 'now to be tuned to personal need' to fuel 'flexible specialisation' based on 'rising affluence and expectations,' the consumer/stakeholder element in PL would shape provision 'from below,' bolstering 'the demand for high standards suited to individual need' (Miliband 2004b).

In this way 'self-regulatory techniques' could be 'instilled' in students, to 'align their personal choices with the ends of government' to achieve more and, instead of producing an unskilled, unqualified and largely unemployed population, 'the freedom and subjectivity of citizens,' in this case as consumers of education, could 'in such ways become an ally, and not a threat, to the orderly government of a polity and a society' (Rose and Miller 1992, p.188). Thus while meritocracy becomes a possibility, the strategy of raised attainment appeals to middle class families, drawing them as consumers back to state welfare and education by raising standards (Barber 2004, Harris and Ransom 2005).

For Hartley (2008) decoding Labour's rhetoric was central to understanding Miliband's strategy. For him, this new phase of marketisation represented a continuation of policies begun in the 1980s under Margaret Thatcher. After more than twenty years, neo-liberalism had begun to seem like 'common sense' where the 'market' provided a suitable way of organising society, accepted and 'internalised by everyone' (paraphrasing Hall, 2010). However, extending the principle of 'choice' to include students implied that 'the 'voice' of personalisation is a 'would-be consumer's voice, not that of a citizen-in-the-making' (Hartley 2009, p. 430). Its power could still be manipulated by the undercurrents of marketing.

Thus if Hall (2003), Fielding (2006a, 2006b, 2007 and 2008) and Hartley (2008) are correct in assuming that neo-liberal values in PL take precedence over social democratic aspirations, the research may show that political manipulation lies behind the 'equitable' use of student voice indicated by Rose

and Miller (1992). Furthermore if the causes of underachievement emanate from beyond the classroom where children 'and their families lack the social and cultural resources and supports' 'generally available' to 'middle class people,' (Smyth 2006, p.370), the achievement of 'excellence' (Miliband 2004b) through school–based strategies will be limited. Thus although student voice and the stakeholder role may provide opportunities for some children the experience of many schools in challenging circumstances demonstrates that overcoming links between material deprivation and underachievement will remain untouched by policies like this.

In education opportunities for flexible decision-making, allowing students' views to be heard, have fluctuated over time not simply because of 'enablist' governments but because of students' dependence on 'enablist' adults. Under Personalised Learning student choice and voice has been revived, making progress in many areas. Identified as one of Hargreaves' nine 'gateways' (2004a), student voice represents a valuable stakeholder or 'consumer' element in education debates, taking a number of forms ranging from representative to researcher. Leren (2006 p.364) recommends student voice as a way of providing educational ownership through student committees, possibly even through school management meetings.

While Watts and Youens (2007) value student involvement in school improvement agendas (p.18), some professionals still treat student feedback with fear and suspicion, dismissing it as immature and worthless. Furthermore the pressure of teaching, the timetable and external testing may restrict opportunities for student discussion of important issues. Smyth (2006 p. 279) regards this denial of student voice as a factor leading to 'the disengagement from school by young adolescents.' Disengagement is also a direct result of the standards agenda, league tables and accountability (p.279). Explaining the progression by underachieving students from disengagement to anger when they 'feel their lives, their experiences, cultures, and aspirations are ignored, trivialised, or denigrated by school and the curriculum' (they) 'develop a hostility to the institution' (p.279), under the pressures of 'performativity' the lack of student voice can lead to violence, aggression and disruption.

Conversely, Rudduck (2004) recognised that student voice might offer a solution to the impasse in the Standards Agenda, raising achievement through improved motivation (p.1), indicating that while student consultation may still not be the norm in British schools (p.2), inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) see it as valuable. Watts and Youens (2007) stress the moral argument in favour of student voice on grounds of democracy, citing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). However Robinson and Taylor (2007) note that both Fielding (2004) (2006a) and Rudduck (2006) had previously cautioned that the current vogue for student voice might simply be 'in order to raise standards and increase attainment rather than for reasons of personal development' (p.7), in other words, to engage them in 'performativity'. So, it could be argued, the reality for student voice under PL is limited, mainly used to manipulate rather than motivate.

The need to negotiate option choices at the end of year 9 (KS3) does however involve the effective use of student voice as a 'gateway' to KS4 (Hargreaves 2004a) where different levels of success may occur (Vandenbroeck 2007, p.29). Given the pressures of 'performativity,' the voice of underachieving students may be undermined at this crucial time in their educational careers. Will the access to 'harder' academic subjects be equitable or will these students be steered towards courses chosen for them by teachers and tutors not daring to jeopardise their final test results?

2.4 Local opportunities and constraints

At a local level, creative and imaginative teachers, inspired by the concept of personalisation inevitably find their aspirations shaped by 'performativity' since, reducing 'the complexities of teaching' 'to what is measurable' (Turner - Bisset p 2007 p.195) performativity creates a paradox for the personalising process. Therefore after initial enthusiasm, early analysis of PL was extremely critical, mainly because it was so loosely defined.

While Dainton (2004) questioned the value of a policy where the central concept was so ambiguous (p.56), Courcier (2007) found this caused confusion limiting the quality of its delivery in classrooms. Campbell et al.

(2007 p.138), agreeing with Dainton and Courcier, thought the lack of definition would lead to practical ambiguities, particularly in the development of 'deep personalisation' advocated by Leadbeater (2004a, p.25). Alternatively, 'earned autonomy,' a by-product of personalisation and the result of 'self-motivation and self-regulation,' could not guarantee equitable 'educational progress' since these personal qualities were 'not equally distributed among different classes and cultures in English society' (Campbell et al. 2007, p.139). As a means of achieving 'equity' in education, PL was counterproductive since it would not only maintain, or possibly increase the 'educational disadvantage' (p.139) of those it claimed to help but also empower the better informed, vocal and more confident middle classes (p.138). Meanwhile Reay (2008b) thought the whole tenet of educational marketisation had been flawed from the outset since it 'exacerbated educational inequalities, while the thriving choice agenda has become an educational means for middle-class parents to increasingly monopolise what they perceive to be 'the best' for their children' (p.647).

Practical criticisms raised by Johnson (2004a) questioned the feasibility of PL given the constant pressure of professional change and additional demands on teachers' time. Harris and Ransom (2005), critical of education policy generally, argued that since the concept of 'choice' could be interpreted differently in different contexts, choice for parents might not be the same as choice for children. Campbell et al (2007), in agreement with Harris and Ransom (2005), highlighted the potential for conflict undermining student voice, especially where student/staff relationships were unsatisfactory. Since student voice could so easily be marginalised by adults, they contested the rationale and purpose behind its inclusion in PL (Campbell et al. 2007, p.139). Moreover they argued that changes in education policy away from 'the previous and current state-centred approached to curriculum and assessment' to the 'learner- centred character of personalisation' would 'generate scepticism' among the teaching profession (p.139).

Thus while personalisation was intended to encourage diverse approaches to learning, performativity would reinforce homogenisation since evidence of failure through published examination results invites the interest of Ofsted with

the potential for direct government intervention where schools are deemed to be underperforming. While this may not rule out the possibility of developing person-centred education it suggests certain levels of teacher/ management confidence are necessary for successful experimentation to take place. Given the pressure to reach increasingly high targets in external examination results, as Fielding (2006a) points out, a truly 'person-centred' education system, is unlikely to emerge. And while 'performativity' is clearly defined by literature, 'personalisation,' the outcome of 'person-centred' education, is not.

Far from being a weakness as Campbell et al (2007), Dainton (2004) and Courcier (2007) claimed, according to Leadbeater (2004a) the absence of a clear definition was an advantage. Claiming that an 'ambiguous idea' like personalisation was 'very potent' and could become 'as influential as privatisation was in the 1980s and 1990s in reshaping public provision' (p.18), education services would be dictated by and tailored to individual needs and goals. Standards would rise. Oversubscription of some schools which had left few realistic options for the remaining population (Leadbeater 2004a, p.52) would, he believed, be relegated to history. For managers, personalisation meant a complete rejection of the internal market where previous definitions of consumer choice had caused rivalry at local levels. The beauty of this flexible approach was that PL could develop to suit the varying social and economic needs across different communities, building on strengths of existing good practice. The necessary level of co-operation between schools would break down isolation based on previous rivalries. With a flexible concept, the bespoke nature of personalisation was ensured.

Delivering PL at a local level meant school managers would firstly be required to work together in developing a working definition of PL, necessary since 'changing whole systems means changing the entire context within which people work,' (Fullan 2006, p.116). This 'back to basics' approach was justified by Hargreaves (2004a, p.1) who claimed that in 2003 Miliband had 'not laid down a detailed specification or a national strategy' but one which 'leaves the way open for the [teaching] profession to take the lead – to define PL in a way that can benefit young people.' Having agreed on a definition, teachers and school leaders would be expected to reflect on appropriate

existing good practice, mapping provision and developing new services in collaboration with other institutions. This process would be essential in developing a constructivist approach, flexibly responsive to local circumstances and need as Carter and Franey (2004, p.3) point out.

Providing 'school leaders with a potentially empowering means by which they might both take control of, and contribute to, this system-level change' (Carter and Franey 2004, p.3), social constructivism offers a process which could 'illuminate contextual realities and inform enquiry into professional practice, which in turn lead to improvements for pupils' (p.6) by offering them greater autonomy. Moving away from the erstwhile one-size-fits-all approach in education, Carter and Franey (2004) stress that a 'local interpretation can be the only mechanism by which school leaders' (p.7) could, on a macro level, provide a more flexible and appropriate service. Fullan, supporting this view, argues 'if you want to change people's behaviour,' quoting Gladwell (2000, p.173), 'you need to create a community around them where these beliefs could be practical, expressed and nurtured'.

To a lesser extent the process of students getting together, constructing their own futures through Assessment for Learning (AfL), option choice and student voice could equally be regarded as constructivist and enjoyed Hargreaves' support. His role in networking through the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) and the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) has been crucial in communicating enthusiasm for personalisation. While PL may be developing in an 'ad hoc' way, but with government approval and funding, as Vandenbroeck (2007) points out, 'new grassroots organisations' 'are (sometimes) constituted' 'attempting to fill in the political vacuum' (p.30). However, errors in constructivism can occur.

Uncertainty about the meaning of personalisation can affect the confidence of managers in implementing PL, producing a patchwork of good practice with omissions as well as excellence. Understandably the advantages of having an on-going process rather than a fixed timetable based on a rigid concept ensure flexibility and innovation suited to the needs of different communities, while retaining the strengths of existing good practice. While the level of co-

operation necessary to achieve this aim may break down barriers created by previous waves of personalisation, nevertheless confusion may also result in inconsistency and inertia. As Sebba et al (2007) noted, difficulties in defining PL meant that in their sample of thirteen schools the interpretation of PL veered towards an 'individualised' rather than personalised approach.

Moreover, the timetable can limit the flexibility required for personalisation to be effective. While individual timetables may offer some degree of personalisation, once set, practicalities dictate that these are seldom changed. Thus there is far less flexibility in education than in health, housing and social services because the availability of funding tends to be restricted by staffing costs and the curriculum by the physical limitation of buildings. In health, housing and social services voluntary organisations may supplement services or funding. This happens less often in education where funding, though devolved through Local Management of Schools (LMS), largely depends on government grants based on annual projections of student numbers and the agenda is controlled by 'performativity' or measurable testing.

To be effective, personalisation requires a major shift in power – from central government to local managers and consumers. Person-centred education where 'all of their community feel special' (Brighouse 2005, p. ix) demands the devolution of resources and managerial flexibility not found in the strict application of PL. Although advised in Leadbeater (2005 p.2/3) by Hannon, Director of the DfES Innovation Unit, that 'Personalising learning relies on getting young people and their parents to invest in their education' as stakeholders, nevertheless the amount and type of power parents and young people have if they do invest in personalised education has never been clarified. Moreover Leadbeater's vision of progression from shallow to deep personalisation in education (2004a, p.25) may never be realised because of the practical necessity to conform to the requirements of 'performativity,' school budgets and the timetable. Indeed, Barber's vision of the 'enabling' state confirms its failure to devolve any real power to stakeholders. It has simply engaged them in a decision-making exercise.

Not for the first time have governments claimed their 'grip on the education system has actually loosened' (Hartley 2008, p.367) when in fact it has been extended by alternative means. For example, Lawson and Harrison (1999) suggest that although Individual Action Planning on Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses may offer greater motivation and empowerment to student teachers, this activity could equally be regarded as 'self-policing,' while LMS, self-evaluation (SEF) in the revised Ofsted inspection process and performance management similarly illustrates this point. Moreover constructivist approaches to management embedded in the development of PL involve systems of 'self-evaluation' and 'self-review' central to self-surveillance and social control. Thus Rose and Miller's (1992) application of Foucauldian teachings on power and self-governance may be valuable in the interpretation of this reality.

Although Lawson (2004, p.3) states that 'empowerment has come to mean' 'the handing over of decision-making to the 'clients' in the educational relationship,' Rose and Miller (1992) argue that Foucauldian analyses of government technologies suggest the exact opposite is true. The concept of 'empowerment' is central to the exercise of governmental power 'because most individuals are not merely the subjects of power but play a part in its operations' (p.174). Based on this application of Foucault's analysis of 'alternative means of control in postmodern societies' (Lawson, Harrison and Cavendish, 2004) and Miller and Rose's critical study of 'governance,' it is possible to test the value of 'equity' experienced by stakeholders in a decision making context brought about by PL. Such a context is provided by KS3/4 wider curriculum choice.

Thus although the success of marketisation through PL may result in some, possibly middle class, articulate families (Vandenbroeck 2007 and Campbell et al. 2007) returning to the state system, empowered as stakeholders in the negotiation of their own 'bespoke' opportunities (Barber 2004, Harris and Ransom 2005, Campbell et al. 2007), other less powerful groups may not possess the skills or cultural experience necessary to access or exploit this situation (Vandenbroeck 2007 and Reay 2008b). Moreover although needing to make an active decision to 'engage' with learning (Ball et al. 2002) they

may not even want to be involved, rejecting the values underlying this 'performativity' based policy. Then neither PL nor its outcomes could be regarded as equitable since it 'is too individualistic' taking 'little, if any account' 'of the claims of wider social allegiance and the common good' (Fielding 2008, p.59). In this way the quality of 'equity' may be revealed by focussing on the experience of underachieving stakeholders as possibly the most diverse and therefore weakest stakeholder group.

By adapting a philosophy like personalisation in welfare to 'performativity' in education, Labour may have overlooked the differences between respective face-to-face services. While the rationale for using health care, social services or housing may be optional or necessity, only reinforced by the law in exceptional cases, every child between certain ages must legally receive fulltime education at home or in school. Long term use of education is encouraged rather than discouraged. Alternatively there is no legal obligation to use health, housing and social services, which were never designed or funded to encourage long term dependency, except in extreme situations.

Moreover a degree of personalisation already existed in the construction of social welfare packages where client involvement based on care values central to a personal 'care plan' is an established feature, representing normal practice for practitioners in health, housing and social services. Individual care plans, frequently subject to amendment determined by changes in the client's situation, are revised, itemised and costed accordingly. Such individual importance and flexible provision is barely recognised in education. Having a collectivist function like the transmission of national/cultural values, education depends on a lengthy, shared experience and although Individual Education Plans (IEPs) have similarities with care plans in health and welfare, in schools their use had traditionally been reserved for students with special learning needs. Extended to cover Gifted and Talented students under the Excellence in Cities Programme during the late 1990s, practical issues, like funding and the timetable limited their provision. Thus while the logic of placing the individual learning needs of children at the centre of their educational

experience showed humanity and far-sightedness, in its purest form, it was probably impractical.

Finally the differences between personalising education and PL may be justified practically as well as politically. An education system that leaves children without employment skills or adequate qualifications must be regarded as dysfunctional and a potential source of social inequality. For Hall (2003) these arguments justified New Labour's policy shift in adapting a 'fundamental neo-liberal programme to suit its conditions of governance - that of a social democratic government trying to govern in a neo-liberal direction while maintaining its traditional working-class and public-sector middle-class support, with all the compromises and confusions that entails.' Thus in 2003, the apparent failure of its flagship education policies meant that Labour needed personalisation to galvanise the teaching profession, motivate students and raise achievement.

Linking this strategy to future employability and engagement with the middle-class voters meant that performativity, as an underlying means of social control in PL was unavoidable. Despite Hall's criticism, the concept of personalisation, crystallised into an attainment raising strategy (PL) might be justified through its flexibility in meeting student needs by taking a constructivist approach to development. However, PL had a much more discretionary attachment to the ideals of personalisation than Milliband claimed (2004b), so that the social democratic aspects of personalisation could be made subordinate to the requirements of neo-liberal economic theory. Thus the degree of equity experienced by student stakeholders would almost certainly be affected by this change in emphasis.

2.5 The relevance of Personalised Learning for individual students

For some individuals, student voice, identified as one of Hargreaves' nine 'gateways' (2004a) to personalised education, could be invaluable in terms of personal development (Watts and Youens 2007), taking numerous forms - from representative to researcher (Sebba et al. 2007). Unfortunately a belief that student voice would 'help students to become better citizens and more active learners, and schools to become better places,' is often held back by a

reluctance 'to engage with shifting power relations that have accorded students their new authority to speak' (Bragg 2007, p.344) so that where some professionals still regard student voice with fear and suspicion, opportunities for its development are held back. Research by Bragg (2007) suggests that student voice may still be used 'by oppressive hierarchies' to engage students in manipulative strategies with 'the explicit aim of school' rather than personal improvement (p.344). Thus 'student voice is not unmediated, but guided, facilitated and supervised through specific techniques that delimit what can be said, and how speakers conceive of themselves' (p.349) demonstrating more than anything the need of gate-keepers to retain enablist powers, redirecting student voice towards the institutional requirements of raised educational attainment.

Similarly, layers of inequality could be perpetuated rather than removed by this strategy. For example the social skills necessary for effective student negotiation may vary considerably between individuals - because of social class, family history and economic circumstance, raising important questions about the value and purpose of student equity in negotiated settlements (Vandenbroeck 2007 and Campbell et al. 2007). While Leadbeater's vision of stakeholder participation and Miliband's social democratic premise for extending marketisation rely on student equity in negotiation, their assumptions may be misleading. Meanwhile Gorard and Smith (2004) imply that the concept of student equity in an attainment-raising policy may be entirely flawed since it involves the identification of underachievement.

Though 'widely used in education and education policy' (Gorard and Smith 2004, p.205) this concept represents an ill-defined, confusing social construct, indicating 'low achievement (in absolute terms), lower achievement (relative to other individuals or groups) and underachievement itself (not achieving as much as the best prediction available).' Despite 'these three things' being 'very different, both analytically and substantively' (Gorard and Smith 2008, p.708), the application of this epithet, 'underachiever' to individual students affects teacher perceptions, challenging student equity and thereby limiting the effectiveness of underachieving students' voice. Seen as part of the problem in school improvement, the views of the weakest element in

education, so-called 'underachieving students,' may justifiably be marginalised and therefore are seldom heard.

For many researchers, however, educational under-attainment in the United Kingdom (UK) is the direct result of poverty (Reay 2006). Beyond the scope of education policies, students' lack of confidence, localised interests restricting educational and occupational opportunities, their inexperience about risk-taking (Archer and Hutchings 2000), the limitations of 'habitus' and deficiencies in cultural capital (Reay 2004) produce communities where inequality and powerlessness (Moore 2004) frequently lead to social exclusion (Reay and Lucey 2004). Wanting to break into this cycle and culture of poverty,' the prevailing focus' of New Labour policies like PL 'has been on within-school processes; a focus that has often been at the expense of understanding the influence of the wider economic and social context on schooling' (p.289). Thus Reay (2006, p.290 quoting Bennett (2005) in the Times newspaper) concluded that under the Standards Agenda, Labour's education policy preceding PL, 'the education gap between rich and poor children' grew despite massive financial and professional investment.

Moreover after a brief respite early in this century, poverty in general has increased (Hirsch 2006, quoted by Pring et al. 2009, p.31). The current economic recession, (p.30/1) means that 'a child in the UK (today) still has nearly twice as much chance of living in a household with relatively low income than a generation ago.' The number of children living in poverty has 'begun to increase again' despite the earlier downturn (p.31), reflecting contemporary changes in Britain's occupation structure. Meanwhile a slowdown in the expansion of middle class employment has temporarily reduced upward social mobility, while downward mobility and unemployment has grown. Thus the increase in family poverty has affected educational attainment and 'subsequent life chances' (p.32) in ways beyond the remit of education reforms like PL (quoting Paterson and Iannelli, 2007).

2.6 Research Synthesis

General research into the development of PL, outlined in the Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) report, edited by Pollard and James

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(2004) covered aspects of Miliband's (2004a) five principles – for example, learning to learn using AfL, effective group work, student consultation about teaching and learning, enhancing pupil participation through consultation and home/school knowledge exchange. Sebba et al. (2007) in an ESRC funded project considered the effectiveness of PL (p.9) three years after its implementation. McIntyre et al (2005) and Fielding in a series of projects separately, together and with others focussed on various aspects of student voice. Much evidence from these projects supported personalisation.

Early research into student voice by Rudduck et al. (2006) funded jointly by the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) Innovation Unit praised its resurgence in affirming 'a sense of individual identity and help young people to believe that in school every child matters' (p.11). Concentrating on general issues of belonging, they confidently affirmed that, encouraged by PL, it created opportunities for students to feel more involved in school life and decision making (p.13). Any reference to student voice in relation to curriculum choice however was absent. Meanwhile from a sample of only four volunteer schools, the value of this research was undermined by a lack of critical analysis because of its reliance on a prescriptive agenda (p.8) set by Miliband (2004a, 2004b).

As an aspect of student voice, independent research into wider curriculum choice is limited. While Cochrane (2007) addresses wider curriculum choice from a 'student voice' perspective, taking a phenomenological approach, he uses students' reflections on decision-making to interpret motivation (p.8). Aware of the limitations of Bourdieu's views on 'habitus', Cochrane's paper is concerned with the way students 'use their cultural capital to cope' (p.8). Restricting his conclusions to general issues, however, Cochrane demonstrates the persistent effects of cultural capital through family influence on student's interpretation of (p.12/3) school based careers advice. Although extremely significant in terms of this research proposal, Cochrane's analysis is limited. Meanwhile White (2007), concerned with categorising choice takers and noting the motivational importance of 'enjoyment' (p.107), students' perceptions of their ability (p.110), 'vocational goals' (p.112) and the general 'utility' of some subjects (p.115) in this process, nevertheless regards his data

on 'choices made in Year 9' as limiting 'the scope for meaningful analysis' (p.121). Possibly regarding KS3/4 as an early, less significant stage in the development of student decision-making, this attitude is reflected in Government funded research. Thus the effectiveness of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is only perceived as a step towards widening the social basis of participation in higher education in the development of a more meritocratic society and evaluated accordingly, despite its overwhelming importance in motivating student achievement in 11-16 education.

Thus Foskett et al (2004), despite a focus on post-16 Education, looked at the influence of schools on students' choice of KS3/4 optional courses. Their research covering '24 schools across nine education authorities' with focus groups which included students from Year 10 (p.1), concluded that 'choice was a dynamic process in that the precise nature of the preferences expressed by young people changed over time as a range of factors influenced their ideas.' Nevertheless the 'school was a less important source of advice than parents or home-related influences' where parents enjoyed high socio-economic status. However 'for pupils from low socio-economic background,' 'the school was a very important source of advice' (p.2). Meanwhile McCrone et al. (2005) took a more sophisticated view. Suggesting that 'both individual attributes and structural factors play a significant part in the decision-making process' at KS3/4 (Executive Summary Report, p.1), McCrone et al. stressed the importance of subject enjoyment (intrinsic value), usefulness in terms of future careers (extrinsic importance) and 'self-perceptions of their ability.' Student choice was also influenced by careers education and guidance, socio-economic impact through parental influence and unspecified teacher involvement (p.2).

Nevertheless Blenkinsop et al (2006, p.ii) looking at the quality of advice available at KS3/4, found that 'schools can make a difference to how young people make' 'the most rational, thought-through decisions' and 'remained happy.' Moreover, students enjoying this level of support tended to be 'more influenced by school factors (such as individual talks with teachers and the careers education and guidance provision) and less reliant on external factors such as friends and family.' Despite finding some 'teachers in 11-18 schools'

'lacked impartiality,' Blenkinsop et al. recognised that 'young people made decisions in different ways' confirming the importance of 'context' in this process. Surprisingly they found that 'few young people' in their sample of 165 students from 14 different schools 'at age 14, made the link between careers education and guidance activities and the actual personal decisions they were making' while 'vocational qualifications were not always recognised in the same way as 'academic' qualifications for entry to A-Level courses, leading to restricted student choice in some areas' (p. ii).

Marson-Smith et al. (2009) provided subjective analysis of students' decision-making, specifically at the end of KS3 regarding a range of vocational programmes. Including within their remit the introduction of Foundation, Intermediate and Advanced Diplomas, 'the raising of the age at which young people are required to participate in some form of education or training (either in school or college, with a work based learning provider or as part of a job) to the age of 18 by 2015,' together with recent changes and developments in Careers Education, such as devolving responsibility 'for information, advice and guidance services to local authorities after April 2008,' they found that 'young people differ in their choice of the type of person from whom they seek guidance' (p.4). Therefore 'there is value in professionals involving and informing parents and carers who have a considerable influence on their children's decisions' (p.4). With regard to KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, they found that 'young people can be further supported to make informed decisions by ensuring that college and training provider staff are actively involved' (p.4). Thus 'in-house' advice by teachers is still seen as critically important.

Attempting to develop theoretical frameworks of decision-making, SHM (2005) tried to consider the options process from the students' point of view (p.3) to make materials and advice more appropriate. Claiming the students were their own experts in this field (p.6), SHM researchers developed a framework using 'a general segmentation by mind-set' (p.4). Meanwhile Paton et al. (2007, p.4) argued that 'people do exercise a degree of agency in their education and employment decision-making, but that their 'choices' are deeply embedded in social practice.' Concluding that there 'is a danger of exaggerating the significance of individual actions and choices,' 'overlooking'

'research which documents deep social inequalities in patterns of educational and labour market success and the social embeddedness of decision-making (p.7), individual actions and experiences should not be overlooked as these are nevertheless 'significant' (p.7). Fundamentally important is the need to understand that student decision-making is 'not often linear' (p.7) despite the general assumption by 'our education system and government support services' that it 'can/or should be' (p.7), thereby providing an incentive for research.

An interim study into AfL by James et al. (2004) in the TLRP report edited by Pollard and James emphasised its central importance for increased pupil confidence and achievement, since AfL 'expects teachers to help pupils, individually and as groups, to find out where they are in their learning, where they need to go, and how to take their next steps' (p.6). AfL had already received support from teachers in the sample James used by 'paying attention to their students' performance' and 'making learning explicit.' However, the promotion of learner autonomy was found to be more challenging but still over 21% of teachers in her sample reported they were making progress with this aspect of AfL. James and her colleagues concluded the PL was a dynamic concept and not 'a matter of tailoring curriculum, teaching and assessment to 'fit' the individual, but is a question of developing social practices that enable people to become all that they are capable of becoming' (p.6). Sebba et al. (2007) found AfL was popular, 'often seen as means of achieving higher standards for all and better post school outcomes' (p.3). Teachers often endorsed AfL as 'one of the best developed components of personalised learning' (p.11) based on prior evidence of its effectiveness from being 'more extensively embedded in the Government's National Strategies than some of the other elements' (p.11).

Meanwhile unpublished research by Coombs and McKenna (2008), confirmed by Taras (2008), suggesting that AfL may not have been interpreted consistently across the teaching profession seemed to imply criticism. Blanchard (2008, p.137) interprets these inconsistencies as 'differences' where 'colleagues brought' 'different understandings about AfL and processes of development' to classroom practice. Moreover AfL proved particularly

effective where teachers presented themselves as 'fallible' learners, in partnership 'with the pupils in worthwhile activity,' 'adapting their teaching to how the pupils behave and learn' while retaining a sense of pupil ownership 'about their activities' (p.140). In such a positive 'interactive' environment children enjoyed 'a sense of their own purpose and progress' in collaborative work, 'tolerating, even welcoming, difficulty, trial and error' facilitating the transfer and application of 'learning on future occasions and in different contexts' (p.140). Consequently where 'school assessment' is 'part of a continuous process, enabling the student to make choices about activities and experiences, supported by the staff's gathering of information about' each 'student's efforts', these 'two features of effective educational development' identified by Black et al. (2006) signify 'internal consistency' (p.142).

Arguing that complete consistency (p.148) will 'take time,' nevertheless progress reviews by Black et al (2003) and Wiliam et al. (2004) record pupil gains using AfL were made at KS3 and 4. Sebba et al (2007), quoting Hargreaves (2006), found 40% of mostly head teachers attending Specialist Schools and Academies Trust conferences felt AfL was 'the most developed aspect of personalised learning in their schools' (p.11). While evidence from both research projects suggest that AfL is making progress so that Johnson (2004b) admitted it was the 'biggest driver for change' (p.223), nevertheless its popularity may stem from its flexibility in achieving the dual targets of person-centeredness and 'performativity.' However, an Ofsted Report on the impact of National Strategy Support (2008) evaluating its effectiveness in English and Mathematics 'across a sample of primary and secondary schools' (p.1) indicated a patchwork, 'better developed and more effective in the primary schools' in their sample 'than in the secondary schools' (p.5) suggesting that initial problems with its development persist. Cross curricular research by Torrance (2007) into post 16 education however notes the intrusion of 'instrumentalism' in the development of AfL, where the understanding of assessment has become an objective in itself 'with assessment procedures and practices coming completely to dominate the learning experience and 'criteria compliance' replacing 'learning' (p.281).

Learning to learn strategies in the TLRP report focused on constructivist strategies like pupil group work. Blatchford et al (2004) quoted by Sebba et al (2007) found that effective learning in group situations depends on team work, involving 'children as co-learners, not just one student helping another' (p.8). Claiming that 'group work can enhance conceptual development and reasoning' he adds that group work can 'improve children's school attainments and therefore school performance' (p.8) by increasing confidence and children's self-belief. Group work improves social skills and intergroup relationships. It introduces skills and qualities that employers find attractive like confident public speaking, tolerance and positive attitudes in work situations. Sebba et al found that while much evidence for effective teaching and learning lays stress on student centeredness, 'enabling pupils to take more responsibility for their own learning and shaping the provision to the learner' (p.12) nevertheless ICT remains important, developing flexibility in learning and greater autonomy for students.

Overall, Sebba et al. found that although development of AfL and learning to learn strategies varied across their sample, nevertheless where schools were committed, improvement was clearly evident. Academic opinion however divided over the development of some teaching and learning strategies associated with PL. Initially the 'range of teaching techniques' (Miliband, 2004a, p.9) in PL followed DfES (2004) guidelines using Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (1985). After the publication of research (Coffield et al, 2004) into learning styles called this application of Gardner's theory into question, their importance declined. While Hall and Moseley (2005) might have agreed that learning style theories other than Gardner's could increase student motivation and thereby achievement, they were nevertheless forced to concede that 'the extent to which learning styles theory can have an impact on teaching and learning is unproven' (p.253). Burton (2007) even questioned the contribution metacognition made to student learning (p.10).Quoting Fodor (2000), she argued that the validity behind the application of current knowledge of brain function was one about which 'doubts have been expressed.' While Burton saw nothing new in Personalised Learning, regarding it as having 'roots in the 1990s vogue for differentiated learning'

(p.14), she cautioned against too much individual involvement in ICT (p.15) as an extreme form of differentiation, preferring group interaction.

2.7 The impact of this literature review on issues, challenges and ideas addressed by the current research

An examination of specific, well established institutional responses to 'A National Conversation about Personalised Learning' (DfES 2004a) is both valid and reasonable given the passage of time since Blair (2003) first applied personalisation to education and Miliband (2004a and 2004b) spearheaded the policy (PL).

General controversy prevails concerning the apparent lack of evidence supporting meritocratic claims that PL would reduce social (and subsequent economic inequalities) alluded to in Pring et al. (2009, p.32, quoting Paterson and Iannelli, 2007) in raising student attainment levels, anticipated by Leadbeater (2004a, 2004b, 2005) and Brighouse (2005). Moreover questions raised by Campbell et al. (2007), Vandenbroeck (2007) and Reay (2008b) concerning social inequalities and negotiation skills have not been trialled in contemporary situations any more than the ideals of educational personalisation extolled by Leadbeater (2004a, 2004b and 2005), Hargreaves (2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2006), Brighouse (2005) and West–Burnham (2005), briefly recognised by Rudduck (2006) and Sebba et al. (2007).

Moreover criticism inspired by exponents of the radical Left like Hall (2003, 2010), Reay and Lucey (2004) and Reay (2008a and 2008b) and those based on Foucauldian interpretations of governance emanating from Rose and Miller (1992) often polarise the conflicting aims of personalisation and performativity. Fielding (2006a, 2006b, 2007 and 2008) alone presents a critically realistic view of the tensions between them. Representing disparate if sometimes overlapping views, this range of critical literature nevertheless provides further justification for investigation. Providing interesting general arguments (Reay, 2008b) impinging on Personalised Learning, possibly formulated without a direct and detailed interrogation of 'grass roots' experience, a gulf

nevertheless may or may not exist between reality and social democratic claims for personalisation in Personalised Learning (PL).

Furthermore any research that has taken place, funded by the Labour government, remains largely uncritical (Rudduck, 2004, and Sebba et al. 2007) while academic interest in KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is similarly dominated by introspective management projects (e.g. Foskett et al. 2004, McCrone et al. 2005, Blenkinsop et al. 2006, Marson et al. 2009). The wider issues of personalisation, performativity and PL are hardly mentioned in this context, leaving the criticisms of Dainton (2004), Johnson (2004), Courcier (2007), Campbell et al. (2007), Fielding (2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008), Harris and Ransom (2005) and Reay (2008b) unanswered. General criticism of student voice as a manipulative neo-liberal strategy fraught with covert mechanisms of social control and self-surveillance identified by Rose and Miller (1992) that are central to the stakeholder role in wider curriculum choice, are also ignored.

Independent research into KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (Cochrane 2007) is also limited, contextually framed and reminiscent of larger government funded investigations. Failing to place KS3/4 curriculum choice within a wider theoretical context, Cochrane is apparently unaware of Carter and Franey's constructivist thesis (2004). Thus he researches student decision-making during Year 9 in isolation in its local, micro-political framework. Accordingly his understanding of this process remains arbitrary and incomplete. Aspects of choice limitation and social control, necessary for optimising the school's performativity and marketisation agenda since 'the school will be anxious to maintain its position in the league tables, and will be influenced to steer young people towards those courses which will give the best statistical return' (Cochrane 2007, p. 3), are raised but not examined or explained. Thus Cochrane implies that the decisions of fourteen year old student stakeholders are shaped by vague ideas of 'their futures' (p.12) controlled to some degree by 'habitus.' Labour's social democratic criteria of individual fairness, freedom of choice and meaningful participation are used to demonstrate inequalities between children 'whose families had a high level of cultural capital' and those 'without the capital' who 'had far less idea about the implications of their

current actions and how they might inhibit or promote future progress' (p.13) while the rationale and inequalities behind powerful institutional responses to this situation are overlooked.

Aiming to provide evidence of one school's response to stakeholder requirements, this project will be particularly interesting since the community it serves is probably one of the most socially and economically deprived in this country. Facing challenges that could, given the pressures of perfomativity and the vulnerability of the student population, lead to strategies for manipulation and social control, this research should provide a suitable context for evaluating claims by Reay (2008b, p.645) that the whole 'thrust of Blair's educational policy has been to enable middle-class parents to 'govern' themselves,' 'while working-class parents' (in this case the unemployed families of recent immigrants) are much more likely to be subject to 'governance' in education' (p. 646).

Recognising that school histories and situations shape strategies like PL, it will firstly be necessary to clarify institutional definitions of key concepts (SRQ 1, 2 and 3) involved in the delivery of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. Providing an illustration of contemporary practice, the research must address the ways in which these interpretations are woven into management of PL (SRQ 4-8), affecting students' freedom of choice (SRQ 9 and 10) during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice when teacher perceptions of student 'achievement' and 'underachievement' could be applied to raise achievement in accordance with institutional attainment targets (SRQ 11). Accepting that the professional values of pastoral staff may be framed by the contributor's role, revealing a range of conceptual and organisational views concerning 'equity' and student voice, affecting student access to the KS4 optional curriculum, the delivery of PL and the purpose/value of personalisation in education, nevertheless this range of views is necessary to provide a detailed image of contemporary reality.

The research may uncover controlling strategies, restricting access to certain curricular choices, possibly based on adult perceptions of student potential and the degree of perceived subject/ course 'difficulty.' Responsibility for

choice, despite theoretical devolution to student 'stakeholders' may therefore be covertly limited by criteria laid down by school managers. This may occur for practical reasons, where the school might be unable to accommodate unmanageable swings in popular decisions or to avoid irresponsible choices necessitating unmanageable changes in Year 10. Thus although students may be encouraged through preparation, exercises and training to reflect on personal qualities, skills and preferences before any decisions are made, justifying self-examination so that student decisions about long and short term goals become more 'realistic', this approach may also limit student aspirations, providing opportunities for manipulation. Alternatively these arguments may be entirely misleading (SRQ 9-11).

Intending to reveal more about the stakeholder role of students in secondary state education, this investigation provides an opportunity to evaluate the quality of personalisation on offer in one school (SRQ 1-11). Focusing on the delicate balance between the democratic rights/needs of students and pressures to improve institutional attainment through the lens of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, an examination of personalised strategies implemented by school leaders (SRQ 1,2,3, 5 ,8 and 9) and shaped by local circumstance (SRQ 7) has been inspired by evidence from pilot research suggesting the empowerment of underachieving student stakeholders may be institutionally manipulated, regulating their access to the KS4 optional curriculum to increase the probability of meeting school performance targets (SRQ 9-11).

Thus in order to answer the research question (RQ) 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' it will be necessary to gain access to a suitable school, gathering information about the research context and its surrounding community. This investigation will test the validity of Reay's views against the reality of student experience based on Rose and Miller's (1992) criticism of the stakeholder role. Addressing both theories in the context of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice may therefore provide a microcosm for evaluating the effectiveness of Labour's education policy (2003-2009.) In this way the research question should provide a detailed

picture of the way Personalised Learning is developing that is particularly pertinent in extending relevant knowledge beyond theory.

Accessing accurate data concerning the way student decisions are processed and the criteria used for acceptance or denial of students' choice may present particular challenges however since this management aspect of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice has traditionally been surrounded in secrecy.

2.8 Summary

Considering the Specific Research Questions (SRQ 1-4) this chapter summarises the aims, theoretical perspectives and extant research surrounding Personalised Learning (2004), providing a context and revealing opportunities for further research.

This overview of a recurring problem in education – balancing the learning needs of individuals with the economic requirement for universally improved student performance – takes a macro view examining the broader issues of social control (performativity) on the development of personalisation in education, providing a context for SRQ 1 and SRQ 2. Having identified inequalities in the student population relevant to SRQ 2 and SRQ 3, the problem of managing underachievement is discussed in terms of student voice and choice addressing SRQ 4, SRQ 6 and SRQ 7.

The difficulties schools have in their equitable management of Personalised Learning (PL) clarifies power differences in the exercise of their often conflicting roles, where an audit culture has the potential to shape the management of each element in PL, including KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. This is demonstrated by the type and direction of research generated by this paradox.

Chapter 3 - Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Introduction - the aims of this research

Aiming to reveal more about the stakeholder role of students in secondary state education, through the research question (RQ), 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' this research provides an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of personalisation on the stakeholder role of students in the context of Personalised Learning (PL) strategies.

Focusing on the delicate balance between the democratic rights/needs of students and pressures to improve institutional attainment, this research will examine how the management process (KS3/4 wider curriculum choice) operates in a particular institution. The investigation will consider management outcomes (SRQ 1-8) from an institutional/teacher perspective and a consumer/student point of view (SRQ 9-11). This examination of personalised strategies, implemented by school leaders and shaped by local circumstance, has been inspired by evidence from pilot research suggesting the empowerment of underachieving student stakeholders may be institutionally manipulated, regulating their access to the KS4 optional curriculum to increase the probability of meeting school performance targets. Thus in order to answer the research question (RQ) 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' it will be necessary to gain access to a suitable school, gathering information about the research context and its surrounding community before undertaking fieldwork to understand the nature of the options system.

Recognising that school histories and situations shape the marketisation strategies (SRQ 5, SRQ 6, SRQ 7 and SRQ 8) emerging from PL, the next objective will be to clarify institutional definitions of key concepts (SRQ 1 and SRQ 8) involved in the delivery of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. Providing an illustration of contemporary practice, the research must address the ways in which these interpretations are woven into its management (SRQ 2 and

SRQ 3), affecting students' freedom of choice when/if teacher perceptions of student 'achievement' and 'underachievement' are used to raise achievement in the pursuit of institutional attainment targets (SRQ 4) Accepting that professional values framed by the contributor's role may reveal a range of conceptual and organisational views concerned with equal opportunities for student access to the KS4 optional curriculum (SRQ 4), the delivery of PL and the purpose/value of personalisation in raising student attainment, nevertheless the introduction of neo-liberal agendas like PL in education has provided a range of apparently legitimate opportunities for school managers to also achieve school targets (SRQ 8).

Hence, this research may uncover controlling strategies, restricting access to certain curricular choices. Possibly based on teacher perceptions of student potential in Year 9 and the degree of perceived subject/course 'difficulty' in Year 10, responsibility for this choice, covertly limited by the criteria laid down by the school, should, according to Miliband (2004b), be devolved to the student through the stakeholder role. Fostering responsible choices, students may be encouraged through preparation, exercises and training to reflect on their personal qualities, skills and preferences before any decisions are made (SRQ 10) and although self-examination may be justified in making their decisions 'realistic', this approach may also provide opportunities for manipulation. Although Form Tutor (FT) and subject teacher advice may address both personalisation and achievement agendas, an investigation of institutional control mechanisms, inhibiting access to 'inappropriate' optional choices, provides a further objective (SRQ 9, SRQ10 and SRQ11). Stakeholder evaluation of outcomes, depending on whether students achieve or are denied their choices presents a final objective, determining the purpose, moral justification and effectiveness of this strategy from a consumer perspective. Alternatively this may not be the case. There could be complete freedom of choice, or possibly a mixture of both extremes.

3.2 Influences on a suitable research design

While it is always important before any research begins to know what one is

doing and why, the strategic choice of research instruments depends on a number of factors involved in the formulation of a suitable research design.

In the fulfilment of research aims (Pring, 2000a p.7) expressed through the research questions (SRQ 1-11), the researcher's epistemological values affect the choice of research methodology, thereby determining the suitability of knowledge about the social world they will produce (Bryman 2008, p.4). This choice depends on the value the researcher gives to different paradigms or clusters of 'beliefs and dictates' (Bryman 2008, p. 696), reflecting the 'stance' taken by the researcher 'on what should pass as acceptable knowledge' (p.693).

3.2.1 Epistemological influences

For research to have universal value, epistemological influences (Somekh 2006 quoted by Carr 2006, p. 422) must be examined by the researcher before any research design is drawn up since 'positivist,' 'interpretivist/constructivist' or a combination of both (mixed methods) approaches 'are not neutral' (Bryman 2008, p.4) in the new knowledge they produce. Thus a clear understanding of 'different [paradigmatic] viewpoints about the nature of social reality and how it should be examined' (p.4) is needed to inform epistemological choice.

3.2.2 Positivism and Interpretivism

Advocating 'the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond' (Bryman 2008, p.697) positivism produces quantitative data relying on surveys, structured interviews, experiments and secondary data in a statistical form.

Taking a deductive approach based on the belief in an 'objective reality', positivism stresses the importance of 'the separateness of the researcher and researched' with 'a notion of truth as correspondence between the research account and what is the case independently of the researcher' (Pring 2000a, p.47). Deterministic elements, concerned with the identification of causes through theory testing, or explanations of social facts or regularities, are gained from non–positivist prior observation. The majority of positivist

research, however, designed to produce empirically hard evidence in statistical form rests on uncertain foundations since its 'doctrine' is 'extremely difficult to pin down because it is used in a number of different ways by authors.' Thus, for some it represents 'a philosophical position,' for others it is 'a descriptive category' while it may also be 'used pejoratively' 'to describe crude and often superficial data collection' (Bryman 2008, p.14). Philosophical links between positivism and research methods used in the natural sciences can be similarly misleading.

While positivism, like natural science methodology, shares a 'concern for objectivity and generalisability' (Alexander 2006, p.205), these perspectives are not synonymous. The positivist/natural science connexion has long been regarded as 'out-dated,' 'divisive and detrimental to social science' (Rowbottom and Aiston, p.138) resulting in its replacement by realism (Bryman 2008, p.14). Sharing generic links to positivism, realism still maintains the existence of 'a reality independent of the senses,' that is 'accessible to the researchers' tools and theoretical speculations,' implying that 'the categories created by scientists refer to real objects in the natural or social worlds' (Bryman 2008, p.698). Offering different interpretations of' reality' however, positivists believe its scientific construction actually reflects 'that reality,' while realists would argue that the natural science approach 'is simply a way of knowing reality' (p.14).

Alternatively interpretivist research normally 'emphasizes words (qualitative data) rather than quantification' (p.697), offering an 'epistemological position' requiring the researcher 'to grasp the subjective meaning of social action' (p.694). Having evolved from three major philosophical sources: hermeneutics, an approach 'drawn from theology that, when imported into social sciences, is concerned with the theory and method of the interpretation of human action', phenomenology, 'concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them and how in particular the philosopher should bracket out preconceptions in his or her grasp of that world' and symbolic interactionism (Bryman 2008, p. 15). Influenced by Weber's concept of 'verstehen', symbolic interactionism is concerned with understanding behaviour through an interpretation of both the meaning and

the intention of action. In the development of meanings it is generally agreed that 'interaction takes place in such a way that the individual is continually interpreting the symbolic meaning of his or her environments (which includes the actions of others) and acts on the basis of this imputed meaning (p.17).

Alternatively Pring (2000a, p.96) asserts that interpretivism represents an attempt 'to understand other people, [and] therefore requires understanding the interpretations which they give of what they are doing' which implies the researcher must have prior knowledge of the situation or person s/he is researching in order to understand the meanings and motives behind each situation. Taking an inductive rather than deductive approach, interpretivism during the 1960s seemed to address many weaknesses associated with empiricism, positivism and realism.

Producing detailed analysis rather than objective statistical evidence, interpretivist strategies like observation, unstructured interviews and the use of qualitative documents like letters, diaries and other contemporary evidence rely heavily on the subjectivity of researchers, are expensive in their use of time and money and difficult to replicate. Moreover 'just as deduction entails an element of induction, the inductive process is likely to entail a modicum of deduction' (Bryman 2008, p. 11) making absolute distinctions between research processes involved in interpretivism and positivism misleading – an insight confirmed by Clark (1998, p.1243).

3.2.3 Education research

Effective educational research may not be possible through the simple application of one set of paradigmatic strategies since 'the *practice* of education,' defined as 'a [complex] transaction between a teacher and a learner within a framework of agreed purposes and underlying procedural values' (Pring 2000a, p.28) 'cannot' by its very nature 'be the object of a science' (p.29) and therefore based on quantitative methods alone, educational research 'invariably includes both elements of qualitative and non-qualitative inquiry' Bryman (2008). In this way, through the 'careful analysis of the social situation with the underlying social rules, the interpretation of the participants, the values and aims embedded within the

practice' (p.489) a valid picture of reality may emerge. Gorard (2007) supporting this view, argues that using mixed methods 'to improve educational justice' requires the researcher 'to understand the problem, find the likely causes or useful policy-levers, test interventions, and monitor the outcomes,' which 'in turn, compels us to use a full cycle of combined methods research' (p.1).

3.2.4 The case for mixed methods in this research design

Any data, whether quantitative or qualitative, must be analysed to formulate theories so further research can be carried out before conclusions are reached. This cyclical, 'iterative' process involving 'a weaving back and forth between data and theory' (Bryman 2008, p.12) is common to both positivist and interpretivist research. Although qualitative research may offer greater flexibility, like positivism it still defies definition, covering 'such a huge range of strategies - from ethnography, grounded theory, applications of interpretive social science, exercises in connoisseurship and narrative and hermeneutic approaches' (Davis 2006, p.488). Thus gradually the 'incompatibility theses' of a rigid qualitative/quantitative divide has been challenged (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003, p.66).

Quoting Howe (1988), they contend that 'social /behavioural research' 'that is either-or (inductive/deductive) is problematic' because 'predicting human behaviour is more difficult' than positivists and interpretivists/constructivists suggest (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003, p. 67). Moreover 'clear cut distinctions between researchers working with either qualitative or quantitative data' 'do not seem to be borne out in the actual research literature' (p.68). Arguing against the 'false dualisms' (Pring 2000b, p.248) of this 'Cartesian approach' (quoting Hodkinson 1998, p.17), Pring rejects previous perceptions of the perceived gulf 'between the objective world (out there independently of our thinking about it) and the subjective worlds (in our heads, as it were, and individually constructed) believing this divisive approach' is simply 'misleading' (p.248). The erosion of epistemological difference has achieved 'increasing recognition' Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003, p.62) leading to the development of a 'pragmatist,' 'bilingual' approach to research (p.64). Although Johnson

and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p.16) agree with Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) that pragmatism acts as 'the philosophical partner for mixed methods,' they nevertheless recognise its limitations in providing 'perfect solutions.'

Having the advantage of enabling 'the results of an investigation' to be 'cross-checked against the results of using a method associated with another research strategy,' a mixture of research methods increases the trustworthiness of data since 'findings' 'can be enhanced by using more than one way of measuring a concept' (Bryman 2008, p.611). Moreover it provides opportunities for research creativity or thinking 'outside the box' (Brannen, 2005 p.5/6). Visualising a methodological continuum with quantitative methods at one end, qualitative approaches at the other and mixed methods in the middle, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) agree with Niglas (2006) in recommending methodological triangulation as 'the third research paradigm' (p.15).

3.2.5 The effect of ontological beliefs on this research design

Affecting the research question and research design (Bryman 2008, p.18), the absorption of ontological values concerning the nature of social entities (p. 696) can affect the quality of the research.

Falling into two main categories, objectivism and constructivism, these theories enjoy close links with epistemological paradigms. Thus a belief that 'social entities can and should be considered objective' with 'a reality external to social actors' [objectivism] is shaped by positivist [and realist] beliefs that social phenomena exist 'that are beyond our reach or influence.' Whether social entities 'can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors' (constructivism), an idea put forward mainly by interpretivists, depends on whether the researcher believes social actors can and do influence roles, situations and organisations. Thus if 'social ontology cannot be divorced (in this way) from issues concerning the conduct of social research' (Bryman 2008, p.21) the researcher should be aware of its influence throughout his/her investigation. If unrecognised it may undermine the trustworthiness of the project.

In this case, researcher values, evident in the research question (RQ), 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' suggest a belief in constructivism. The investigation of an educational framework for students' decision-making implies the existence of several stages in the development of this policy built around different levels of power.

The government sets out a policy framework within which institutions are expected to operate. Institutions must adapt this policy to meet local needs and circumstance (Hargreaves 2004a, Carter and Franey 2004). Within this local framework, student stakeholders influenced in varying degrees by parents, peers and advisors/teachers in a range of roles make choices from a range of options provided by the school. All of these stages are 'managed' by individuals and are therefore socially constructed. Thus interpretivist research methods like observation and informal interviews are required to understand external and internal agendas, motives and meaning shaping this process.

Comparing the experience of different students suggests an objective, measurable difference may exist between them. This may be identified using objective means like secondary statistical data and/or student questionnaires. However any subsequent differences, if they exist, may not necessarily be causal so the validity of any such claims can only be established through informal interviews, based on questionnaire responses. Thus both objectivist and constructivist elements in the production of new knowledge will be accommodated in this way, though not in equal measure since the outcome of each stage in the research is unknown. PL may be developing in unexpected ways. Always intended to spread in a social constructivist manner, accommodating local needs, strengths and interests, its development nationally should be varied, multi-facetted and shaped to meet the learning needs of individual children in different geographical areas (Carter and Franey 2004, Hargreaves 2004a).

Moreover an open research question (RQ) is therefore justified. Suitably speculative in a philosophical climate where the reinterpretation of truth/validity and reliability have stimulated the search for a more

sophisticated rationale for investigating social phenomena, the phrasing and subsequent implementation of this research question (RQ) may now reflect a more realistic interpretation of what actually happens in the 'field.'

3.3 Research approaches

The design of this investigation 'reflects decisions about the priority being given to a range of dimensions' which include the possibility of generalising 'to larger groups' like other schools beyond the immediate research context. By understanding the 'behaviour and the meaning of that behaviour' of teacher managers in the 'specific context' of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, it may be possible 'over time' to appreciate the 'social phenomena' of performativity and personalisation and their 'interconnection' with contemporary state education, adapting Bryman (2008, p.31).

3.3.1 The strengths of an ethnographic case study

By focussing on 'a discrete location' (Pole and Morrison 2003, p.3), an ethnographic approach offers research opportunities while maintaining methodological flexibility. Using ethnographic strategies to immerse the researcher 'in the social setting for an extended period of time, observing behaviour, listening to what is said in conversations both between others and with the fieldworker, and asking questions' (Bryman 2008, p.693), knowledge of 'the complexities of the discrete event, location or setting' (Pole and Morrison 2003, p.3) provide a social and physical context for research.

Investing the research with internal validity from 'a detailed (and privileged) insider's view,' understanding 'the significance and meaning of social action for the actors upon whom the research is focused' (Pole and Morrison 2003, p.8), ethnographic research focuses on 'the complexities of a discrete event' (choosing options) moving quickly 'from detailed description to the identification of concepts and theories' (p.3). This 'intensive examination' of a school community in a 'single location' (Bryman 2008, p.53), the product of qualitative methods (covert observation and informal interviews) where 'the general approach of naturalism' (Pole and Morrison 2003, p.6) aims 'to minimise the intrusion of artificial methods' (Bryman 2008, p.35), an

ethnographic methodology reduces researcher effect on student behaviour, enabling the researcher to understand the school's normal practice and interpreting the meaning behind the behaviour of social actors.

3.3.2 Justifying ethnography in this study

Official aspects of this school's interpretation of personalisation, performativity and KS3/4 wider curriculum choice should quickly become apparent. Taking the role of a classroom assistant, an ethnographic study may reveal many aspects of school culture, reflected in its organisation during KS3 in terms of a pre-KS3/4 wider curriculum choice framework. From the outset, these may reflect inequalities between staff and students, revealing the importance of teacher expectations in terms of performativity since institutional perceptions of inequality between students may pre-date the research. Aware that 'covert' aspects of observation in 'naturalism' are controversial, the researcher's role as an observer will be completely transparent, since deception violates 'the ethical principle of informed consent' (Bryman 2008, p.692). Despite ensuring 'a high level of congruence between concepts and observations' (Bryman 2008, p.376) ethnography has weaknesses since the generalisability of findings may be limited by the singularity of circumstance. Nevertheless a 'fuzzy generalisation' or 'best estimate' of 'generalisability' (Bassey 2000, p.1) may be possible. Working within time limits however creates pressure to maximise the effectiveness of the research opportunity.

3.3.3 Advantages of an ethnographic case study

The resulting case study can be carefully crafted into a richly 'detailed and intensive analysis' (Bryman 2008, p.52) concerned with 'the complexity and particular nature' (Stake 1995, quoted in Bryman, p.52) of meanings constructed by students, Form Tutors and different levels of teacher managers in a range of roles. Pring (2000a, p.40) was particularly in favour of using as wide range of witnesses as possible, since 'without such in-depth detective work, one would not really understand what was going on' (p.41). Thus for Fendler (2006) generalisation, even from inductive case studies, is possible and justified by Hume's view that 'generalisations' can be 'derived from habit or custom' (quoted by Fendler 2006, p.439). Conversely Evers and

Wu (2006, p.511) emphasise the value of inference in generalising from case studies. They argue that because 'all our observations are laden with theory' and 'many of the terms used in the description of particular phenomena are general terms,' the generalisation of many 'social practices' is also 'defined by rules' (p.512) which 'can be defended by abductive inference,' sometimes known as 'inference to the best explanation' (p. 513).

3.3.4 Justifying an ethnographic case study

The richness of descriptive data, or 'thick description' identified by Geertz (1973) and quoted in Bryman (2008, p.34) found in this case study may enhance the trustworthiness of the research in terms of its 'transferability' to other contexts and settings, providing a detailed current working example of the way KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is developing.

3.4 Sampling methods and sample selection

This involves the identification of three participant samples.

3.4.1 Pastoral Staff

A small selection of pastoral staff is required from a range of management levels, representing a 'convenience sample' where involvement in KS3/4 wider curriculum choice provides the sampling frame. Despite the range of views it provides, this sampling strategy nevertheless has weaknesses, since the interviewees are unlikely to be representative of the staff population as a whole, limiting the external validity or generalisability of evidence generated in this way. These participants cannot be randomly chosen since it is their involvement in KS3/4 wider curriculum choice that determines inclusion in the sampling frame. Coming from different power groups since position in the school hierarchy will determine access to knowledge, they will only be interviewed about their own level of involvement in answering (SRQ 1-9).

3.4.2 Student questionnaire sample

Each year cohort of two hundred and ten students has a seven-form entry. Given the restrictions of timetabling and the practicalities of doctoral research, students from two mixed ability tutor groups may provide a suitable probability

sample, where each unit (tutor group) in the population (year cohort) has an equal chance of being selected. This approach will allow some generalisation because of the 'randomness' with which students were originally allocated forms in Yr. 7 (Bryman 2008, p.171). Checks will take place to ensure representativeness, since their quantitative evidence will be used to establish the validity of data from the first sample. Intended to provide a 'microcosm' of the 'population' (sampling frame) in the year cohort under review 'accurately' (p.698) since the degree of representativeness would affect the generalisability of 'findings' firstly to the 'entire student body' (Bryman, p.168) and possibly beyond, sixty students from two complete tutor groups might prove appropriate. While absolute representativeness based on social characteristics defined by the population of the school rather than society as a whole (Bryman p.183) could not be guaranteed, tutor group membership was random, mixed in terms of ability and/or achievement and mainly determined by friendship groups in Year 7. Their evidence will be used in response to SRQ 10.

3.4.3 Student interview sample

A subgroup of the questionnaire sample, twenty two students, reducing to twenty as a result of recording difficulties, had, with their parents, given written permission to be interviewed in response to the letter (Appendix 3). As volunteers this 'non-probability sample' (Bryman 2008, p. 696) might not be representative in terms of achievement levels. Made up of eleven females and nine males this sample did not reflect the male/female ratio of the school.

Central to the integrity of this research, qualitative experiential data from this group, in response to SRQ 10-12 and the research question (RQ), provides a consumer perspective on KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, revealing more about the quality and nature of 'personalisation' and the degree to which students feel constrained or empowered as stakeholders during decision–making. However it would still be necessary to find a reliable means of identifying individual achievement levels and potential at some stage in the research process to answer the research question fully.

3.4.4 Problems arising from a non-probability sample in this research

To save time and effort while fully aware of the limitations of secondary data (Bryman 2008, p.297/8) a suitable source was needed for the identification of achievers and underachievers. The only one available, generated through the schools' internal monitoring system, was based on regular objective specimen tests and subjective teacher assessment. Since the head teacher, understandably unwilling to allow these records to be viewed by an outsider off the premises, would only facilitate its use in the identification of students 'on site,' the application of subject and subjective data in the construction of a representative sample presented a number of problems.

Firstly this data would relate to current subjective teacher assessment, which could be unreliable. Quantitative test data is not subject to standardisation procedures between markers, subjects or across teaching sets. Working relationships between individual staff and students may vary. Moreover, the data for the previous Year 9 would probably have been archived and therefore unavailable.

Ethical considerations could cause serious controversy since its preparation in a form appropriate for the research would cause considerable effort on the part of administrative staff. To avoid inconveniencing them, paper records would be necessary and without a secure base for holding such data, this strategy was potentially hazardous. If internal data was seen in the researcher's possession, the head teacher's decision could be challenged. The concept of 'trust' within that institution could be damaged with questions raised about student confidentiality. Moreover access to this data could involve breaching ethical guidelines (BERA 1992) concerning 'the need to 'protect' participants from harm,' indentified by Pole and Morrison (2003, p.150). Presenting an unacceptable risk, alternative identification strategies would be needed. Moreover, teacher assessments might lead to 'ventriloquy' (McNamee 2001) in the way interviews were conducted.

To avoid this kind of interviewer effect, and since underachievement has many causes, the identification of a fully representative interview sample might be difficult, if not impossible given the constraints of doctoral research.

Already aware that the researcher might be perceived by students as an authority figure, axiological sympathies towards particular individuals would potentially affect the trustworthiness of evidence and so it seemed sensible to reduce opportunities for bias through interviewer effect. The list of interviewees was handed to the KS3 Manager who returned it with the reassurance that this group formed a generally 'mixed' sample.

3.4.5 Resolution of these challenges and barriers to research

Thus a calculated risk might be justified so that identification of student potential could occur after the interviews had taken place. Once student interviews were complete, Form Tutors would be asked to confirm the ability levels and potential from school data on their tutees in the sample. Furthermore, the Learning and Language Support managers would also be asked to identify, from the same list, students with learning and language difficulties .A 'retrospective' approach would minimise researcher bias.

3.4.6 Justification of sampling procedure

Year 10 rather than Year 9 might provide a more suitable context for the research since the time frame for the research would begin during the preparation for KS3/4 wider curriculum choice in Year 9 and needed to be complete before the choice-taking process ended. Thus the production of Year 9 students' quantitative and qualitative data might not be stable (Bryman 2008, p. 698) given the fluidity of decision making. For staff and students making decisions during KS3/4 wider curriculum choices might be problematic for a number of reasons. The quality of data generated from Year 10 students' questionnaires, having had time for reflection, might have more integrity or internal validity (Bryman 2008, p.700) and there was a greater probability of them being settled in their choices. Thus a sampling frame from Year 10 rather than Year 9 might provide more trustworthy data. Similarly this meant that pastoral interviews would also be required from Yr. 10 rather than Yr. 9 Form Tutors.

3.5 Research methods

Using triangulation of source and method with respondent validation procedures to access some of the multiple realities of personalisation in secondary education the researcher tried to build a relationship with the participant community as part of the process involved in developing trustworthy research. The range of teacher and student interpretation of concepts and experience meant that this research relied on predominantly interpretivist methods. Recognising the objective existence of government policy in terms PL, however, it was necessary to include positivist/quantitative strategies to establish the internal validity of key concepts.

While it could be argued that despite a mixed methods approach, there is an overdependence on interpretivist methods, providing opportunities for researcher bias, any marginalisation of quantitative strategies to the acquisition of background data, sampling procedures and respondent validation strategies must be refuted. Firstly, quantitative data from student questionnaires is essential to the integrity of this research since it was used comparatively with the qualitative evidence of teacher interviews to establish internal validity. Secondly, implications of qualitative bias may be offset by the richness of this data, especially when qualified by evidence from validation strategies. Meanwhile this particular combination of research strategies provided flexibility (Brannen 2005) and pragmatism (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004, Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003 and Niglas 2006) in allowing the research question (RQ) to 'determine the design of the study' (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003).

Essential where 'the quest for knowledge and truth does not amount to the quest for absolute certainty and (so to speak) eternal foundations' (Ramaekers 2006, p.244) this approach anticipated that, given the pressure of unremitting change orchestrated by Labour governments since 1997, the current emphasis on personalisation may shift during the time scale of this research so that 'compromises and confusions' (Hall 2003) in policy direction may prove to be temporary. Equally the truths revealed in this mixed methods approach may reflect a momentary even partial 'snapshot' of reality, that is

'open to criticism,' but nevertheless providing 'firm grounds upon which to act in the meantime' (Ramaekers 2006, p.244).

3 5.1.Research timetable plan

Having negotiated entry to the research school (see Appendix 1) the following research timetable (Table 3.1) emerged.

Plan of Study	Proposed completion date
Topic agreed by supervisor	April 2009
Preparation of data gathering and data analysis processes	August/Sept 2009
Refine research instruments including draft questionnaire for pilot.	SMG access letter -April 2009
Pilot study	Oct 2009
Review data gathering and analysis processes	Nov 2009
Data gathering	Nov-Dec 2009
Analysis of results	Jan 2010

Table 3.1 Outline of research timetable

3.5.2 Qualitative methods – staff interviews

Informal staff interviews may provide credible and dependable evidence of the school's interpretation of personalisation, performativity and KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. Taking an interpretivist approach, informal recorded interviews beginning with individuals in key institutional management roles, would cascade through the pastoral system. Through open interview questions it may be possible to understand the pupil management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice 'through the eyes of the people being studied' (Bryman 2008, p.385). In trying 'to understand how social order is created through talk and interaction,' the researcher would need to be aware of 'the different ways social reality can be constructed' (p.367) affecting the quality of evidence (internal validity) from each interview.

Simply reflecting the interviewees' perception of themselves, their role in the decision-making process, their interpretation and assessment of the research,

personal reaction to the researcher, or any combination of these factors, the quality of interview evidence will vary. Therefore this inductive approach could, if uncorroborated, produce biased evidence since it is the outcome 'of interactions between individuals, rather than phenomena '*out there*' and separate from those involved in its construction' (p.366). As a result, triangulation of method and source will be used to assess its quality and content.

Recognising that KS3/4 wider curriculum choice may be developing in creative and unexpected ways, having gained access to a suitable school, it was necessary to ask permission from ten members of staff to carry out informal interviews. This was done verbally in the staffroom and individual offices. Using the school's internet to confirm appointments, a rough outline of the interview was sent to each staff member (Appendix 2). These interviews were transcribed and in the same way, were subject to respondent validation by e-mail. Qualitative data from these teacher interviews concerning the application of concepts provided various foci for questions in the student questionnaires.

3.5.3 Analysis of staff interviews

The value of interview evidence will depend on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). While Conversational Analysis (CA) and Discourse Analysis (DA), having some advantages over the 'traditional research interview' (Bryman 2008, p.493) could have been used to reveal what interviewees think about a topic or their behaviour through 'fine-grained analysis of talk as it occurs' (Conversational Analysis) (p.692) or 'the ways in which versions of reality are accomplished through language' (Discourse Analysis) (p.693), both analytical strategies fail to address issues of power inherent in the management and implementation of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice.

Emphasising 'the role of language as a power resource' 'related to ideology and socio-cultural change,' CDA 'draws in particular on the theories and approaches of Foucault' (p.692) to uncover the 'representational properties of discourse as a vehicle for the exercise of power through the construction of disciplinary practices, such as individual subjectivity and the operation of rules

and procedures that enabled the construction of disciplinary practices that enable the construction of the self-disciplining subject' (p.508). Meanwhile CDA is particularly useful since it incorporates the concept of 'pre-existing material reality' arguing that 'discourses should be examined in relation to social structures, including the power relationships that are responsible for occasioning them' (Reed 2000, quoted by Bryman 2008, p.508).

Recognising that negotiations between students and pastoral managers concerning KS3/4 wider curriculum choice represent in microcosm a 'social and political context' underpinned by 'social inequalities' (Van Dijk 2001, p. 352 found in Tannen, Schiffrin, and Hamilton (Eds.), CDA analysis of interviews with pastoral managers and students facilitates the 'uncovering' of 'interpretative repertoires' displayed by both interviewer and respondents (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984, p.56, quoted by Bryman 2008, p.503). Despite proceeding according to a 'three dimensional framework' examining 'the actual content, structure, and meaning' of the interview, 'the form of discursive interaction used to communicate meaning and beliefs' and a 'consideration of the social context' in which the discourse takes place (p.509), the researcher must recognise CDA analysis could be based on conjecture alone, and therefore respondent validation is required to establish internal validity with every interview.

3.5.4 Student questionnaires

Quantitative data from these questionnaires would be analysed and compared with the qualitative data generated from the teacher interviews to establish a more valid, trustworthy picture of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice.

Before administering the questionnaire, permission was sought verbally from two randomly chosen Yr. 10 tutor groups to secure their involvement in this activity. After brief introduction, they all completed the same anonymous self-report questionnaire (Appendix 5). Aware that taking students 'off timetable' and into new accommodation to participate in research sometimes affects the 'ecological validity' (Bryman 2008, p.46) of individual accounts, leading to ambiguity or error, this activity took place in form rooms, a relaxed but controlled setting. Used to operationalise concepts emerging from teacher

interviews, the questionnaire also linked student experience to the specific research questions (SRQ10-12) (Bryman 2008, p.239).

3.5.5 The pilot questionnaire

Pilot research (Appendix 4) took place before the research began as part of the iterative process in questionnaire development (Oppenheim 1992, quoted by Pole and Lampard 2002, p.111) to avoid some possible difficulties and reduce negative effects. Such practice 'is always desirable,' not least to provide researchers with contextual experience, if at all possible, by conducting 'a pilot study before administering a self-completion questionnaire' (Bryman 2008, p.247).

Feedback from such situations using 'real experts' (students) is invaluable since the researcher 'cannot assess how the questions will come across to other people' (Pole and Lampard 2002, p.110) due to subjectivity through ownership. For example, one pilot question requiring students to rank influences on their option choices resulted in inconclusive responses, possibly due to its complexity making 'the respondents feel uncomfortable' (Bryman 2008, p.247). Moreover since the essence of 'good questionnaire design' is 'a process rather than an event' depending on 'a superficially satisfactory wording' 'on paper' that 'gives the researcher something 'concrete' to work on' (Pole and Lampard 2002, p.102), Question 9 needed to be clearer to avoid this problem.

Open questions where 'the respondent is free to give a spontaneous answer in their own words' are often used in piloting so that answers can be used in a final version to produce 'closed questions where the respondent is directed to select an answer from a given range of alternatives' (p.102). Thus seven open questions were used in the pilot questionnaire to operationalise key concepts by testing the effectiveness of relevant indicators in this research (p.97). Students were asked to evaluate factors involved in their own decision-making and avoiding double negatives and double barrelled questions (p.108). They could 'reply as they wished' (Bryman 2008, p.231) 'in their own

terms' and without being led towards a 'correct' interpretation of 'new areas' (p.232).

Intended to diffuse tension, nevertheless data analysis from this approach was time consuming but led to an animated discussion in the interview session. 'Personal factual' (p.238) Questions (1-5) about attitudes (p.239) towards Key Stage 4 (Years 10-11) curriculum seemed neither negative nor leading. Respondents could reasonably be expected to 'have the requisite knowledge' (p. 243), although Question 4: 'How many vocational courses were you allowed?' contained the technical term 'vocational' requiring explanation. (The pilot questionnaire is found in Appendix 4.) Despite these considerations, the wording of questions may have affected the quality of student response through perceived power differences between the researcher and children and the unconscious infiltration of the researcher's values (Pole and Lampard 2002, p.92).

3.5.6 The final version of the student questionnaire

Data analysis of the pilot questionnaire assisted in developing a quantitative approach in the final questionnaire, increasing the internal validity of this research.

Concerning the research question (RQ) however 'the extent of equitable empowerment' implies a measurement of levels (i.e. a comparative quantitative approach, using a self-report questionnaire), while analysing the experience of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice from several viewpoints requires interpretation (i.e. a qualitative strategy using open questions). However, attempting a comparison between the experience of achievers and underachievers is not without risk. It may be 'difficult to establish a causal direction' (Bryman 2008, p.46) between student potential and student equity, a consequence of weak internal validity inherent in comparative approaches. Moreover 'ecological validity' (p.46) is sometimes affected in situations like this by taking students 'off timetable.'

While Question 1 requested student identification codes to allow for respondent recognition of his/her own questionnaire if required as the basis of a student interview, Question 2, concerning student age, was also simple to

answer. Intended to reinforce student confidence, the data it produced might have proved significant when applied to Question 3, which asked 'How long have you lived in England?' Its purpose was firstly to identify early language learners and secondly to discover students who had arrived late in the processing of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. Early language learners might be distinguished from internal migrants by their answers to Question 4 concerned with the students' start date at this school. Question 5 would test official claims that every child in the previous Yr. 9 received their first choices. Meanwhile Question 7 allowed the researcher to explore the type of courses that might have high or low status with students and/or KS3 management to discern whether there was any in house 'matching' of perceived ability linked to Question 5. Questions 8 and 9 concerned the relative importance of influences on students' choice, while Questions 10 and 11 required them to evaluate two of the support units. In summary, Question 12 asked them to evaluate the outcome of all these processes.

Thus eleven out of twelve were closed questions and although some spontaneity might be lost through this strategy, student responses would be 'easy to process,' since 'closed questions may clarify the meaning of a question,' and are easy for everyone including respondents, to complete as they 'reduce the possibility of variability' (p.235) facilitating quantitative analysis. Intending to reduce bias through interview effect, allowing student voice to emerge after some introductory questions, closed questioning was used to facilitate univariate analysis through frequency tables. While the size of this group of sixty students was 'likely to impose some limitations on the kinds of (analytical) techniques' available (Bryman 2008, p.314), achievement and underachievement, to be identified later, would represent the key variables. The distribution of values as averages would be understood through arithmetic means, medians or modes while the range of dispersion across both achievers and underachievers would be significant, allowing for a comparison of range generated manually or using an Excel spread sheet.

Meanwhile questionnaire 'statements' using Likert scales allow 'delineation,' suitable for measuring 'fine differences' between student perceptions of equity

and facilitating analysis through matrices. Consistent differences provide a 'yardstick' or 'measurement device' for 'making distinctions' between variables, enabling 'more precise estimates' of the degree of correlation to emerge (p.144), increasing the credibility (internal validity) and confirmability (objectivity) of data while improving its potential for transferability (external validity) and dependability (reliability) (p.34). Likert scales, particularly helpful in allowing the identification of multiple indicators with greater precision, improve the researcher's understanding of respondent attitudes. For example, different perceptions of autonomy in the decision making process demonstrate 'ratio variables' between individuals while self-perception may be indicated through rank ordering, indicating ordinal variables. Nominal/categorical variables however 'comprise categories' such as interpretations of power brokerage, resistant to rank ordering (p.321). These can be cross checked by student validation.

As the only open question, Question 6 addressed the reasons children received if possibly they did not receive their first choices, key to the identification of control mechanisms used by the KS3 Manager should they exist. Particularly useful in this regard, since open questions facilitate independent 'unusual' responses the researcher may not have previously contemplated and are particularly 'useful for exploring new areas' of research like this (p.232). Although these responses may require coding, by limiting this strategy to just one question, analysis of data from this question should not prove time consuming.

3.5.7 Student interviews

Having asked the students to identify their own previously anonymous questionnaires, their interviews were based on these earlier responses.

3.5.8 The pilot interview

During pilot research, student interviews took place immediately after administering the pilot questionnaire to allow for cross-checking, clarification and possible corroboration of relevant issues. However they had been

conducted without prior analysis of questionnaire data, making these activities impossible.

Reducing validity, the potential for interviewer effect increased, focussing on issues of researcher importance. Furthermore the sound recording revealed aspects of role conflict for the researcher. As an insider through previous employment but without professional contact with these Year 10 students, being a 'familiar face' may have been advantageous in gaining entry to this group. However the recording shows the researcher managing the interview as a teacher rather than a researcher, not having considered his/her 'own role in the observation' of interview behaviour (Pole and Lampard 2002, p.76). Moreover valuable evidence was missed since a suitable focus for observation had not been ascertained prior to the pilot interview taking place.

Aware of time constraints, the researcher may have encouraged more confident students to dominate, raising considerations of turn-taking in the future. However, with few exceptions from the sound recording, it was difficult to accurately identify all individual contributions and later feedback to the Form Tutor (a trusted person) claimed some girls had felt 'shy' in the interview, requesting a further opportunity to express their views. The informality of the situation had facilitated the explanation of specialist terms like 'vocational,' thereby investing student confidence with some degree of trust. Telescoping the two strategies had produced limited but relevant statistical and qualitative data, however demonstrating 'there may be more than one plausible' (Pole and Lampard 2002, p.91) interpretation of performativity and personalisation in the options process. Most certainly the group appeared uncritical of their experience, justifying further enquiry.

More general weaknesses emerged since pilot research had involved a recorded group interview with ten mixed achievers. From this situation it had been impossible to ensure the every individual had the same opportunity to participate without the researcher dominating the informality of the situation. Although it might have increased internal validity to observe 'the ways in which individuals collectively make sense of phenomenon and construct meanings around it,' nevertheless in a group situation the researcher had

'less control over proceedings' than would be possible with individual interviews (Bryman 2008, p.476). Thus individual interviews appeared preferable especially as the students would be unknown to the researcher beforehand.

However complex issues surround the interpretation of student voice. Firstly, given the short time available to build trust, the students may find difficulty in articulating their true feelings. As a result, recalling Levering's (2006) doubts about the validity of respondents' interpretation of their own experience, the crucial objective concerned with brokerage in the context of the Options process might be difficult to ascertain. Thus to offset 'ventriloquy', opportunities must be built into the interview process for respondent validation while the keeping of a research log/audit trail will be invaluable for establishing the validity of evidence throughout the project. By 'empathetically' 'taking' the respective 'positions' (Bryman 2008, p.385) of those students involved and cross checking different accounts, insight into different perceptions and a better understanding of contemporary reality concerning KS3/4 wider curriculum choice might emerge. Thus piloting this interview provided 'experience' on which to build.

3.5.9 The student interview procedure

Based on the students' own questionnaire responses, these individual, informal interviews provided a useful way of ascertaining the circumstances and underlying meaning behind questionnaire responses 'in a way which is unobtrusive' (Pole and Lampard 2002, p.138) while cross-checking the internal validity of questionnaire data. Asking interview questions in similar circumstances and the same order does not mean that each interview is replicable however, reducing the external reliability of evidence. Moreover if identifiable differences in student responses emerge, causal links to perceived achievement levels may not be internally validated. Nevertheless the researcher must ensure such topics 'are adequately discussed' (p.138). Limited by time constraints (p.139), questioning and management skills involved in pacing the interview, together with observation and data recording,

benefited from piloting procedures (p.140 -146) in the refinement of specialist skills.

Useful in clarifying students' interpretation of key concepts, a small 'case study' of each child was produced, subject for ethical reasons to respondent verification procedures without using the school's internet. Instead, sealed envelopes were sent and returned to the researcher via Form Tutors.

3.5.10 Form Tutor identification of 'achievers' and 'underachievers'

Once student questionnaires were complete and all student interviews had taken place, Form Tutors, Learning Support and Language Support Department heads were asked to identify the achievement levels of students in the interview sample. Combined retrospectively, student evidence and pastoral data revealed institutional perceptions of equity or social control in the decision-making process in response to SRQ 11: How does the experience of underachieving students differ from that of normally achieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?

3.6 The trustworthiness of research methods

It is important to be able to justify the value of this research by the quality of evidence produced.

Although there is consensus over concepts like 'validity,' concerned with 'the integrity' of 'conclusions generated' (Bryman 2008, p.700) and 'reliability' or 'the degree to which the measure of a concept is stable' (p. 698), positivist research is nevertheless 'essentially concerned with the adequacy of measures' regarding the 'soundness of findings that specify a causal connection' (internal validity), the 'representativeness of research subjects' and 'sampling procedures that maximise the opportunity for generating representative sample' (p.33). Presupposing 'that a single absolute account of social reality is feasible' (p.377) translation of these positivist concepts to ensure the integrity of qualitative research appears problematic.

Given that it is perfectly acceptable for different concepts to have different meanings for interpretivists, it is hardly surprising that attempts to improve the integrity of interpretivist research though the application of 'validity' and

'reliability' have resulted in a range of responses – from 'direct assimilation' (Mason, 1996, quoted in Bryman 2008, p.376) to the development of more sophisticated meanings (LeCompte and Goetz, 1982 and Kirk and Miller, 1986 also quoted in Bryman 2008, p.376). While direct assimilation can be difficult, the use of LeCompte and Goetz's terminology seems to be more prevalent.

For LeCompte and Goetz, 1982 (quoted in Bryman 2008, p.376) the reliability of qualitative research is no longer concerned with 'the degree to which the measure of a concept is stable' (p.698) but with aspects of internal and external consistency. Although 'external reliability' or 'the degree to which a study can be replicated' is difficult 'to meet in qualitative research' since it is impossible to reproduce social settings or the circumstances in which certain events take place, 'internal reliability' is more flexible as it depends on whether 'more than one observer' agree 'about what they see and hear.' 'Validity' has been similarly re-interpreted. Thus 'internal validity' depends on the quality of 'match' between the observers' findings and the theories developed while 'external validity' concerns the generalisability of data (p.376/7).

Using criteria largely attributed to Lincoln and Guba (1985 and 1994) and quoted by Bryman (2008, p.700), trustworthiness is based on the degree of 'credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability' (Yusoff 2001, p.3 and Bryman 2008, p.377) found in every research project. Meanwhile the quality of trustworthiness refers to any aspect of the research in response to the question: 'Does this really mean what we claim it means?' (Bassey, 1999). Relevant to this research is the knowledge that opportunities can be built into the research design 'to test for' trustworthiness (p.3). Thus while evidence of 'credibility,' based on issues of 'internal validity' in providing a satisfactory answer to the question 'How believable are these findings?' (Bryman 2008, p.34) may be acquired through 'multiple accounts of social reality' (p.377) provided by triangulation of source and method, respondent validation, 'a process whereby a researcher provides the people on whom s/he has conducted research with an account of her/his findings and requests feedback on that account' (p.698) is also valuable.

In this research comparing the evidence from teacher interviews involved in a range of pastoral roles during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice with data from student questionnaires provides triangulation of source and method. Moreover relying on ethnographic strategies and interviews (LeCompte and Goetz,1982, quoted in Bryman 2008, p.376) 'internal validity tends to be a strength' since 'prolonged participation in the social life of a group over a long period of time allows the researcher to ensure a high level of congruence between concepts and observations.'

'External validity' or 'transferability - namely whether 'findings apply to other contexts' (p.34) or whether 'they can be generalised across social settings' (p.376), may not be possible as this investigation 'entails the intensive study of a small group or individuals sharing the same characteristics.' Therefore any qualitative data produced will be focussed on the 'contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect of the social world being studied' (p.378), making generalisation difficult but not impossible. The production of 'rich accounts of the details of the culture' or 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) provides others with what Lincoln and Guba, quoted in Bryman (p.378) refer to 'as a database for making judgements about the possible transferability of findings to other milieu.' Nevertheless problems of external validity will remain if the sample size of participant groups is small.

While 'dependability' 'parallels reliability,' raising questions of applicability in terms of whether 'the findings likely to apply at other times?' (p.34) is not really applicable in this case, 'confirmability' referring to objectivity, focussing on the degree to which 'the investigator has allowed his or her values to intrude' (p.34) is relevant and demonstrated through an audit trail (Yusoff 2001).

3.7 Ethical principles underlying this research

Any research involving children where the over-riding principle is that of 'finding the truth' along with 'the right to know' 'where matters of public interest are concerned' (Pring 2000a, p.144), must include 'the ethical virtues of openness, anonymity and confidentiality' (Tickle 2001, p.349). Thus 'covert' aspects of observation in 'naturalism' are controversial, rejected by Erikson

(1967, 1968, 1982) and Homan (1980, 1982, 1991), quoted in Pole and Morrison (2003, p.149) since researcher deception violates 'the ethical principle of informed consent' (Bryman 2008, p.692).

Having pointed out that 'ethical issues arise at a variety of stages in social research,' Bryman (2008, p.113) takes a more general view, claiming that research ethics are applied in a variety of ways, ranging from the philosophical to the practical. Interpretations range from those of universalists, like Erikson (1967), who believe that 'ethical precepts', including covert participant observation, 'should never be broken' to a case-by-case situational response where 'the end justifies the means' or possibly the researcher has 'no choice' such as Goode (1996) quoted in Bryman 2008, p.116. Further debate surrounds the concept of 'voluntary, informed consent' (McNamee 2001, p.310) and the 'conditions of informedness' (p.311) under which such consent is given.

When working with children or parents 'gaining consent, developing trust and maintaining anonymity' (p.311) are essential to the effective management of the project. However the trusted role of the researcher can conflict with that of 'gatekeeper', in that by publishing his/her findings, the researcher is speaking for the people s/he has researched. Therefore if 'ventriloquy' (p.314), a particular problem associated with studies of 'student voice,' is to be avoided the researcher must respect the voice of those whose views and values s/he claims to represent, hence the need for built in checks and safeguards like respondent validation to ensure the 'trustworthiness' of the enterprise. Moreover McNamme warns against researchers who 'utilise the data collection phase to explore issues only tangentially related to the intended research, with the potential for the abuse of private spaces' (p.311). Such behaviour may not only be unethical but affect the dynamics of the situation, with unforeseen consequences.

Homan (2001, p.336) goes on to question the ethics of student consent. Normally requested from parents or the school itself, Homan points out that while students are usually the focus of research, their personal consent is rarely sought. Highlighting the illogicality of this behaviour since 'the motives

for declining to consult child participants are complex' he acknowledges that much in this justification 'would apply equally in research with adults' (p.336). Requesting student consent, 'cover stories' (McNeill 1985 quoted by Homan p.337) may be used that sometimes involve deception, in narratives designed to encourage rather than deter participation. Thus Homan merely reiterates the interpretivist nature of the situation – that the behaviour of the researcher will ultimately affect the actions of the children and the outcome of the research even though some introductory element must occur, along with a means of gaining student consent and involvement.

Therefore bearing in mind 'the need to "protect" participants from harm' found in BERA guidelines (1992) and indentified by Pole and Morrison (2003, p.150) permission will be sought at every level, including individual permission from students before research begins. Identities including that of the school will be kept confidential and the purpose of the research explained orally and in written form to all participants. Interview evidence and preliminary conclusions will be subject to respondent verification.

Meanwhile without previous history but a friendly and fairly frequent contact with the students, an equitable working relationship might develop between them and the researcher, improving the internal and external validity of data. To counteract absorption into a student or institutional culture, compromising objectivity, this working relationship may prove ethically sound in maintaining some detachment.

3.8 Summary

This chapter considers the broader issues affecting research design, the quality of the research and its ethical basis while relating them to the research questions. Taking an ethnographic approach to case study development, the importance of mixed methods in education research is highlighted and explained. A range of sampling and research methods is applied to the research problem. Issues of representativeness together with the difficulties involved in accessing a representative sample in a short period of time emerge. Meanwhile the trustworthiness of the research is largely maintained,

so that student voice can emerge with some confidence and clarity. Working mostly with children, the ethics of honesty, anonymity and avoiding harm are paramount.

Chapter 4 – Research Findings

4.1 Introduction

The 'choice' element of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice provides each student with opportunities to specialise or diversify during Years 10 and 11. This optional curriculum takes up at least one third of each student's lessons. Negotiated in Year 9, optional courses are added to the National Curriculum for KS4 (English, Maths, Science, ICT, Citizenship, Physical Education and Religious Education) which every student is expected to follow. Thus within class size limits, every student has a 'personalised' timetable, integrated into a whole school timetabling programme.

A key element in Personalised Learning (Miliband 2004a, p.9), wider curriculum choice encouraged the introduction of a broader range of vocational and academic opportunities, accessed through different locations 'for study, the workplace or the college, not just the schoolroom' (Hargreaves 2004a, p.3). These developments anticipated the publication of DfES (2004c) 14-19 *Curriculum and Qualifications Reform: Final Report of the Working Group on 14-19 Reform,* known as the Tomlinson Report.

This chapter provides an outline of the research context and the research process, linking teacher and student evidence to Specific Research Questions (1-12).

4.2 Research purpose and strategy

Taking account of the school's geographic, social and economic setting along with the demographic makeup of the school population, an ethnographic case study approach is used to answer Specific Research Questions (SRQs 1-9). Evidence from senior members of staff presents an official view of personalisation (SRQ 1, 9) in the way KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is managed (SRQ 2). The degree of importance afforded student voice in this school in the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (SRQ 3) may reflect pressing internal and external management agendas pertinent to performativity (SRQ 6) and marketisation (SRQ 7). Accounts of specialist middle managers clarify perceptions of this process (SRQs 1-3) and

institutional perceptions of 'achievement and underachievement' (SRQs 4-8 and 12). Form Tutor (FT) interviews provide personal rather than official accounts, based on their established regular proximity to students in answer to SRQs 1-9. Taking a Critical Discourse approach to analyse the evidence generated by this interaction, specific contextual issues relating to SRQs 10-12 are addressed through student questionnaires and interviews.

4.3 The research context

In 2009 five underperforming schools in the Local Authority (LA) were threatened with being taken over by central government agencies if their examination results did not improve. Reported in the local media, this action, though mitigated by later improvements, may have contributed to the pressures on other local schools.

Located in 'the most densely populated inner city area' in the Midlands (Ofsted Inspection Report 2008, p.3) where 'over a third of the households' live 'in overcrowded conditions,' the acute poverty of local families, indicated by 39% of the student population being eligible for free school meals (Self-evaluation Form (SEF) created Feb 2007, p.5) means low achievement is always a possibility in the research school.

Nearby housing indicating environmental poverty presents the school with a number of marketing difficulties. Despite its positive, successful public image, it must rely on the local community for recruitment since the area's traditional, possibly unfounded reputation for high crime rates would deter many applications from more affluent neighbourhoods/families. Thus the school accepts 38% of its students from 'the bottom 5% of households nationally' (p.5). Upward social and economic mobility makes the school's population of 1050 students 'more fluid than most' (Ofsted Inspection Report 2008, p.4) turning pupil retention into a major issue. Local asylum seekers and recent immigrants with paid employment or successful small businesses will move their families away if/when they can.

High levels of inward mobility, currently around 22% (SEF, 2007 p.5) threaten the school's position in education league tables, while cheap local housing

attracts successive waves of immigration. The number of Black Africans, for example, mainly Somali, increased to 200 in 2010 while about 20 Afghan males, mostly unaccompanied and often traumatised asylum seekers, are fostered nearby. Some new children have little or no knowledge of English while others arrive without previous experience of education. Entering the school at random times and stages, they present a considerable challenge. Although 'all students feel well cared for and listened to, but the care for the most vulnerable is particularly strong,' 'enabling them to integrate quickly and to make good gains in achievement' (Ofsted, 2008 p.4), nevertheless further waves of immigration will follow.

The most recent is a miscellaneous group of non–English speaking Slovakian or eastern European students, possibly economic migrants, making up 1.9% of the student population. (Pre-Ofsted Inspection Report, 2007 p.7). While this number is expected to increase, 96% of all students are Muslim from a largely settled population (49.3 %) of Asian or Asian British families. Thus for 94.6% of the school population English is a second language, with over 30 other first languages spoken. Despite male students (54.8%) outnumbering females (45.2%), student achievement at KS4 'compares well' both locally and nationally (SEF, 2007 p.6) with a five A*-C rate, not including English and Maths, of 70% in 2009.

4.4 The research timetable

Outlined in Table 4.1, the research process slowly gathered momentum. Staff interviews were scheduled to accommodate teacher workload. Contact with students was adjusted to fit in with and around tutor programmes and Work Experience.

4.5 Teacher perspectives.

A brief outline of research aims with an exemplar of possible interview questions (Appendix 2) was provided in advance by email for a range of pastoral staff who had agreed to be interviewed. These people, initially associated with Year 9, would normally expect to be involved at different levels with KS3/4 wider curriculum choice.

Time	Strategy
April 2009	Headteacher letter, requesting permission to use the research school - Appendix 1
June 2009	Meeting with KS3 Manager to explain research purpose and strategies
Sept. 2009	Informal interview with KS3 Manager (not recorded). Received documentation re Options 2010
24th Sept. 2009	Open Evening for students and their parents from local primary schools
25th Sept.2009	Awards Presentation for 2008/9, rescheduled from last term due to illness
6th Nov. 2010	e-mailed first batch of teacher interviewees to confirm arrangements and forward outline of interview questions – Appendix 2
11th Nov. 2009	Recorded interviews with KS3 Manager, two Yr. 9 Form Tutors and Yr. 9 Head of Year
13th Nov. 2009	Interview with Headteacher
19th Nov. 2009	Interviews with Head of Language Support and Assistant Head in Charge of Inclusion
20th Nov. 2009	Met Form Tutor whose Yr. 10 tutees might provide a suitable sample for questionnaire etc. Agreed to support Yr. 11Sociology teaching group
26th Nov. 2009	Student and parent 'permission to be interviewed' letters – Appendix 3
3rd Dec. 2009	Piloted Student questionnaires - Appendix 4
10th Dec. 2009	Questionnaires handed out to Yr. 10 Tutor Group - Appendix 5
15th Dec. 2009	Interview with male Yr. 10 Form Tutor
17th Dec. 2009	Questionnaires handed out to a second Yr. 10 Tutor Group
18th Dec. 2009	Questionnaire respondent 'mop up'
7th Jan. 2010	Interview with female Yr. 10 Form Tutor
8th Jan. 2010	Interview with KS4 Manager
12th Jan. 2010	Interview with Head of Learning Support
15th -18th Jan. 2010	Analysis of student data from questionnaires
21st Jan–4th March 2010	Individual student interviews taking place during Tutor Time

Table 4.1 Research log

Early interviews revealed however that current Year 9 pastoral staff were new to their roles. Thus it seemed sensible to focus on Year 10 where Form Tutors had recent experience and were ready to reflect/ comment on what they knew of the management process.

4.5.1 Institutional perspectives on personalisation (SRQ 1)

Recognising that the Headteacher's vision of personalisation is central to school policy, determining its importance and meaning, it seemed sensible to begin by interviewing him. Regarding personalisation as a morally justified strategy with a crucial role in the improvement of student achievement, the headteacher's view is justified by the extreme poverty of the area. Thus:

'In terms of our philosophy, our starting point is maximising our achievement together' so that *'if personalisation is part of the package that helps to raise achievement then we'll do it.'*

Emphasising the moral imperative underlying this statement, he added:

'I suppose where we come from as a school and I think the majority of the staff by far buy into this view, is that every single student, regardless of their background, regardless of their ability, deserves personalisation.'

He later described the personalising process in education as a remedial tool, but one of several attainment raising strategies:

'We have a look at the whole child and say, 'Right, in order for that child to succeed, you need to do this, you need to do that.' 'You have to work out the appropriate approach so that the child will end up with a good set of qualifications.'

Thus personalisation is one of the '*little pieces of a jigsaw'* currently available to facilitate social and economic mobility. As a member of the Senior Management Team, the KS3 Manager, responsible for the delivery of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice holds similar views:

'Personalisation is not just about keeping children happy but it's about providing them with what they need.'

The KS3 Manager explained institutional interpretations of the stakeholder role as:

'they [the students] *perceive, they believe that they have some control over processes* [like their KS3/4 option choices] *which indeed they have. And when a student body realises that there is some ownership of what they choose and what actually happens they feel a lot more involved. Being involved means personalisation.'*

The product of stakeholder participation is raised achievement. Benefitting both the school and student, improved attainment is equated with personal development, the by-product of increased stakeholder satisfaction so that:

'it means that when it comes to actually studying the subjects we have a much better chance of them being successful and, dare I say, enjoying what they are doing.'

Another member of the Senior Management Team (SMT), the Inclusion Manager held a more democratic view of personalisation. Raised attainment was important but not if it limited students' range and freedom of choice. She asserted that:

'A-C results are not a factor to judge on. A-C is completely irrelevant. I would want to look at the residual graphs. What are those children capable of achieving elsewhere in the curriculum? I would guess if it was a Design subject it is quite possible that lower achieving students may have chosen it because they are artistic as opposed to academic. And they may not have got a C and what's wrong with that if that's what they enjoy and that is their level? If that's what they are getting across the board, that subject should not be penalised because it's attracting those kinds of children.'

The KS4 Manager, also a member of SMT took a different view. Responsible for KS4 examination results, which determine the school's position in education performance league tables, he regarded *'freedom of choice as a definition of personalisation,'* in the context of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice as *'very narrow.'* Instead he favoured a more managed approach, controlling access through improved student information and guidance. He believed this

would avoid many *'pastoral problems'* from the previous year where some Year 10 students had experienced adjustment problems, especially with further education courses. Although current policies allowed students to change options up to the end of Year 10, this actually undercut KS4 examination outcomes because students making late changes had less than two years to catch up.

Although evidence from four senior managers reveals a common investment in personalisation, linked to raised achievement and shaped by individual management roles, the absence of a clear, commonly understood definition, led the Inclusion Manager to reflect that the importance of personalisation was being eroded by the pressure to improve student outcomes. Thus, in the context of underachieving courses she said:

'I would have thought it was better not to just wipe a subject out as an option, because you are taking away a choice for children.'

Questioner: And not only that but a choice for children with different abilities?

Inclusion manager: *'Absolutely - which is not personalisation at all!'*

Questioner: There is a conflict of interests then?

Inclusion manager: *'Yes….but everyone is very well meaning within it. No one is being malicious in that agenda……... the KS3 Manager particularly is very driven in letting the children have a choice, letting them have some empowerment over their own destiny. But I think some other people here would say 'No, we should dictate more where they go to.'*

4.5.2 Management strategies for the delivery of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (SRQ 2)

Every year the decision-making process begins with a long list of possible 'options' to which the students can add further subjects/courses. The list is then revised so that staff can be recruited to provide some of these new courses. Those that can be covered, like Law and Psychology GCSEs introduced in 2009 are then included in a first round of choices. Every student

selects three 'options' or courses from several Option blocks. The returns are sent via the Form Tutor to the KS3 Manager.

Student names are used to compile subject lists and class sizes which the KS3 Manager then firms up into a Year 10 timetable. If proposals are not compatible with the timetable, where class sizes are too small (with less than eight students) or over-subscribed, then students are asked to reconsider, making second and sometimes third 'rounds' of choices necessary. This process normally carried out between January and the end of February may run into late June.

If students are unhappy with their choices for any reason during Year 10, because of personalisation, they can opt into another subject. Students wishing to move to a very popular subject like Business Studies or ICT must negotiate an exchange with another student beforehand however. This system has been introduced, developed and managed by one person alone. Although responsible to the Senior Management Team, the KS3 Manager oversees its delivery at every stage, leading him to claim:

'KS3/4 options? I am the person who organises it. I am in control of it and I manage the Option Process from start to finish. From the drawing up of the possible subjects the students might have available to them to the introduction of the subjects giving them information via a presentation and a booklet, to managing the team of staff who work with the children and managing the option choices once they are made – so I have complete control over the entire process, working through a team of staff.'

Interpreting personalisation firstly in terms of the breadth of choice on offer to students (currently standing at forty one course options, from which students pick three) he claimed personalisation in the context of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice involved a respect for students' democratic rights which for him meant:

'every child getting their first choice - the subject they want to do. The only circumstance where this would not happen is if they were the only person to do that' [make a particular choice] *'and then the subject would not be put into*

the options in the second round' thus *'first choice is guaranteed and has been for the past four years since I've been in charge.'*

The KS3 Manager regarded the current procedure as providing *'a very, very fair system.'*

Expecting to find that the Head of Year 9 would nevertheless take a leading role, by mid-November she seemed unconcerned despite it being '*the first year that I've ever done Head of Year things with the Options.'*

Unsure of what happened next, she explained:

'I know that I will have some sort of input into maybe looking at how we set them [the Options] *out but how much input I don't actually know yet. It might be something that I get asked an opinion on and then it might not actually go ahead since obviously they* [the KS3 Manager] *know what they are doing far more than I do. So I would be there more in an advisory role for the students and tutors, to ensure that the tutors persuade the students to fill in the forms on time or that I can answer any questions for them. So it's an advisory thing more than anything else.'*

When asked how this might operate, she confirmed that:

'Where it gets fed down from the VP [KS3 Manager] *to us and the students, I am then there for the tutors in a managing position for them, making sure they do things on time with the students. And then if there are any queries they can come through to me or the VP and we sort it out that way.'*

She does have some insight into procedures however, explaining 'Practice Choice' and how it works:

'Yes, they get a Practice Choice, and then these [students' choices] *are sorted by the Vice Principal. Their responses are then looked at in terms of 'What do they like? Will these fit into the Options when the VP* [KS3 Manager] *makes the proper Option Blocks? And I think he tries to fit the final version round the majority. Then it's their proper choices, and hopefully it should work but I don't expect it fits for every student.'*

Pointing out the difficulties for Design students, she explained not everyone always receives first choices:

'so, say it's the Design thing they really enjoy doing, they can only pick one design option. So even if they like Art, DT, cooking, they can only pick one. That's how it has been before. Whether they are going to change that this year or not, but that's generally how it has been.'

Interviews with Year 9 Form Tutors were similarly revealing. The absence of information, complete trust in and dependence on the KS3 Manager's leadership were characteristic. While a male Form Tutor (FT) was in his first year of teaching and therefore '*knew nothing,'* a female FT had some relevant though indirect experience of procedures:

'It's the first time I've been going through Options but I did have to cover a group once before, quite interestingly, when the students were applying to colleges. I worked quite closely with Connexions and that's about it at the moment.'

She talked about the importance of '*trust'* in her situation as she at least had been with her Tutor Group since Year 7, **'***and I like the children very much.'* Therefore she thought:

'it is very important that I get to know them while they learn they can trust me. I can only speak about my own form but I'd like to think that as a result, I will have quite an effect on their decisions. When I think back to when I was at school, there is a lot more choice [now] *and the students need to talk it through with someone they trust.'*

Interviews with Year 10 Form Tutors confirmed this view. Describing how he tried to help, the male Year 10 Form Tutor recalled:

'We got to a stage last year where one or two students in my class wanted to become doctors. So I sat them down individually. We went through the Options and I tried to give them a brief idea with things like, so you're a high achiever, then you've got to be doing this or that. So now they've got a more rounded idea of how to approach things.'

In summary, this evidence reveals much about the way access to KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is managed. Huge inequalities in power and knowledge exist between various players in the management structure, demonstrated in Figure 4.1.

The Head

Key Stage 3 Manager

Head of Year 9

Year 9 Form Tutors

Year 9 Students
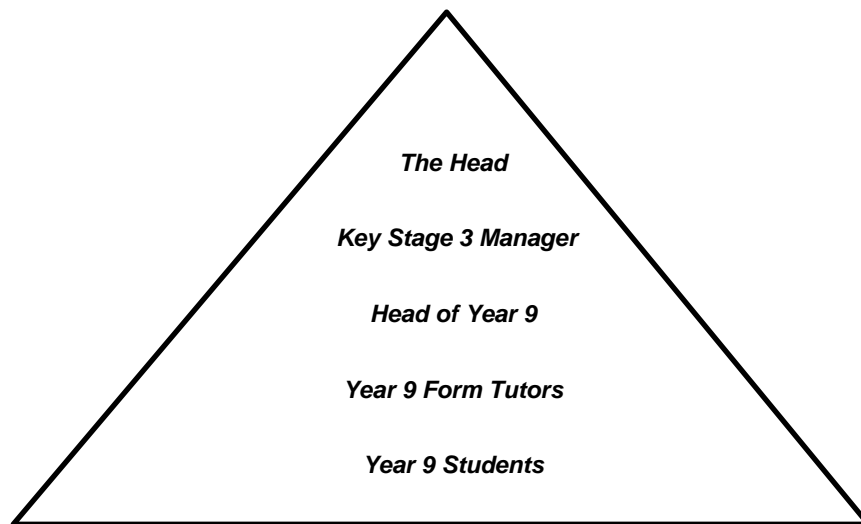
Figure 4.1 Management structure of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice

4.5.3 Teacher perceptions of personalisation and students' freedom of choice during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (SRQ 3)

A range of views exist.

The KS4 Manager wanted to improve the quality of information available so that students might make *'right choices for themselves through a good process of discussion and consultation with parents, looking and finding things on line (through research etc.) and obviously help from within the curriculum.'*

Having dealt with pastoral problems in the past arising from misinformation or the lack of accurate information about courses and subjects, the KS4 Manager believed each personalised choice should be handled with more care than currently afforded by a '*first choice system.*' Convinced that improving the quality of advice or information would not only maximise achievement but increase student empowerment, he felt this approach might be particularly advantageous for newly arrived immigrants.

As a middle manager, the Head of Language Support explained what personalisation meant for recently arrived non-English speakers who were without previous educational experience. When faced with KS3/4 wider curriculum choices, it was her job to minimise the effect of these inequalities. Thus her team tried to:

'have somebody to speak to them in their own home language. Clearly that is easier. We do have working now as part of Language Support a Bengali speaker because it was an issue early on that there was nobody on the staff who was an adult who spoke Bengali.'

With an emphasis on using adults rather than older siblings, *'I personally do not think it's appropriate to use other students as interpreters because I think that somehow demeans the students themselves. This* [process of deciding which new courses to take] *should be an informed choice where an adult helps them.'*

Budgets restrict access to extreme minority languages, despite the Local Authority having a bank of people to draw on, but

'the cheapest is £28.00 per hour plus VAT and the most expensive can be £45.00 per hour plus VAT….. so we try to do things 'in house' when we can but if it simply isn't appropriate we do buy in [Local Authority language support].'

Every student known to Language Support, about 10% of the school population, '*has a named adult whom they meet with once a term'* to make their school experience more equitable. These consultations also cover KS3/4 wider curriculum choice but generally she feels the process is too rushed for students new to studying in this country because:

'students need to think about things, take information on board, go away again, have the opportunity to come back and ask a few more questions, go away again and come back again. So ideally I think it probably needs 3 or 4 steps in it,' but *'we don't have that luxury.'*

Surprisingly the Language Support Manager felt early language learners without previous education benefitted more from performativity than

personalisation. Scrutiny of their achievement levels may have highlighted specific learning difficulties, leading to the allocation of additional finance, allowing the Language Support faculty to develop homework clubs, make better use of school-based translators and keep an 'open door policy' for these children.

The Head of Learning Support, another middle manager responsible for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), identified aspects of personalisation inherent in SEN students' experience of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. Apparently they go through

'exactly the same procedure, exactly the same forms and exactly the same assemblies as every other child in this school.'

Thus from the outset, personalisation meant equality, respecting student voice and choice. However,

'if we know we have a particular student with particular difficulties choosing something they are obviously not going to be able to access, we discuss it with them because of their individual needs. So we're very much on the case, based on the fact that the child should be able to access what they want on a first choice basis. But we do have instances where that is not able to happen, either individually or with support from the LS Assistants, however they all begin on a level playing field.'

From a transcript of this interview (Appendix 6), the modification of choices, where student decisions, like the boy with learning difficulties who wanted to be a vet, were inappropriate, was achieved through student realisation, based on discussion with parents and Form Tutors. Sometimes this was the result of trial and error, based on the student recognising their own limitations. Providing another illustration, she recalled a member

'of current Yr. 11 with learning disability and visual impairment, involving tunnel vision who wanted to take up a motor engineering course at College. The main problem was that he wanted to access the college independently, as he thought he was too grown up to accept the presence of an accompanying Learning Support Assistant. Parents were extremely

concerned. A long debate followed. He finally realised for himself that travelling across [this city] *could be hazardous and the course might not be suitable given his disabilities, so he looked at Food Technology, deciding he'd always enjoyed it and took that instead.'*

Thus perceptions of 'need' rather than ability were used to shape student choices once they had been made. The personalisation process supported this view, protecting and maintaining student self-esteem rather than compromising it. These students were:

'supported through filling in the forms and going through the Option Booklets. They are encouraged to speak to parents and if they've no idea what they want to do as a career, we always advise them to consider the subjects they really enjoy, saying, well, if you've got to study this subject for the next two years and you've not got a clue, don't choose something you'll hate because once you're in it, you've got to do it. So we very much look into individual needs and try to include parents in this too.'

Thus while personalisation supports students' freedom of choice during KS3/4 Options, particularly where individuals are already disadvantaged, performativity may also have a positive role based on individual needs.

4.5.4 The School's current record on student attainment (SRQ 5)

After government policy changes (DfES 2005) the results of 70% 5 A*-Cs in 2009 were affected by the inclusion of English and Mathematics GCSE, reducing them to 34%, putting the school just above National Challenge criteria of 30% introduced in June 2008.

4.5.5 Problems facing the school in meeting future targets (SRQ 6)

According to the Headteacher these are *'low prior attainment,' 'the language barrier'* due to recent immigration, the natural tendency for local families to use home languages and the heavy concentration of minority groups in the community, marginalising the use of spoken English.

For the KS3 Manager, challenges arise from a student population that *'is continually evolving…..*[and] *changing.'*

While the Headteacher is confident the policies he has introduced to target small groups of underachievers will raise levels of achievement particularly in English, he feels:

'I could do a whole range of things at this school to increase our 5 A*- C rate, or our 5 A-C including English and Maths, but this may be at the cost of other things that I think as a school we value.'

Although:

'there's pressure to raise a particular threshold - that never goes away - but if I was a National Challenge School, the pressure would be very different. Then there would be massive pressure to raise the 5 A*-C rate above 30%, and a Head in that situation might have to compromise some beliefs. It's easy to sit here smugly and say, well you know, I wouldn't do some of these things but in different circumstances, maybe I would. I don't know.'

4.5.6 The success of current interpretations of personalisation during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice in motivating students (SRQ 7)

The KS3 Manager provided several illustrations of the way institutional interpretations of personalisation during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice motivated students. Firstly:

'the attendance of last year's Yr.11 was over 95% which is the highest of the year groups in this school.'

Secondly: *'70% of our students got 5 A*-Cs in 2009. That is a good statistic for an inner city school but you have to match it up with ten years ago and the figure being less than 20%.'* Four years ago *'we were too restrictive in our practices and as a result there were disappointing results and the students weren't accessing a full curriculum because quite often when they weren't successful in a subject, one and a half years down the line they actually wouldn't be entered for the exam.'*

Currently *'our school has the lowest NEET rate* [Not in education, employment or training] *in the city which means we have the highest staying on rate,'* so *'in*

nearly every case [our children] '*go on to education in one of the colleges in town.*'

Finally '*there is a higher than average, from comparable schools, rate* [of students] *going into HE* [Higher Education].'

Even the KS4 Manager admits current practices during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice may have improved student motivation, when he says: '*Well clearly the results that we have suggest that this might be true.*'

The Headteacher qualifies this assertion, arguing that other factors are involved, such as:

'*the support and guidance that's given to them* [the students]. *So they're not actually, a lot of the time, making these choices without asking the views of other people……and there's always a Parents' Evening just before the students make their Options choices so they can come along to the Parents' Evening and talk about the subjects and the choices for them.*'

4.5.7 Institutional reconciliation of personalisation with performativity (SRQ 8)

The school has no problem reconciling personalisation with performativity. Situated in an area of extreme deprivation, where parents have 'aspirational' values, the school's aims fit closely with those of Muslim families who value educational achievement as a route whereby their children progress to greater material and economic security. The Inclusion Manager identified with this view:

'*Everything in education tells you that if somebody* [a student] *is happy, then they achieve more…… If you are happy doing what you wanted to do, then you're going to be interested in it. If you're not happy and no matter how much we say this is a course you need to do well from my own children's point of view, and including myself as a parent, I steered my children or I tried to and it doesn't really work, not if they don't really want to do it*' confirming the KS3 Manager's view that:

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'if children end up doing what they want to do [resulting from the way KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is currently managed] *they will be more favourably disposed towards it. They'll be more enthusiastic. They will attend lessons and attend days at school and they will achieve more and they will get better result.'*

For the Headteacher, there is no tension between performativity and personalisation since both have a moral purpose, tied to inclusion, which he defines as:

'Not just about being inclusive in school but about being inclusive in society. ….we are being more inclusive if we send our students away at the end of their time with us with a good set of GCSEs that allows them to take the next steps as learners and increase their life chances.'

Describing his role in this process as *'ensuring the priorities are right for the school in maximising student achievement,'* he justifies

'this idea of pressure on schools to get results, well to a certain extent there is pressure on students to get results too because that is what inclusion is about. Some of our children here are competing on an uneven playing field and unless they get qualifications, nobody [meaning no employer/further education college/university] *is going to look at them.'*

4.6 Summary

Teacher interview evidence demonstrates the complexity of issues involved in the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, balancing potentially conflicting attainment raising pressures regardless of circumstance, student background and potential, while simultaneously developing personalisation 'equitably' across the school. These issues are resolved democratically as part of inclusion. Although *'universal guaranteed first choice'* may be instilled in student's beliefs when this may not always be possible, nevertheless student voice is respected. Student choice remains the ideal for accessing the optional curriculum. Raised achievement acquires ethical justification through its importance in children's lives and in the maintenance of community life.

Moreover the school's future depends on it. To evaluate the trustworthiness of this account, a consumer view is required.

4.7 Student Evidence

Issues emerged from teacher interviews, informing questions in the student questionnaire (Appendix 5) and subsequent interviews. Attempting to elicit the 'message' behind the 'voice,' exposing the reality of student experience (SRQ 9), the trustworthiness of student questionnaire data from a sample of sixty students was cross checked against recordings of twenty qualitative student interviews, while the credibility of interview data was enhanced by respondent validation to address SRQ 10.

As an expression of student voice the questionnaire and interview data raised several interesting points, since student voice in this context was not intended as a means of legitimising a neo-liberal education policy (Arnot and Reay 2007, p.311) but as a means of investigating the first-hand experience of students who had been involved in a 'pedagogic encounter' engineered by powerful adults. A student perspective is invaluable in assessing the trustworthiness of data from teacher interviews through triangulation of source and method. Involving students' understanding of 'power and control' (p.312) during KS3/4 decision-making process, the value of questionnaire data may be limited since it ignores 'the inequalities of power relationships' between individuals in the sample (p.313). Producing quantitative data, however, its analysis is useful in assessing qualitative interview data from teachers.

Where distinctions can be made between 'voice' and 'message' (p.316) from various accounts, a situational analysis of decision-making and problem-solving involved in wider curriculum choice becomes possible, reflecting the complexity of students' social identities, power relationships and communication skills. Thus despite assurances of an equitable outcome, as experienced Yr. 9 students, the self-image of these respondents will have already been affected by teacher assessment of their potential through Form Tutor mentoring, school reports and feedback from parents' evenings, leading the majority of students to 'make the right choices for themselves' (KS4 Manager interview). Nevertheless, students' perception of adults including the

researcher may infuse this investigation with inequalities affecting data quality.

Although student understanding of the rules involved in the KS3/4 decision-making process was framed by information delivered during Yr. 9 assemblies and preparation exercises (SPF, TT and the PDP Unit) which overall they claimed to enjoy, their views on this preparatory experience could potentially 'offer insights' (p.318) into institutional interpretations of their student role – as children in need of control or co-producers/stakeholders, responsible for their own decisions.

4.8. Student questionnaire data

Question 1 provided an identity code. Students who had given permission to be interviewed could subsequently recognise their own questionnaire responses. Answers to Question 2 found in Table 4.2 demonstrate the age range within the sample, providing an easy opening question and encouraging participation. Four students failed to answer.

14 yrs.	**15 yrs.**
37 students (total)	19 students (total)
% sample - 61.6%	% sample – 31.6%

Table 4.2 Question 2: Age of Student Sample

Given that recent language acquisition affects 10% of the school population leading to underachievement, it was important to ascertain the questionnaire sample's length of residency in the UK as an indicator of representativeness. Thus responses to Question 3 in Table 4.3 revealed 9.9% of the sample had lived here for less than three years. In this area at least, the questionnaire sample was representative.

	Percentage sample of 14-15 year olds (37 students)	Percentage sample of 15 year olds (19)	NK sample 4 students didn't put in their age.	Percentage sample of all students (60)
Less than one year	nil	nil	25% 1 student	1.6 %
1-2 years	8.1% 3 students	nil	nil	5.0%
2-3 years	2.7% 1 student		25% 1 student	3.3%
3-4 years	2.7% 1 student	5.2%1 student	nil	3.3%
4-5 years	2.7% 1 student	nil	nil	1.6%
5-6 years	5.4% 2 students	5.2% 1 student	25% 1 student	6.6%
6-7 years	5.4% 2 students	5.2% 1 student	Nil	5.0%
7-8 years	8.1% 3 students	Nil	Nil	5.0%
8-9 years	2.7% 1 student	Nil	Nil	1.6%
9-10 years	Nil	Nil	25% 1 student	1.6%
10-11 years	13.5% 5 students	10.5% 2 students	nil	11.67%
11-12 years	5.4% 2 students	nil	nil	3.3%
14-15 years	8.1% 3 students	5.2% 1 student	nil	5.0%
Entire life	29.7% 11 students	57.8% 11 students	nil	36.7%
Totals	37 students	18 students (1 response missing)	4 students	59 students (1 response)

Table 4.3 Question 3: Length of stay in UK

Time in years	Less than 1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4-5	N/A	Total
Total no. of 14 year olds	0	3	3	1	29	1	37
Total no. of 15 year olds	1	1	1	3	11	2	19
Total no. of incorrect responses	2	0	0	0	2	0	4
Overall total	3	4	4	4	42	3	60

Table 4.4 Question 4: Attendance Period at the research school

Data from Table 4.4 produced by Question 4 concerned the period of attendance at the research school. This was relevant in establishing the

representativeness of the questionnaire sample and whether the sample data would be compatible with the secondary data found in the SEF document (2007, p.6). Of particular interest was whether the sample would reflect similar 'high levels of turbulence' (22%) alongside a 'largely settled' local population.

While the maximum period these students might have attended was just over four years, 11.6% of the sample had attended for less than two years. The vast majority, 70%, had attended for 4-5 years. 5% of responses were unclear. Although these percentages were not as closely parallel with official data, nevertheless turbulence would not be consistent across age or tutor groups. The data from Question 4 does show inward mobility however alongside a settled population. There was no obvious correlation between student length of stay and student age. Having established a basis for generalising from student data to the school as a whole, it seemed reasonable to test the validity of the KS3 Manager's repeated claim (SRQ 10) that'100%' of Year 9 students 'get their first choices.'

First Choice	Yes	No	Total
Total	38	22	60

Table 4.5 Question 5: Student access to first choices

Student responses to Question 5 indicated whether the student sample were able to have their first choices in all three option blocks (SRQ 9). Demonstrated in Table 4.5, 22 students (37% of the sample) claimed they were denied their first choices, while 38 students (63% of the sample) received first choices. Realising this data might not be accurate due to my misunderstanding the KS3 Manager's claim, students misunderstanding the question, student error or the desire to complain or deliberate misrepresentation of evidence, certain validation strategies would be needed to ascertain trustworthiness. This might emerge from the reasons given to students for refusals.

Data from Question 6 (Table 4.6) demonstrated that of the 22 students who did not get their first choices, timetabling and oversubscription accounted for only 12 out of 22 cases (SRQ 10). Nevertheless this sample was quite small.

Reason given	Frequency
1. No reason given by student	3
2. Student doesn't know	1
3. Timetabling issues	4
4. Subjects were oversubscribed	8
5. Choice turned down	1
6. Form Tutor lost the form	1
7. Offered further choices	1
8. Admission late in the school year	1
9. Chosen by staff on behalf of the student	2
Total	**22**

Table 4.6. Question 6: Reasons for denial of student choice

Of the remaining ten students, three were not given a reason, while two were re-allocated by a staff member. Other reasons were vague, with students claiming they did not know why they had been turned down or offered alternatives. One student even maintained the Form Tutor had lost their form. Only one student knew why he had not been allocated his first choice. As a late admission to Year 9, he realised most popular options would probably be filled long before he arrived.

Although these students could not provide any supporting evidence, not one of the reasons they had been given was negotiable, not even the official reasons like timetabling and over-subscription. As impersonal factors beyond the student's control, they indicate further engagement in 'choice-taking' would be necessary.

Depending on student responses to Question 6, Question 7 should have revealed any hidden criteria used by pastoral managers in the allocation of student choices to particular options. The range of courses chosen by sixty students however made the significance of any hidden criteria impossible to

identify. Clarification was needed through informal interviews with a much smaller sample.

Question 8 requested information about the influences on option choices. These factors varied in substance and degree between those receiving first choices (Table 4.7) and those denied them (Table 4.8).

Option Influences (38 students)	Frequency	Expressed as a percentage
1. Family's wishes	3	8%
2. Career Choice	20	53%
3. Form Tutor advice	7	18%
4. Enjoyed the subject	17	45%
5. Subject teacher advice	0	0
6. Good relationship with subject teacher	1	3%
7. Connexions advice	1	3%
8. Preferred teaching style	1	3%
9. Fancied something new	7	18%

Table 4.7. Question 8: Influences on choice where student received first choices.

Where students received first choices, career aspirations (53%) and subject enjoyment (45%) were crucial while 18% claimed Form Tutor advice and the fact that they 'fancied something new' were influential. Family influence was marginalised at 8%, while the importance of Connexions advice, good teacher/pupil relations and preferred teaching styles proved unimportant. Some students gave only one reason while others gave several so these frequencies do not correlate with the number of students.

The final outcome for students denied first choices had some features of an informally negotiated settlement. Student choice, largely determined by novelty (31%) and subject enjoyment (54%) was possibly the result of discussion with family (9%), subject teacher advice (9%) and pastoral guidance from Form Tutors (4%). Although the advice to 'choose something they (the students) enjoy,' illustrated in Appendix 6, was often used, choosing

'something that supports' 'what they want to do as a career' also remained a potent influence.

Option Influences (22 students)	Frequency	Expressed as a percentage
1. Family's wishes	2	9%
2. Career Choice	8	36%
3. Form Tutor advice	1	4%
4. Enjoyed the subject	12	54%
5. Subject teacher advice	2	9%
6. Good relationship with subject teacher	0	0
7. Connexions advice	0	0
8. Preferred teaching style	1	4%
9. Fancied something new	7	31%
10. Other	0	0

Table 4.8. Question 8: Influences on choice for students denied first choices.

Generally students receiving first choices were significantly more career-oriented while those denied their first choices valued enjoyment and enterprise in their final decisions. Some students gave only one reason while others gave several so the frequencies fail to correlate with the number of students. Two students copied each other's answers, increasing the unreliability of this evidence.

Question 9 required students to assess the relative importance the influences identified in response to Question 8 had on KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. Data was unclear however and would need clarification in student interviews.

Exploring the significance of preparation for students leading up to decision-making meant they were asked to evaluate the usefulness of each source. Beginning with the most broadly based training manual, the Progress File, Achievement Planner (2002) frequently known and later referred to as the Student Progress File (SPF) this student support material might have a role in preparing students for self-surveillance, as part of the stakeholder role in

decision-making identified by Rose and Miller (1992). Students accepted for first choices might feel more positively about its usefulness than those denied first choices. Thus Question 10 asked on a simple 'yes/no' basis whether students felt the units covered in tutor time using the Student Progress File were helpful in choosing subjects/courses or not? Data in Table 4.9 revealed positive responses from 41 out of 60 students – with apparent consensus between those who received first choices and those who did not.

	Yes	No	N/A	Total
First choices	26 (68%)	8 (21%)	4 (10%)	38 answers
Denied first choice	15 (68%)	4 (18%)	3 (14%)	22 answers

Table 4.9 Question 11: Evaluation of the Student Progress File

Data from Question 11 addressed the usefulness of the school's Personal Development Programme (Career Planning and Option Choices Unit). Used to prepare students for the school's management process during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, its helpfulness was evaluated on a scale of 1-5, where 1 implies excellence and 5 suggests dissatisfaction. Table 4.10 reveals generally lower levels of satisfaction with this Unit among students not receiving their first choices.

Indicating quality of student experience	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	N/A
Accessing first choices (38 students)	4 10%	15 39%	11 29%	4 10%	0	4 10%
Denied first choices (22 students)	1 4%	8 36%	4 18%	3 14%	5 23%	1 4%

Table 4.10. Question 11: Evaluation of Personal Development Programme (Career Planning and Option Choices Unit)

While the data from Question 11 could simply reflect student disappointment, Question 12 addressed student satisfaction with the final outcome of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. Data from Table 4.11 shows high levels of student satisfaction, regardless of first or later choices.

	Complete satisfaction with all options	Dissatisfaction with one option choice	Dissatisfaction with two option choices
100% First choice	85% (32/38)	15% (6/38)	Nil
Denied first choice	91% (20/22)	4% (1/22)	4% (1/22)
Total	82% of total sample (49/60)	89% of those dissatisfied (8/9)	11% of those dissatisfied (1/9)

Table 4.11. Question 12: Evaluation of current outcomes

The questionnaire data therefore provides evidence of student experience (SRQ 9) providing a dialogue (SRQ 10) with pastoral accounts of personalisation during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice in 2009.

4.9 Summary

A sizeable proportion of a reasonably representative student sample did not feel their freedom of choice in accessing the KS4 optional curriculum had been fulfilled in the way the KS3 Manager had promised (SRQ 10). Reflecting on the trustworthiness of student evidence, this response could represent different interpretations of the situation, or even respondent error. There would be to be gained from deliberately providing misinformation. Allowing for respondent error through carelessness, a sizeable number of students must still have been denied first choices. Thus for a minority of students, timetabling and oversubscription did not apparently explain the need to repeat the decision-making process.

Why then were they all so satisfied with the final outcome? For those students whose first choices had been accepted and who tended to be more career-oriented, satisfaction might follow from taking the 'next steps' in pursuing their goals. Alternatively students required to repeat the procedure probably had more pastoral support. Providing reassurance, extra time for thought and individual attention probably helped to justify second or third choices in students' minds (SRQ 9).

4.10 Student interviews

A convenience sample (Bryman 2008, p.182) of twenty student volunteers, as a sub-group of the questionnaire sample who, together with their parents, had given permission for a recorded interview to take place, were subjected to one brief informal interview.

The gender ratio of this sample, nine males to eleven females, was not representative of the school, where males outnumber females. All students except one were Muslim. Most were recent immigrants. Only one child had no previous experience of education while three others were early language learners. Some had been born here into large immigrant families. Many were only temporarily part of an underclass as their parents had professional backgrounds before wars, economic necessity and/or social disruption brought them here. Their parents, already well-educated, had high expectations of their children. Some, including a student from Bangladesh, came from poorer families, where education was also valued. Apprenticeships rather than university were more likely to be sought on leaving school.

Using the student questionnaire as stimulus, individuals were asked about ethnicity, family size, birth order, reasons for living in this area and for their original choices, their views on the materials used in preparation for decision-making and degree of satisfaction with the outcome. As young people talking to an adult, previously unknown to them with a recording device clearly visible, the students' ability to relax varied considerably. Within each interview some answers were short while others sparked a more detailed response. Indeed some questions still required only 'yes/no' answers.

For a number of reasons some silences did occur. These could have been the result of students trying to recall information (Appendix 7: Interview with Student 9), embarrassment (of the student, the interviewer or both) leading to the interviewer filling in these silences (Student 18), or because the interviews were conducted in strange rooms, with other adults present who were unknown to the interviewer but possibly not to the student (Student 9). Thus these interviews may have lacked some ecological validity. Moreover students might have regarded the interviewer as an authority figure. Information could

not be corroborated by Form Tutors as this would represent a breach of trust. Nevertheless as evidence of student experience (SRQ 9) these interviews helped to clarify student/management negotiations, demonstrating the aspirational values of the family, the supportive role of the Form Tutor and the value of the preparation units.

Student interviews uncovered errors in the questionnaire data concerning SRQ 9. One very able girl, Student 8, for example, admitted in the interview that she had progressed through four different options before settling on her final choice. In the questionnaire however she insisted she had accessed her first choices. Outlining the rationale behind her decision-making, she had been *'confused about careers,'* and was temporarily influenced by a friend before settling on her final decision. Guided through this lengthy process by her Form Tutor, in whom she had deep trust, she expressed her delight in achieving a satisfactory outcome from this process:

'*every time I wanted to change my options I went to him and talked to him because he's a really open Form Tutor….. He's a very good Form Tutor, you know. He gives very good advice.'*

From his questionnaire, Student 17 claimed to have received his first choices when this was only partially accurate. Opting for the Diploma in Engineering, he was accepted but also '*picked IT. I couldn't do IT because it was already in Diploma in Engineering so I had to pick from other subjects, so I picked Spanish,'* '*because there were no other real, good options left because they were all taken and this was the best out of all of them.'* As an 'achiever,' he had the ability to cope with a foreign language and so his decision had not been challenged. Rationalising this situation, Student 17 claimed this particular choice might prove useful in fulfilling his personal aim of travelling.

As an underachiever, Student 1, claimed in the questionnaire to have been refused his first choices as a result of *'a timetable clash.'* Possibly a 'face-saving' strategy, he later admitted in the interview that he *'quit'* his first option, the Diploma in Engineering *'at the beginning'* because he felt it was *'too hard.'* He justified this decision because *'if you fail one GCSE* [or Diploma Unit] *you fail the whole thing'* so he *'thought it was better to get two GCSEs rather than*

nothing.' Thus he changed his options *'because he fancied something new.'* However his account of the timetabling issue was entirely fictional. Instead of blocking him, as might be implied by the notion of a 'timetable clash,' the KS3 Manager had allowed this student's autonomy to remain intact (SRQ 11). He may even have helped Student 1 achieve the changes he wanted when doubts set in. However there was no indication of this from the student questionnaire – only that Student 1 was now confident and happy with the outcome. Moreover addressing SRQ 11, evidence from this student interview showed that by avoiding failure in Engineering, Student 1's current options might lead to some success. Thus while these changes could be interpreted as the product of an underlying results-driven agenda, personalisation, based on student need, may have also determined the KS3 Manager's role in this matter.

Question 5 about the management of other student decisions had been answered accurately by most students although outcomes varied considerably. For example, as an underachiever with language and learning difficulties, the denial of first choices for Student 11 might have been expected when this was not the case. All three choices were accepted, and while this outcome might have been the result of personalisation, other factors may have come into consideration. She claimed her decision had been based on Form Tutor advice to do *'what you're good at or choose something new,'* shaped by career choice. She wanted to travel *'round the world'* as a journalist. For a Somali female from a strict Muslim family living in an impoverished area, this outcome seemed improbable. Moreover she had opted for Geography, Media Studies and Sociology, subjects requiring excellent literacy skills. Justifying her choice with the comment that her *'father thinks that this* [combination of courses] *is a good choice,'* it later emerged from the pastoral support team that this parent was extremely vocal, confrontational and frequently in school – factors that might have influenced negotiations.

Student 15 may have been accepted for all her course options for more conventional reasons. Another underachiever, following in the wake of her older sister who nurses adults, Student 15 wanted to become a children's

nurse. The decision to study Double Health and Social Care, which she enjoys, with Business Studies as *'something new'* was for her, a strictly logical process. She *'just'* liked *'working with children.'* Her family told her *'to do Health and Social Care'* but she was specifically recruited by the subject teacher rather than following Form Tutor advice (SRQ 11). The logic behind this decision seemed much clearer.

Alternatively Student 9 (see Appendix 7) was not allowed to have his first choices on the grounds that they, as Business Studies and ICT, were already full. He seemed a confident, ambitious person, intending to have a career in Medicine or Law but as an underachiever, these popular options were denied. Both courses may well have been full, remembering the KS3 Manager's comment that:

'the only full option subjects are ICT, because it's a practical subject for 21 or 22 people and Business Studies actually. I can't move people into Business Studies. So you have to be very careful about who is allocated so that everyone who puts first choice Business Studies gets it, and everyone who puts it second choice gets it and 3rd choices sometimes get it, and the fourth choices don't get in that particular one.' While these remarks are not completely compatible with Student 9's account, since Business was one of his three first choices, his status as an underachieving student may have excluded him from entry or possibly his form was handed in late and these courses were already full.

Student 18, an Indian Muslim, wanted to be a doctor, pharmacist or *'something to do with science.'* Regarded as an achieving student, he did not access Sociology, which in some schools may sometimes be regarded as a low status subject, as one of his first choices *'because classes were full.'* He was however accepted for Psychology, which he regards as *'more scientific.'* Introduced in 2009 and therefore requiring capable students to establish a place in the school's curriculum, this manoeuvre might represent manipulation to establish Psychology as a viable opportunity. Or it may have simply appealed, on reflection to this particular student. Thus the outcome for each student could be different. Patterns were difficult to discern. Diverse outcomes

could be interpreted as 'personalisation.' These students were all satisfied with their courses, even though the process whereby decisions were reached did not correspond completely with the questionnaire data or the KS3 Manager's claim (SRQ 10).

As in-comers from very traditional conformist backgrounds most were unlikely to challenge any unexpected barriers. Some students even justified the system, claiming that early, overridden choices had been inappropriate. This was true of Student 10, a Somali refugee with no previous experience of English or of formal education. Arriving as KS3/4 wider curriculum choice was underway, he was refused his first choice, the Diploma Course in Engineering but tried again. His second choices were also rejected:

'They didn't accept me so I wanted to choose IT and they said it full'

Eventually deciding he wanted to become a basketball player and with help from Language Support, he made a third set of choices that were successful - P.E., Fine Art and Citizenship. Claiming *'I chose these subjects'* and the decision to study Citizenship *'was mine'* because *'I enjoyed learning about the Constitution,'* he said nothing about P.E. or Art. Nevertheless in Year 10 this optional curriculum seemed to be helping him to settle (SRQ 11).

Conversely the experience of Student 22 was difficult to understand. Categorised as an 'achiever' wishing to study Psychology, found that '*a lot of people wanted to do it so I didn't*' [manage to be accepted for that course]. He then reconsidered his career options, decided he wanted to study Engineering saying, *'I like 'hands on' stuff.'* His family had told him to *'do what you want,'* delegating their responsibilities. Although this complete freedom may help to develop student choice and voice, nevertheless it also leaves some students open to manipulation. He was eventually accepted for the Engineering Diploma.

Some students, like Student 2, denied their first choices had the negotiating skills and confidence to challenge the situation. Her parents had come here as students in Higher Education. Wishing to study Media with GCSE Health and Social Care, she was allocated Media Studies, Psychology and Geography but refused this offer. She changed teaching band where she kept

the Health and Social Care and then negotiated her way back into Media Studies again. She does not know why she had to struggle to study Media but as she had the cultural capital to do this she is now thoroughly satisfied with this outcome.

Other students were less fortunate. Student 14 another underachiever with language difficulties came from India four years ago. Choosing Textiles first *'because I wanted to become a fashion designer then'* more realistically she *'just wants to improve her sewing skills,'* she was allocated to Geography. *'They just gave it to me,'* and although she found this interesting at first, Textiles did not turn out so well. So she tried to exchange Geography and Textiles for Hairdressing, a double option she thought might suit her but *'there were no places left.'* Finally accepting her limitations in Textiles, she still enjoys Media Studies but *'doesn't really understand what she's doing in Geography'* (SRQ11). Student 7 a Somali female, categorised as an achiever, did not receive her first or second choices involving Health and Social Care with Business and later ICT. While these changes might be explained by the popularity of Business and ICT, Student 7 ended up with History, Graphics and Business, disliking both History and Graphics because *'I didn't choose them.'* She thinks her Form Tutor *'may have lost the form'* so she *'just ended up in those options because there were spaces left.'*

For those achieving satisfactory first choice outcomes, personalisation with respect afforded to the stakeholder role is paramount. Student 16 provides an illustration as a confident, achieving dual heritage student who has lived in this area all his life. He wants to be a dancer, choosing his optional subjects because he enjoys them, opting for:

'Media Studies' as a *'career choice because I wanted to get something to do with the Media'* and *'I enjoy dancing.'* He is articulate, confident and happy with all his decisions. Similarly Student 6, another achiever, received all her first choices, having a fairly clear idea of career plans:

'I want to work in like the medical area of things' 'with children' because *'they always say something new'* and partly because *'my mother was a nurse in Somalia and now she's a teacher.'* This girl had been born in Western Europe

and had excellent social and communication skills, describing herself as '*a happy person. They call me 'Smiler' at home.'* Living in a deprived area, her values and confidence were more consistent with those of middle class students.

From this sample it was possible to generalise about the preparation units. No student found them controlling but opinions regarding their usefulness varied. Student 18 found preparation exercises in the Personal Development Programme *'kind of helpful'* but the SPF *'not very useful.'* The course in tutor time was said to be *'like a paper exercise.'* Recent immigrants like Student 4 who had only lived in England for three years, an underachiever and early stage language learner was the most positive about this experience, as might be expected. She *'enjoyed finding out about herself'* in the SPF exercises, while the PDP Unit was '*OK.'* Student 21 who had lived in the Midlands all his life and already knew what he wanted to be found the preparation units '*not very clear.'*

Alternatively Student 17 agreed that the exercises were '*quite helpful,'* confirming a career choice made long before the Options process began**.** Student 13 declared the KUDOS programme was *'quite helpful,'* finding the preparation *'useful.'* Articulate, lively, very confident if indecisive, Student 8 recalled that she did not find the preparation exercises helpful at all but *'they were not controlling me. It's just like my choices and stuff.'* While most students found the PDP Unit helpful, more intelligent students like Students 16 and 6 described them as *'boring'* since they probably had worked out the KS3/4 wider curriculum choice process for themselves already. Inadvertently the preparation materials and exercises may have left students better informed about alternatives if they experienced set-backs, choice denials and unsatisfactory experiences later (SRQ 11).

Thus these student interviews confirmed many aspects of qualitative teacher data. Parents were caring, ambitious and valued what the school was doing for the children, despite living in such a poor area. Coming from a family of five children, Student 8's parents were aspirational, '*supportive of education'* and expecting her to progress to higher education as the Headteacher

described. Student 13 whose family had moved from India eleven years ago *'for a better life'* reported her parents were *'really happy with me.' 'They are kind of proud.' 'They want me to be a teacher. They want me to do what I like.'* Later *c*onfirming what the Head of Language Support had said about students wanting to stay within the city, Student 8 declared:

'*they* [her parents] *wouldn't want us to go out of* [this area]*. They would want us* [all] *to stay at home. Like you know how you get accommodation and you live there, my Mum wouldn't want that for me or my brothers. For my brothers it's OK but like for a girl – in our tradition, it's good for girls to stay at home.'* Although Student 17 intends to *'try to become a civil engineer,'* he is planning to go to university locally via a local college of further education. Making no comment about leaving home to find employment later, he was confident he could look after himself domestically. As a Muslim male, this may be possible, but only if his family's financial circumstances can support him.

4.11 Summary of Student interview data

This interview data provided a rich and varied impression of student experience. Those students with a clear idea of their futures, good negotiating skills and confidence found the experience of personalisation during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice extremely positive. Not everyone accessed a KS4 timetable with subjects/courses they had first chosen however. Two students had choices imposed and six months later, they were still dissatisfied. The vast majority were progressing, so that even the lowest achievers had benefitted from the extra personal attention.

4.12 Identification of student 'achievers' and 'underachievers' in the interview sample retrospectively from teacher assessment data

Nine individuals were classified by Form Tutors as 'underachieving' using 'in house' school data while eleven were categorised as 'achieving normally.' Fourteen individuals did not receive their first choices, three of whom were early language learners (SRQ 11). From this data it would seem that institutional perceptions of underachievement do not inevitably lead to the denial of students' first choices.

4.13 Assessing the trustworthiness of teacher interview and student questionnaire data

Given the disparities between some evidence from teacher interviews and the student questionnaire data, it seemed sensible to clarify these issues, cross checking its trustworthiness with another information source, the female Yr. 10 Form Tutor. In an unrecorded interview, she was able to confirm the dependability of the students' questionnaire data. Despite the KS3 Manager's assertions, there had been students in her pastoral care the previous year, unable to access first choices. It had been her role to guide them into their second choices. As such she had urged them to consider 'enjoyment' factors very seriously since they would, if successful, be making a serious personal investment in that course or subject. She admitted the percentage of students revealed by the questionnaire whose first choices were rejected reflected the reality of her experience as a Form Tutor in Yr. 9.

Thus without reference to this conversation, the researcher requested a further interview with the KS3 Manager. When asked very politely in a similarly unrecorded interview whether the questionnaire data was misleading or not, perhaps due to a misunderstanding, the KS3 Manager referred to the writings of the leading Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). Requesting the researcher's attendance at the next Yr. 9 assembly, he would then demonstrate exactly what was meant by the claim of 'first choice is guaranteed.' Later, at this assembly the students were urged to hand in their outstanding option returns promptly so that everyone could benefit from 'guaranteed universal first choice.' From his earlier remarks, construed as an allusion to Gramsci's concept of hegemony and without any further clarification, this reassurance to students would, in view of student evidence, subsequently be interpreted in that light.

Later as the evidence from the recorded Teacher Interview 9 showed, the Yr. 10 Form Tutor refused to comment further on the value of the student questionnaire data or the disparity between it and the KS3 Manager's claim. Instead she praised the KS3 Manager's 'absolute commitment' to the ideal of student satisfaction through the achievement of 100% first choices.

Recognising that any further discussion of this topic would be unwelcome, it seemed appropriate to complete the investigation without compromising professional links between the researcher, the school and the university. Thus all remaining interviews were conducted without researcher comment on the quality of access to student first choices or the rationale behind different interpretations of this matter.

4.14 Discussion

Since 2004 with the introduction of Personalised Learning, student choice has become the subject of negotiation rather than the outcome of linear decision-making confirming the views of Paton et al. (2007). As stakeholders with investment in their own education, students in the research school were encouraged to express free choices with guidance from Form Tutors as Hargreaves recommended (2004a, p.3). The evidence suggests that this system may be working well, either in its own right or as part of a package, by improving attendance leading to better examination results.

The meaning of personalisation in the research school however seems to be affected by professional roles (SRQ 1) and personal values. This is demonstrated by the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (SRQ 2). According to its architect, personalisation can be measured by student success in the achievement of desired outcomes (SRQ 3). Despite evidence from students that this particular measurement may not be completely accurate, a range of student outcomes still result in stakeholder satisfaction (SRQ 9), which in itself may represent either a different interpretation of personalisation or the manipulation of pupil choice.

Thus Fielding's (2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008) claim that totalitarian education will emerge from a personalised, performativity driven system does not seem completely justified by the evidence. Totalitarianism is not inevitable in education although it may be widespread. For the research school performativity is recognised. Anxieties may exist but they remain secondary. For students, raised achievement is morally justified by social inclusion (SRQ 8) so that whatever mechanisms of social control there may be in operation

during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, the majority of students are content. Possibly the school is unusual.

Although student data (SRQ 10) from questionnaires fails to confirm claims for personalisation during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, it presents a picture of overall satisfaction with final outcomes. The randomness with which some student decisions are managed however raises questions concerning the criteria used for acceptance or refusal and whether this provides covert opportunities for manipulation (Rose and Miller, 1992), implied through claims of 'first choice guaranteed.' These have not been answered by this research. Whether it is important for students to believe this claim and the role any belief might have in engaging participation, controlling behaviour, is difficult to tell in the time available.

Students already accustomed to covert social control through religion, community and family networks, may be easily manipulated. These students have from birth been socialised into accepting traditional forms of authority. Moreover these traditional controls are particularly strong in immigrant communities, perceived as a means of preserving communal identities. Thus these students would be unlikely to challenge the KS3 Manager when first choices are not universally achieved, given that they have already been provided with a reasonable practical explanation. Meanwhile a personalised approach intrinsically facilitates student acceptance by isolating individuals from each other.

From student interviews there is some evidence that inequalities in negotiating skills may affect student outcomes during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice as Campbell et al. (2007), Vandenbroeck (2007) and Reay (2008b) have claimed. Mainly associated with underachievers who are the lowest achievers (SRQ 11), for the remainder family size (with possible links to poverty), the closeness of community ties and the effect of Islam seem to enhance student communication, eroding barriers frequently associated with poor communities. Early language learners with no previous experience of formal education may be particularly disadvantaged but its effects may

diminish as school and families communicate, working together to benefit the child.

Whether personalisation affects student motivation and achievement in the research school as Brighouse (2005), Leadbeater (2004a) claim, is not difficult to ascertain (SRQ 7). Evidence is provided through management accounts of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (SRQ 2 and SRQ 3) and statistical data. As part of a 'jigsaw' of measures, isolating and evaluating its impact through KS3/4 wider curriculum choice presents statistical and interpretivist difficulties for the researcher. Moreover these issues are beyond the remit of this investigation. It remains a fact however that student achievement has improved remarkably in this school over the past ten years.

Although, with the 5A*-C rate reduced from 70% to 34% in 2009 by the inclusion of English and Maths (SRQ 6), some pressure from performativity undoubtedly exists, involving not only the raising but the sustaining of educational attainment (SRQ 6) in communities where English is not the first language, a factor beyond institutional control (SRQ 6). Therefore current interpretations of personalisation during the 'Options Process' may change. This is especially true if the school community changes, a factor which is inevitably true in a heavily populated immigrant area. A settled Muslim population may be replaced by Eastern European families with different needs, expectations and patterns of settlement. New marketisation strategies may be needed by the school.

While the causes of underachievement may vary between schools justifying contextual constructivist interpretations of Personalised Learning (2004) as Carter and Franey (2004) suggest, different strategies were used in the pilot and research schools to manage student access to inappropriate choices. Meeting different student needs requires a range of interpretations of the delivery of Personalised Learning (SRQ 4). Although this could be interpreted as personalisation, it may not result in the targeting of specific underachievers to counteract underachievement (SRQ 3). It could simply mean that every student choice is scrutinised. The school may wish to maximise student

achievement and thereby subject every student to greater levels of social control in the realisation of this aim.

Finally, the combined effects of performativity and personalisation do not seem to be producing an immediate meritocracy as Blair and Miliband (2004b) had hoped since social, economic and geographic mobility for the most part is hindered by low incomes, family size and unemployment. Students remain in this area to attend local universities. Ultimately they may find employment here when their education is completed (SRQ 8).

Chapter 5 - Analysis, synthesis and discussion

5.1 Introduction

Triangulation of source and method was used in this research, firstly to represent the dialogue involved in the research situation and secondly to generate trustworthy evidence. In this way quantitative evidence from student questionnaires could be used to test the internal validity of qualitative data from a range of teacher interviews, while the questionnaire format gave structure to student interviews. Using earlier questionnaire responses as a stimulus, this interactive process provided further clarification of individual student experience in the research context. Teacher assessment data provided identification of perceived differences between individual students in terms of attainment potential.

This chapter addresses some of the reasons behind qualitative and quantitative response data produced through Specific Research Questions (SRQs 1-11) supporting the Research Question (RQ): 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' The way in which SRQs contribute evidence towards the research question is outlined in Table 5.1.

5.2 The application of Critical Discourse Analysis

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) with teacher interviews it may be possible to explain rather than describe their evidence in terms of SRQs 1-9 while student questionnaire and interview data will be compared and analysed according to SRQs 10-11. CDA is particularly appropriate in understanding power relationships in management structures. The management of KS3/4 involves such relationships shaping the behaviour of participants at every level. Thus policies emanating from the Senior Management Team, delegated, in this case, to the KS3 Manager who *'organises'* and *'is in control'* of the whole KS3/4 wider curriculum choice process *'from start to finish,'* reflect the underlying tensions between personalisation and covert control

generated by the need to address the performativity agenda. So far, this is not obvious from research findings but was evident in the research setting.

To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?	
Teacher SRQs	**Student SRQs**
SRQ 1. What meaning does personalisation have in this inner city school today?	SRQ 10. How does student evidence compare with the pastoral managers' views?
SRQ 2. How is KS3/4 wider curriculum choice managed?	SRQ 9. What is the student experience of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice? SRQ 10. How does student evidence compare with the pastoral managers' views? SRQ 11 How does the experience of underachieving students differ from that of normally achieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?
SRQ 3. In that school context, how much freedom of choice and voice is afforded to students in the management of a Personalised Learning strategy like KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?	SRQ 10. How does student evidence compare with the pastoral managers' views? SRQ 11 How does the experience of underachieving students differ from that of normally achieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?
SRQ 4. How if at all does the management of underachievers' experience of KS3/4 differ from the norm?	SRQ 10. How does student evidence compare with the pastoral managers' views? SRQ 11 How does the experience of underachieving students differ from that of normally achieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?
SRQ 5. What is the school's current record on student attainment?	
SRQ 6. What problems does this school face in meeting future targets?	
SRQ 7. How useful/ successful are current interpretations of student choice and voice during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice strategy in motivating students?	SRQ 10. How does student evidence compare with the pastoral managers' views? SRQ 11 How does the experience of underachieving students differ from that of normally achieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?
SRQ 8. How, if at all does the school reconcile the philosophy behind 'personalisation' with the performativity agenda?	SRQ10. How does student evidence compare with the pastoral managers' views? SRQ 11 How does the experience of underachieving students differ from that of normally achieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?

Table 5.1.Structure of Specific Research Questions as they apply to the Research Question

5.2.1 Power relationships in the research context

During the research period, local Headteachers had set up a series of meetings to share examples of good practice. Although a suitable definition of 'good practice' was not offered, this probably indicated 'raised achievement'. During the research the focus at one of these meetings was a presentation by

a headteacher from another 11-16 comprehensive school with the most improved KS4 results in 2009 in the Local Authority. At this meeting, KS3/4 wider curriculum choice was discussed resulting in the Headteacher in the research school bringing information back to the Senior Management Team to spark an 'in-house' debate. This was on-going for several weeks. Thus he recalled:

'I went to a presentation the other day where there was another headteacher from a school where they'd raised achievement in terms of threshold values, and the way they said they did this was by limiting the Option Choice, saying to the students, 'You haven't actually got a choice. We are going to place you in an Option group that we think is suited to your needs and ability. So if you've got a C in a subject, we're going to put you in classes that your teacher is telling us you enjoy.'

He added:

'Now I think we do the complete opposite of that. What we say to students is, 'You've got to do Maths, you've got to do English, you've got to do science etc. The 'Options bit' which is only a little bit of our curriculum when you actually analyse it, is your chance to do something that you really want to do' and make that Option Choice as wide as we possibly can. And then say to the students, 'We will endeavour to put you in whatever subject you choose as your first choice.'

He then went on to consider ways in which the school might avoid particularly able students opting for courses regarded as inappropriate to their abilities, like the A* student who might want to study Hair and Beauty. While this comment could suggest bias towards academic rather than vocational achievement, in fact this type of situation '*does not often happen* [here] *due to the intervention and care of Form Tutors.'* It had led him to reflect on the value of the current system of managing KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. The Headteacher might have been thinking that if the present system works well, how can it be improved it to raise attainment even higher? Or it may have worked well in the past but how can we adapt our present system to suit our

needs in the future? Given the context of the Headteachers' meeting however, it would be concerned with raising achievement.

The disclosure puts a different interpretation on some aspects of teacher evidence – the issues aired by the Inclusion Manager about not wanting to delete *'underperforming'* courses, the need for clearer student information, possibly '*Taster Sessions'* about courses and subjects new to the students, raised by the KS4 Manager and the continuing importance of the Form Tutor as a trusted student advisor and friend. This discussion might explain some aspects of the interview evidence from the KS3 Manager. He was under pressure and whatever the reason, performativity was higher on the school's management agenda than the development of personalisation.

Thinking that CDA might facilitate an understanding of this situation, justified by the need to 'explain' rather than 'describe' 'the ways discourse structures' like a debate on the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice [may or may not] 'enact, confirm, legitimate [and] reproduce' 'relations of power and dominance' (Bryman 2008 p.509) between the Head and members of the Senior Management Team, the debate was not yet resolved. That it was taking place at all revealed underlying anxieties about future attainment levels. Performativity was still a serious issue, despite the Headteacher's earlier claims to the contrary.

Meanwhile the use of CDA is contentious. It would need to be applied with care since its usefulness in supporting disadvantaged, 'dominated groups' (Van Dijk 2001, p.353 found in Tannen, Schiffrin and Hamilton, Eds.) might distort truths if pursued too vigorously, and although the students were socially disadvantaged beyond the school gates, school policies reinforced a consistently caring approach to their management. Thus conversational analysis, 'grounded in ethnomethodology' (Bryman 2008, p.692) might seem more appropriate.

5.3 Analysis of research evidence

Specific Research Questions (SRQs) will be addressed in sequence, apart from SRQ 5, requiring a numerical response already provided in section 4.5.4.

5.3.1 The meaning of personalisation in the research school (SRQ 1)

Asked for their conceptual definitions of 'educational personalisation', pastoral staff had provided functional explanations through examples of good practice. Thus ambiguity still surrounds the meaning of personalisation as Courcier (2007) indicated. Institutional consensus over its meaning, if a definition was ever agreed, may have been lost over time. Alternatively the performativity agenda, morally justified by student need and institutionally justified by marketisation, vindicated the use of personalisation in order to maximise student achievement since:

'*I think the majority of the staff by far buy into this view, that every single student* [in this school], *regardless of their background, regardless of their ability, deserves personalisation.*'

Accordingly for the Headteacher, there was no reason to discriminate between individual students, targeting one level of achievers rather than another. Optimum achievement was the equitable goal for everyone, regardless of potential. This was an inclusive school. Thus personalisation was proceeding along the lines laid down by Gilbert (2006, p.13) whereby the Headteacher facilitates the design of

'*approaches to engaging and raising the achievement of underachieving groups*' by '*ensuring the priorities are right for the school in maximising student achievement.*'

As far as the students were concerned personalisation in the context of wider curriculum choice meant a broader range of options to choose from. They could choose and at least two thirds would be successful in accessing their first choices. For those who were unsuccessful, there were further opportunities, further choices.

5.3.2 The management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (SRQ 2)

In the strategic development of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, issues of equity had been considered for student stakeholders concerning their 'choice' and 'voice'.

To ensure equity, Form Tutors played a central advisory role as they knew *'the children really, really well from Year 7'* (Year 9 Form Tutor) and could therefore be trusted to act in each student's best interests. Although this assessment of the FT role may not be realistic as some students may be pleasant while others are absent, difficult and/or undecided, nevertheless the Form Tutor role remains a corner-stone of this present strategy. That Form Tutors will always behave impartially is taken for granted, although in this very busy role, it may not always be possible. Thus Student 7 thought her Form Tutor had lost her Options Application Form, which s/he may have done. Alternatively, the student may not have filled it in or even misplaced it.

For the KS3 Manager, student voice and choice were respected through his guaranteed universal acceptance of students' first choices. He clearly enjoys this role because of its success in raising achievement through the application of personal social democratic principles. Despite his absolute *'control'* of the decision-making process *'from start to finish,' 'working through a team of* [pastoral] *staff'* demonstrated in Figure 4.1, he would be sensitive to the SMT debate, regarding it as criticism.

His enjoyment of Year 9 assemblies, providing direct contact with students is obvious. Reluctant to share this platform with subject heads (HOS) since their involvement would result in a *'marketing process'* where students *'might choose on the strength of the personality' 'as opposed to the strength of the subject,'* he contends that by appealing to and involving himself directly with students he can democratise the decision-making process, sincerely believing that:

'*You have to start with your values, your core values which are that children should be getting what they want to study.'*

Nevertheless, through his membership of the Senior Management Team, the Headteacher's interpretation of personalisation and social 'inclusion' together with the school's commitment to raised achievement, collective values impinge on his role. Based on logic designed to motivate students, the KS3 Manager places *'we'* (the school) ahead of *'them'* (the students) in the same sentence, when talking about '*being successful.'* His rationale for linking

personalisation with raised achievement in the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice may be largely covert. In the business of helping socially deprived and vulnerable youngsters gain a foothold on British society through achievement leading to employment, however the KS3 Manager's respect for student voice and choice is both individual, collective and moral because the present system is *'something I believe in.'*

5.3.3 The degree of flexibility afforded to students' freedom of choice and voice during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (SRQ 3)

The KS3 Manager's engagement of student voice in 'widening' curricular options as another aspect of personalisation represents a complete reversal of normal curriculum development.

At the beginning of every year, before any decisions are made the KS3 Manager requests information from Year 9 students about subjects and courses they might like to study. These include courses not previously on the optional menu. Student suggestions may be added to the list, but with the proviso that '*we can only offer what we can offer'* dependent on *'facilities and staff.'* This *'demand led'* approach resulted in an optional curriculum of forty-one vocational and academic opportunities. The school therefore added Health and Social Care GCSE in 2009 with GCSE Law and Psychology in 2010. This scope was limited however since Year 9 students had only three options, a poorer offer than frequently made in many nearby schools where four was the norm. Moreover only one subject from the Design option block was permitted. Although he maintained there was total flexibility in meeting student choices, any student choice could be denied at any time if he thought it was inappropriate.

All he needed to say was that the classes were full or he could not fit a particular option into a particular student's timetable. Such decisions would not be challenged by students or their families, as evidenced in student interview data. Only Student 2 had the confidence and skills to do this. Thirteen out of fourteen students in the interview sample accepted the situation, making further choices. Such unquestioning stakeholder trust reflects the traditional acceptance of male authority figures in schools, at

home and in the Mosque, where according to the Inclusion Manager it produces *'conservative and devout behaviour'* where *'children don't seem to question or challenge authority.'*

Although official accounts of universal access to first choices seemed unlikely given that two hundred and ten students were simultaneously involved in decision-making, the questionnaire results showed that from a reasonably representative sample of sixty students 37% claimed their first choices were denied. Standing at over a third of participants, this rebuttal, despite some misunderstanding by Students 8, 17 and 1, was unexpected. Moreover given the straightforwardness of Question 5; '*Were you able to have your first choices in all three Option Blocks? Yes or No?* it was difficult to challenge the students' interpretion or their responses. Only Student 1 had answered negatively to hide his embarrassment. Others may have responded inaccurately because of the phrase 'in all three option blocks.' causing this disparity if any of their choices were denied, when the KS3 Manager was referring to one choice in one Option Block. Most student interviews however, tended to undermine that possibility. Although official claims of universal access to and respect for student choice and voice were routinely used to substantiate the existence of personalisation during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, the questionnaire data suggests different interpretations of the situation, challenging the validity of these claims. Access to optional choices was not determined by student choice but may simply have been covertly manoeuvred to meet student needs.

Of these 21 students denied first choices, the reasons they were given, elicited by Question 6, demonstrated that oversubscription/timetabling did account for over half of the refusals. Although exchanges between students were possible throughout Year 10, rewarding the persistence of about thirty determined individuals, not every student would have the confidence or foresight to carry out such a strategy. Just under half of this sub-set claimed they were not given a definite reason. Only one student, having arrived in this country after the completion of the decision-making process in school, had a reason for limiting his choices that was unconnected to group size or timetabling. Thus it may be that the KS3 Manager is dealing fairly with student

decisions and this sub-set of students are choosing, deliberately or accidentally, given the passage of time, to forget the real reasons for their lack of choice.

Alternatively if this small group of students are responding accurately, their experience highlights the imbalance of power between student stakeholders and teacher managers, student acceptance of authority and the unassailability of imprecise and/or practical barriers.

5.3.4 The experience of underachieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is similar to that experienced by normally achieving students (SRQ 4)

Returning to the Headteacher's clear statement of values:

'In terms of our philosophy, our starting point is maximising our achievement together' so that *'if personalisation is part of the package that helps to raise achievement then we'll do it'* because *'every single student* [in this school], *regardless of their background, regardless of their ability, deserves personalisation,'*

and that the main problems facing the school are students coming *'with low prior attainment and the big barrier is the language barrie*r', in the context of wider curriculum choice these problems are addressed with sensitivity. The equity of early language learners for example without previous experience of education is ensured through the provision of advisors who are adult native speakers while students with learning difficulties follow the same decision-making procedure as the rest of Year 9. Although the '*most vulnerable'* would be supported by Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) to reduce *'inappropriate'* choices leading to *'damaging outcomes,'* nevertheless the outcome of decision-making is also monitored by Year 9 Form Tutors.

Thus the stakeholder role appears universally respected, regardless of student potential. Moreover the KS3 Manager's interpretation of equity, choice and student voice during this process resonates with the same 'aspirational' values as impoverished local families. While education has intrinsic worth in Muslim culture, social mobility through educational achievement is

encouraged. Conscious that this approach, currently reinforcing consensus between school and community may change because the ethnicity of the community *'is always evolving,'* affecting *'the student population,'* the values of future in-comers may not be readily identifiable, making them more difficult to meet.

5.3.5 The problems faced by the school in meeting future targets (SRQ 6)

The school and its population are constantly changing, as the Headteacher points out:

'I think this school traditionally has catered for the new influx of people. These certainly change in waves but there was a time when this school catered for new Pakistani immigrants, and they've largely settled' as *'quite a stable part of the community'* but *'new populations that have moved in recently are Somali students and increasingly we do seem to be getting Eastern European students.'* With a further twenty Afghan boys, unaccompanied asylum seekers, one of immediate problems is providing suitably skilled translators for these children, supporting English language development as well as helping sometimes traumatised students to adjust to the relative safety of their new environment. Some of these children may not have had previous experience of schooling, so there is a problem in helping them to learn and adjust quickly.

Children coming into the school at the age of eleven often have '*low prior attainment, with large numbers of our students coded as EAL*' (English as an Additional Language). Since language acquisition skills are central to all learning, reduced competence in English slows down overall educational progress, making Grade C in English difficult to achieve for many children Thus changes in education league table criteria in 2008 under the National Challenge Scheme where GCSE or their equivalent scores must include the grades in English and Maths have created further pressures for the school. Although these changes resulted in school's GCSE 5-A*-C rate dropping to 34% in 2009, this remains above the 30% bench mark for National Challenge status so that the Headteacher regards this result as 'reasonably good'. Nevertheless 34% is perilously close to 30%. Thus his 'debate' on attainment

raising, modifying current management procedures concerned with KS3/4 wider curriculum choice may be related to this issue.

5.3.6. How far do personalisation strategies involved in the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice motivate students to achieve more? (SRQ 7)

According to the KS3 manager, his universal guarantee of student first choices works extremely well. Advising Year 9 students in assemblies to *'choose what you enjoy'* this guarantee motivates them to participate in the decision-making process. Giving them access to their first choices characterises his interpretation of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice as a *'very, very fair system'* *'where they [the students] feel a lot more involved.'* Previously the school was:

'too restrictive in our practices and as a result there were disappointing results and the students weren't accessing a full curriculum because quite often when they weren't successful in a subject one and a half years down the line students actually would not be entered for the exam.'

Today his management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is improving the school's NEET rates (of students Not in Education, Employment or Training) which *'means we have the highest staying on rate in the city, increasing attendance rates in Year 11 to 95% and a higher than average from comparable schools rate of going into Higher Education.'*

This amounts to a defence rather than a justification of his management, needing to be understood in the context of management debates. While the Inclusion Manager would agree with him arguing that:

'well from my own children's point of view, and including myself as a parent, I've steered my children or tried to - and it doesn't work, not if they really don't want to do it. You're not actually achieving a great deal.'

The Headteacher however only regards the personalisation of Options as one part of a package offered by the school. It is the package that motivates students rather than one particular element in it. As with many initiatives in

education, it is difficult to isolate and measure the impact of one particular strand in a package of strategies. The connection between meaningful stakeholder input into wider curriculum choice and improved attendance levels may however represent cause and effect. Equally it may reflect the personal beliefs of its instigator. Thus the KS3 Manager, having invested a great deal personally in this system claims:

'in any institution I went to in the future I wouldn't ignore what they currently did but if it wasn't in place, I would make their system as close as possible to what we have here – so, yes, this is something I believe in.'

Nevertheless evidence from this research shows that although personalisation does not include the automatic acceptance of all students' first choice options, it does appear successful in establishing satisfactory outcomes. Thirty-two out of thirty-eight students accessing their first choices and twenty out of twenty-two who did not were completely satisfied with final outcomes. If the evidence from this research is accurate and the Inclusion Manager is correct, students who are happy in their education will '*achieve more. Full stop! If you are happy doing what you wanted to do, then you're going to be interested in it. If you're not happy, no matter how much we say this is a course you need to do – well it doesn't really work.'*

5.3.7 The way the school reconciles the philosophy behind personalisation and performativity (SRQ 8)

The institutional reconciliation of the tension between these apparently paradoxical values is justified on the grounds of social 'inclusion'.

The Headteacher feels morally constrained to implement strategies now that will raise student attainment later to provide students with a means of accessing employment and/or higher education opportunities in the future. To experience any kind of upward social mobility students must have qualifications. It is the school's role to acts as a facilitator in this process. Arguing that he is not alone in this view since:

'*There is a whole tranche of people in the school that are working on these priorities at senior level, middle leader level right down to the chalk-face level.*

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In making sure our priorities are the right ones, we need to maintain a sort of consultation process with the whole staff, student body and the community on what those priorities should be. So it's not about me saying I think this should be the priority for the school. It's about the whole community of people coming together and those priorities coming out of that process.'

Regarding KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, he refers to the current debate in management meetings, stressing their speculative nature. Reconciling performativity with personalisation, he illustrated his point by saying:

'going back to that debate we are having about the Options Process – if we went down that line,' (presumably the one identified at the Headteachers' meeting) *'we are asking, wouldn't it improve our results? Well it might do – probably – but is that the best thing for the students? Well, I don't think so. And yes, there's pressure, but it should always be* [that we do] *what's right for the school, what's right for the students.'*

In this way he illustrated the dilemma schools are in, having to make decisions to suit institutional needs that balance personal freedom with the need for qualifications in the future.

5.3.8 Student experience of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice (SRQ 9)

Students' experience of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice varied in terms of the degree of personalisation acknowledged by the process. This depends on how students perceive their subject and course choices. Does 'first choice' mean personalisation as the KS3 Manager seems to imply, or is it a final satisfactory outcome, tailored to student needs that characterises a personalised decision?

Given that the range of opportunities has increased under Personalised Learning, students (and researchers) should expect the process of decision-making to be more complex today than it was before 2004. Perhaps the promise of 'universal guaranteed first choices' should be changed to something more accurate like the Headteacher's promise to students that:

'We will endeavour to put you in whatever subject you choose as your first choice' as this would simplify the situation for those denied first, second, third choices who might see themselves as isolated from their successful peers when in fact they are not.

From the interview sample of twenty students, fourteen claimed, Student 1 erroneously, they were denied their first choices. Once Form Tutor evidence of comparative achievement was attached to each student's code, three types of experience broadly emerged. The first category mainly involved students regarded as 'achieving normally' and therefore receiving first choices, while the second comprised 'normally achieving' students whose first choices were denied. The final group were regarded as 'underachievers' whose first choices were also not accepted.

Of the five girls and one boy in the first category, all six students were clearly good communicators. Only three, including the boy, were regarded as 'achievers' however. Both girls were Somali in origin while the boy was dual heritage. Confident, articulate and having 'good negotiating skills' (Student 8), all three came from families with four or more children where each interviewee was one of the oldest. Without rigid 'traditional values' (Student 20), all three families supported their children's career choices, facilitating decisions about the KS3/4 wider curriculum. All three students had identified their own goals (Student 16) based on specific careers with clear strategies for their achievement. Although they had found the Student Progress File (SPF) and Personal Development Programme (PDP) Units helpful in 'focussing' (Student 16) their thoughts, no student felt they had been controlled by this preparation or induced to control themselves. All had attended the school for the duration of their secondary education and were happy with that experience. Thus their applications had been straightforward and successful.

The remaining three girls in this category were regarded as 'underachievers' by Form Tutors. Sharing similar personal and social characteristics with the first subgroup they were very positive in their assessment of the whole curriculum choice process, claiming to be '*very happy*' (Students 15 and 11) with the outcome of this '*very positive experienc*e' (Student 13)*.* Whatever

their current achievement levels, their choices in Year 9 must have seemed sensible and within their capabilities.

A second student category – a mixed group of eight children, five boys and three girls, regarded as 'achievers' by their Form Tutors and subject teachers, were nevertheless, denied their first choices. Not everyone in this diverse category was satisfied by the outcome of negotiations with the KS3 Manager. Student choice was frequently denied because the course 'was full' or for timetabling reasons. The rationale behind alternative offers seemed random, if not contradictory. For example Student 18, having been informed that Sociology classes '*were full*', was accepted for Psychology, a new and very popular option that might reasonably have been expected to fill up with carefully selected pupils on the first round. Nevertheless Student 18 had been selected to join Psychology rather than Sociology. Meanwhile Student 21 wanted to study Psychology but was told this was '*full'* on the first round, later opting for Business Studies, another popular subject.

The KS3 Manager had already said some subjects like Business Studies were so popular student applications had to show commitment and be carefully scrutinised every year before admission. Student 19 wanted to study Geography which was not usually oversubscribed but he was told it was 'full/too popular'. Student 2 didn't '*get her Options first time,*' although she '*wasn't slow to return the form*' and consequently '*didn't understand the reason for'* her '*lack of success.*' Offered alternatives in Health and Social Care, with Media Studies GCSE that she refused, Student 2 later changed bands so that she could keep Media Studies, but with Psychology and Geography GCSE. These options had proved inaccessible to Students 19 and 21. Student 7 was similarly manoeuvred away from Health and Social Care together with Business GCSE to do Business, History and Graphics GCSE. Now happy with Business, nevertheless this student regrets accepting History and Graphics, as she 'had never opted for these subjects at all'.

Other manoeuvrings seemed slightly more 'personalised' to meet student needs. Thus Student 8, a very articulate girl, underwent a raft of changes from Beauty Therapy to Engineering, eventually settling for Fine Art, Graphic

Product and Citizenship to leave her '*many career options open still.*' Student 17 opted for the Diploma course in Engineering with ICT GCSE. Advised that the Diploma contained the same level of ICT as the GCSE he kept the Engineering but settled for a modern language instead of ICT as '*something entirely different*' as he wanted at some stage in his life to '*go travelling.*' Student 22, denied access to Psychology was diverted to oversubscribed Business Studies. Admitting his application form went in late, he was also allowed to access the Diploma in Engineering which particularly pleased him as he had anticipated this would already be full. Wishing to begin a mechanical engineering apprenticeship on leaving school, he felt this out-come of Business Studies with the Engineering Diploma would prove to be very useful if/when he has his own motor vehicle business.

The final group, made up of six (three girls and three boys) 'underachieving' students, were all denied first choices for non–negotiable reasons. For example students reported that '*they didn't accept me,*' '*they said it [the course] was full,*' '*they just gave it to me*' or '*there was a timetable clash.*' Three of these children were early language learners and therefore must be regarded even temporarily, as 'low achievers' rather than 'underachievers' (Gorard and Smith 2004, p.205). As the younger children of asylum seeker families, recent immigrants and members of low status Asian communities, the majority of this third category had probably the weakest negotiating skills with the least cultural and economic capital to navigate confidently through the choice process. Thus their decisions were relatively easy for the KS3 Manager to deal with.

The personal attention given by Form Tutors or subject teachers to students denied first choices in the second and third groups of interviewees may have encouraged them, making these students more confident about choosing unfamiliar options like Sociology or the Diploma in Engineering. Nevertheless, the influences on student choice where first choices were denied were not as clear as the influences on students achieving first choices, since those denied first options had not been asked to distinguish between first and second/third rounds. Influences could have been cumulative, grounded in pastoral support students made decisions for the second or third times. These influences may

not have been recorded systematically across the sample making analysis difficult.

All children in the first interview category found the preparation material (SPF, Tutor Time materials and PDP) '*interesting*,' '*helpful*' in persuading them to reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. They sometimes found this preparation 'boring' however as they already had relevant insights. Some students in the second category were more discerning. Three were uncritical, while the remainder found the SPF material on personal qualities helpful. For a range of reasons however they felt the PDP unit was '*boring*,' '*unhelpful*,' and '*not very clear*' while the TT course was dismissed as '*a paper exercise*.' In the final category all but one, Student 12, felt positively about the SPF and the PDP Unit. Overall no one in the interview sample felt these units shaped their decisions.

5.3.9 Student experience and pastoral managers' views (SRQ 10)

For whatever reason, the universal allocation of first choices to students claimed by the KS3 Manager as a feature of personalisation during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice does not seem to be borne out by student evidence. Agenda differences in the Senior Management Team defined by management roles may account for some of these differences. For example, the KS4 Manager, responsible for examination/test results in Year 11 specifically denied personalisation was a major factor in the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, maintaining that '*we're not slavishly looking towards personal choices as the ultimate*' but towards a '*guided process*' based on student '*need*.' Hence, there is a systematic reliance on Form Tutor advice for students. For teachers and managers an in-house bank of teacher assessment data is available through the school's internet system to identify student need.

Without specific clarification, the KS4 Manager's interpretation of '*student need*' could be regarded as an aspect of social '*inclusion*,' a concept used by the Headteacher to justify the students' need for qualifications. Thus to be '*included*' in society, improved qualifications would be necessary to fulfil personal and family aspirations. This student need for suitable qualifications

validates the pressures of performativity on teachers and schools. Consequently the KS4 Manager's words go some way in providing an explanation for the experiences of the second and third student categories in the interviews. These students were asked to resubmit their choices until they selected courses compatible with their ability. It did not particularly matter whether these students were underachieving or achieving normally, just as long as their choices would produce a satisfactory result to take these students to the next educational level.

First choices may have been officially denied for unspecified or practical reasons, usually course oversubscription or timetabling issues, when in fact other agendas were present, determining student access. Gate-keeping took on a permissive rather than a forbidding form so that access could be justified in terms of maximising student achievement, a phrase repeatedly used by pastoral staff in the school as it constitutes part of the school motto. Underachievers were not specifically targeted although interview evidence suggests early language learners most certainly were. Although this analysis is largely speculative and based on the evidence of a small minority of students, it affects possibly about a third of Year 9, if the student questionnaire and interview results are accurate and the Year 10 Form Tutor recalled her experience of Year 9 correctly. Certainly a universal guarantee of first choices does not appear to exist, although a distinctive feature of this system is that it does rely on student choice and therefore could be regarded as an adaptation of personalisation. Democratic elements were retained to provide a second, third or several round(s) of opportunities for students to make more achievable choices.

Adjustment to maximise achievement could be justified by *'staff that care about them* [these students] *and want them to do well'* based on a perception of society that suggests the students are in fact *'working against the odds'* because, according to the Headteacher, *'there are certain elements who are hostile towards their religious beliefs and label them in a particular way because they are Muslim.'* This approach has to be covert so that student beliefs in themselves are not undermined and parental perceptions of the school are kept intact. Universal guarantee of first choices has importance as

a means of marketing the school locally. Thus for most students the denial of first choices provided a positive experience – firstly for student choices to have a reasonable level of challenge, given the lack of specialist input by Heads of Subjects and secondly for students, especially those with special educational needs and early language skills, to be successful in terms of external qualifications.

Alternatively these suppositions could be completely mistaken since the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice must be concerned with balancing the learning needs and career aspirations of children and their families against the practicality of timetabling, teacher resources and institutional pressures to raise educational attainment. Thus where students, unaware of performativity, might wish to use KS3/4 wider curriculum choice to explore unusual personal agendas, make traditionally inspired decisions based on family values or pre-set personal goals not commensurate with their abilities, many senior managers would feel that covert intervention is justified. After all, KS4 achievement is used in educational league tables as a public indicator of educational success or failure. Statistical data can influence parental choice, pupil recruitment and the continued existence of the school, justifying the routine application of institutionally accepted strategies used to control student choice.

5.3.10 The experience of achieving students differs from that of underachieving students (SRQ 11)

While it might be convenient to assume underachievers are more likely to be denied access to first choices than normally achieving students, the evidence from student interviews does not support that supposition. The attainment raising strategy of the research school is not one of targeting underachievement. It is more positive, preferring to maximise attainment for everyone.

Thus there are numerous scaffolding strategies in operation for a range of underachieving groups, co-ordinated by the Inclusion Manager. The evidence suggests that the experience of early language learners, making up ten per cent of the school population and students with learning difficulties requiring

special educational needs for example is enhanced by adult support in a range of specialist roles, limited only by financial constraints. The Headteacher's concern for disadvantaged students, the caring attitudes of many staff and the values of the school intentionally combine to reduce rather than exacerbate the inequalities causing underachievement. Thus the experience of most underachieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice is not markedly dissimilar to that of normally achieving ones.

From the questionnaire data different choice influences emerged between those receiving first choices and those denied them (Question 8) but these cannot be traced back to perceptions of achievement and underachievement. Overall children receiving their first choices, presumably more able or better organised were significantly more career-oriented with enjoyment a substantial secondary influence. Those denied their first choices had probably followed the KS3 Manager's advice more literally, valuing enjoyment in their choice of studies and experimentation in trying 'something new'. This may have led them to choose popular, possibly oversubscribed options, quickly resulting in rejection. Overall the impact of Connexions advice was surprisingly marginal while the importance of 'enjoyment' was clearly evident for both categories. This factor may reflect the impact of the Personal Development Programme preparation materials drafted by the KS3 Manager, and subsequently reinforced by Form Tutor advice.

5.4 Synthesis and discussion

Although KS3/4 wider curriculum choice as an element of Personalised Learning (DfES 2004a), presents opportunities for the active involvement of students in important educational decisions, this strategy, shaped by aspects of neo-liberalism, provides opportunities for social control. In a climate of performativity the emergence of manipulative strategies however small may seem inevitable.

Representing a complete reversal of priorities in state education, from the conformity of the National Curriculum in 1988 to new freedoms offered by a broad optional curriculum, the concept of personalisation in education had popular appeal. In ordinary state schools however, the idea of handing over

significant power to young people might be too intimidating for many teachers to contemplate limiting its development advocated by Leadbeater (2004a, p.23) from 'shallow' to 'deep'. Within these limitations, the quality and type of personalisation revealed by the research requires careful consideration.

Personalised Learning	Hargreaves' Gateways	Gilbert's 2020 Vision
KS3/4 wider curriculum choice	Curriculum choice	Increasing curriculum breadth by delivering some lessons remotely using video conferencing
	Student voice	Engaging pupils as active partners, with responsibility for participating in designing their learning and providing feedback.
	Student Advice and guidance	Designing approaches to engaging and raising the achievement of underachieving groups.
	Mentoring	

Table 5.2 The progressive development of student voice

In the research school personalisation expressed through student voice (SRQ 1) has characteristics identified by Hargreaves (2004a), and Gilbert (2006) in Table 5.2. Ambiguities concerning the interpretation of 'personalisation' highlighted by Courcier (2007) persist. No one in the research school would attempt a definition, identifying only popular features of PL through 'choice' and 'student voice'. Routinely used for their potency in appealing to parents, children and possibly Ofsted, these evocative concepts might also be more readily understood by all. Thus the expression of 'student choice' and 'voice', rather than 'personalisation' had a high profile in the research context. Respect for these values, possibly connected with marketing strategies, also revealed a constructivist element in the development of PL identified by Carter and Franey (2004).

The ethical case for personalisation, given the current climate of performativity, is justified by raised attainment, warranted by material deprivation, the vulnerabilities of recent immigration and cultural discrimination in accessing future employment. Presenting many features of Fielding's definition (2007, p.395) of a 'personalised school' (see Table 2.2), the research school does not represent an 'ideal type', but nevertheless as a person centred learning community refutes many arguments against the policy of Personalised Learning.

Opportunities are built into the management process of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice for student voice (SRQ 2) in the extension of student choice. Form tutors play a key role in mentoring, especially during student decision-making when their advice and guidance as trusted 'friends in authority' are essential for the limitation of inappropriate choices. Students have curricular access of 'increasing breadth' (Gilbert, 2006, p.13), though possibly this does not include video conferencing. For many years an advocate of 'student voice' as an agency of social change in schools, Fielding (2001) seems to have gone through a period of intellectual disillusionment with this concept (2006a, 2006b, 2007 and 2008). Resulting from official adaptations of 'personalisation' into the policy of Personalised Learning, he regards this 'reform' as a lost opportunity for positive and fulfilling educational change. Predicting the wholesale manipulation of choice and student voice by governments into 'a valuable legitimising tool' to draw attention 'away from increasingly aggravated social inequalities' (Fielding 2007, p.301), some of these claims are indicated in the research findings.

There are unanswered questions concerning students' freedom of choice in accessing 'guaranteed first choices' (SRQ 3) during the Options process. Student access to the KS3/4 wider optional curriculum through voice and choice may be manipulated by the school. Affecting possibly one third of the student population, 'manipulation' does not necessarily involve the subordination of student decisions to a selfish, performativity driven school agenda. It could be benevolent, minimal and effective since the student population in Year 10 are content outcomes. Alternatively, manipulation of student choices because of the integrity of management might not take place at all. Adjustment may be entirely dependent on practical issues.

It is the KS3 Manager who acts as gate-keeper, confirming Campbell et al.'s prediction (2007, p.143/4) that 'if anyone is going to be involved in co-producing knowledge it is the teachers' 'not the learners themselves'. Moreover students' families had surprisingly little influence over their decisions. Inexperienced in the English language, culture and education system, these parents may have felt it was more appropriate to leave decisions about their children's future to the experts like teachers. Thus

because of habitus and almost negative cultural capital, the school's management of KS3/4 choices, may have left many student decisions open to redirection.

Confirmation of Leadbeater's claim that personalisation would revitalise education by its equitable, progressive development from shallow to deep, was only partially demonstrated by the evidence – possibly because of power differences between individual students and pastoral staff or simply the result of idiosyncrasies peculiar to education as a service. For those students achieving first choices during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, 'deep personalisation' was a reality since they had achieved 'self–organisation' (Leadbeater 2004a, p.23) as 'co-designers and co-producers' of their own optional curriculum. Students denied their first choices however could only experience 'shallow' personalisation, with a 'modest modification' of 'standardised services' partially adapted 'to user needs' (p.20). Unlike many schools the democratic values of the KS3 Manager meant these pupils did have subsequent choices. The student/stakeholder role was still respected, ensuring considerable consumer satisfaction. Introduced in 2005 by the current KS3 Manager, this policy had largely remained intact rather than developing to a deeper level.

Moreover students in the interview sample regarded as 'underachievers' who are in fact the lowest achievers, probably asylum seekers with early language development in English, tended to experience social control early in the decision-making process through the denial of first choices (SRQ 4). Possibly disappointed by this outcome because they had taken early reassurances too literally, they were nevertheless motivated to achieve more, often regarding their access to English education as a valued opportunity. As only 15% of the interview sample, this experience may not be representative of the underachieving population as a whole. Their confidence in bargaining would be limited by language, poverty and low status in the community. Moreover as the younger children of large families they were probably used to fitting in with the decisions of others rather than asserting themselves, confirming Vandenbroek's views (2007, p. 27) that through low status and expectation these students might have felt isolated from their peers and that the system

blamed them for this failure. For example there is a plaintive tone in the evidence from Student 6. Newly arrived as a traumatised refugee with no English, his engagement with wider curriculum choice was required. Probably not understanding what it was all about he nevertheless made choices, recalling that:

'*I chosen Motorcycle Engineering. They didn't accept me so I wanted to choose IT and they said it full'*.

Acting as a marketing strategy for the school to the community (SRQ 5), the school's remarkably high current record on student attainment retains students from 'aspirational' families, reducing turbulence and supporting raised achievement. Located in an area of very poor housing, this community school also encourages student involvement at KS5 with city colleges, leading students into Higher Education. Because of poverty, these students do not normally travel beyond the city; they study at local universities. Thus after graduation, the pressure of traditional values, inexperience and insecurity leads them to return to an area deprived of employment commensurate with their qualifications. In this way, especially for female graduates, the research school may be inadvertently contributing to a cycle of poverty rather than facilitating students' upward mobility. Thus the evidence confirms Reay's observations (2004, 2006) and the insights of Archer and Hutchings (2000), Reay and Lucey (2004) and Moore (2004) regarding the ineffectiveness of PL as one of New Labour's flagship policies in reducing the economic divide between rich and poor.

In the neo-liberal marketisation of the school locally (Hartley 2009), it was necessary to provide a positive image of conformity to government policy. Thus probably unaware that he was reiterating Miliband's (2004b, p.3) application of Piore and Sabel's (1984) theories on 'flexible specialisation' where 'self-regulatory techniques' could be 'installed in citizens', including students, to 'align their personal choices' to achieve more, the KS3 Manager had undoubtedly been influenced by Brighouse, in de Freitas and Yapp (eds.) (2005),) and Leadbeater's claim (2004b, p.6) that responsiveness to individual needs would improve motivation and thereby raise student attainment (2004a

p.25). Believing in the motivational value of equitable 'choice' and 'voice' and defending this policy in the face of current Senior Management debates, the KS3 Manager may have extended his case, attributing many recent improvements in motivational behaviour to the flexible application of his democratic ideals (SRQ 7) through the present system of managing KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. The negativity of targeting underachievement (SRQ 8) becomes positive by developing a focus on the whole school (Fielding 2007, p.395) and extended to be inclusive and person-centred. Thus the pressure on students to achieve more is transformed into an exhortation to maximise every student's achievement collectively.

Analysis of the way control mechanisms operate through neo-liberal education strategies (like personalisation, choice and voice, empowerment and the stakeholder role) has in recent years been associated with much academic writing, providing postmodernist insights into their operations, using a Foucauldian interpretation of governance. Providing a deeper understanding of 'how power works by producing practices for acting on the self by the self' (Bragg 2007, p.345), governmentality not only provides opportunities to address aspects of governance and manipulation through neo-liberalism (Rose and Miller 1992) but also 'enables a focus on aspects of student voice' 'that are often ignored or taken for granted' (Bragg 2007, p.345). Moreover it is possible to address issues of governmentality (SRQ 10) in the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice 'to produce' rather than 'describe' 'understandings and subject positions' 'about how individuals work, what motivates them' (SRQ 9) 'and what is good' (p.348).

Mindful of Lawson's work on teacher autonomy (2004), the role of individual action planning in Initial Teacher Training (Lawson and Harrison, 1999) and the potential for target setting and self-monitoring as a strategy for self-surveillance (Lawson, Harrison and Cavendish, 2004) the students were asked to evaluate materials used to prepare them for the Options Process. They did not however regard their preparation, role play and classroom exercises found in the Student Progress File and Personal Development Programme units as particularly controlling. As 'conservative', 'devout,' 'conformist' individuals, according to the Inclusion Manager and as students

rather than adults, they probably accepted this approach as normal and educative. Bragg's response to this would be that their preparation exercises guide and facilitate these students to be 'supervised through specific techniques that delimit what can be said, and how speakers conceive of themselves – techniques for shaping subjectivities' (2007, p.349).

Despite slight differences regarding the SPF between those denied first choices and their successful counterparts, the low value placed on the PDP Unit by those not achieving first choices may be explained not by sophisticated insight into its purpose but by the fact that, focussing entirely on the students' immediate school experience, it may have raised and subsequently not fulfilled student expectation. Nevertheless, as a guidance source for wider curriculum choice it acted as a pedagogic restraint to personalisation, leading students into the acceptance of covert effective forms of limitation and restraint inherent in the decision-making process itself (Rose and Miller, 1992).

From the outset the Year 9 cohort is collectively reassured that 'first choice is guaranteed,' providing them with 'new and hybrid identities' as 'consumers of education' (Bragg 2007, p.350). Delivered in a public setting (assemblies) by an accepted authority figure (the KS3 Manager has directed KS3/4 wider curriculum choice for the previous four years) establishing this belief in students' minds may be represented as manipulation. 'Based on [this] knowledge, information, or authority' (Van Dijk 2001, p.355), hegemonic power, identified by Gramsci (1971) is used in a pedagogic setting to ensure students' participation in decision-making. Introduced, organised and managed by the KS3 Manager alone, although his authority is not 'absolute', demonstrated by the experience of Student 2, the students are unaware of its extent or limitations. Indeed, presented with reassurances in this way, his control may appear absolute to them. Empowered as individuals, paradoxically they are isolated from one another, facilitating potential manipulation of choices.

Thus students denied first choices from the initial round of student decisions, are offered further alternatives which needed to be accepted by the KS3

Manager, as arbiter before they can be operationalised as good decisions. Since this system operates 'at a distance' through Form Tutors rather than directly with the KS3 Manager himself, 'without recourse to direct forms of repression or intervention' 'it encourages individuals' to regard themselves as 'active, responsible and choosing' participants, working 'through not against' 'subjectivities, constructing their personal goals and aspirations and harnessing them to broader organisational objectives' (Bragg, 2007, p.355). Thus (SRQ 11) where students like Student 2 challenged management decisions, changing bands rather than accede to decisions she did not wish to follow, the manager conceded. Such confident students represent a minority in resisting rather than 'accepting, condoning, complying with, or legitimating' such power. Meanwhile the majority seem to find directional changes 'natural' given their cultural acceptance of religious and patriarchal authority. In this way the power of dominant adults in many schools becomes integrated into 'rules, norms, habits, and even a quite general consensus, taking the form of what Gramsci called "hegemony"' (Van Dijk 2001 p.355).

While it is possible to argue along with Reay (2008) that hegemony in the research school presents a mild form of 'class domination, sexism, and racism', 'exercised' not 'in obviously abusive acts' but 'in the myriad of taken-for-granted actions of everyday life', impoverished students aged 14-15, accustomed to being controlled by their beliefs rather than experience, accept this authority especially if the outcomes are obvious, beneficial and in accord with community values. Thus Student 8 having gone through many changes was still convinced she had received her first choice. Local families may be similarly persuaded, justifying the value of this claim by the outcome in terms of improved examination results. Similarly, 'not all members of a powerful group are always more powerful than all members of dominated groups: power is only defined here for groups as a whole' (Van Djik 2001, p.355). This was demonstrated in the research by the female Year 10 Form Tutor, withdrawing her confirmation of the percentage of students routinely denied first choices after the researcher raised this issue with the KS3 Manager.

Thus in the research school strategies to control student choice do not need to rely solely on reflection and self-regulation through role play, classroom

exercises, target setting and evaluation but on the calming acceptance of traditional and well established 'in-house' practices and authority. Like the workforce in education, student stakeholders are subjectively held to account by their own decisions. Finally the research question: 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' addresses issues of social control, a familiar aspect of life for many teenagers in the locality given the proximity of school, mosque and home.

5.5 Assessment of the research methods in terms of validity and reliability

Although the research methods produced quantifiable and qualitative data, the validity and reliability of this evidence may have varied for a number of reasons.

5.5.1 Introduction

Addressing the research question, 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' a mixed methods approach with triangulation of source was used to produce an ethnographic case study. Addressing the dialogue between pastoral managers and students in the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, ten informal interviews took place with a range of pastoral staff, followed by the administration of sixty student questionnaires. Using Year 10 as a sampling frame, two mixed ability tutor groups were selected. Tests were built into the questionnaire to ensure some representativeness. Twenty students from the questionnaire sample, having, with their parents, given permission, were interviewed using their questionnaire responses as a stimulus. Using conversational analysis, staff and student interviews were analysed. Teacher assessment data was applied retrospectively to student names to distinguish perceptions of achievement and underachievement.

From the evidence produced by these strategies it was possible to see whether, because of performativity, there were any differences in the degree

of equity experienced by normally achieving and underachieving students in accessing first choice 'options' from their experience of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice.

5.5.2 Assessment of teacher interview process and quality of data produced

Evidence from a range of pastoral managers, starting with the KS3 Manager and including the Headteacher, proved adequate, providing a vertical overlapping picture of roles and responsibilities, attitudes and interpretations of key concepts involved in accessing the personalised optional curriculum at KS4. Using a set of simple questions as a focus (Appendix 2), each recorded interview allowed the respondent to express themselves freely. As some of these people had previously been known to the researcher as colleagues, this factor probably affected external validity of some interviews with some participants revealing more detail and opinions because of familiarity. Others in senior roles were more guarded about their evidence. Producing detailed, interesting and useful data however this made comparison between interviews difficult. Although the data could not be replicated, the same method could be used in another research context, providing external reliability. Ecological validity could be safeguarded if every interview took place in private offices on the school premises.

5.5.3 Assessment of student questionnaire method and data

Student questionnaire data provided valuable evidence, useful for checking the internal validity of teacher interview data. Thus triangulation of method and source meant the validity of teacher claims, principally those of the Headteacher and KS3 Manager, could be validated.

With a focus on Year 10 rather than Year 9 students, although the immediacy of Year 9 data might have increased the minutiae of evidence, these students would have had little time to reflect on their experience, affecting the clarity and depth of their understanding. Year 10 students were eager and quite articulate in their accounts, although their evidence may have lacked detail. The process of 'choosing options' however, having run through all its phases

by December 2009 had evidently provided a meaningful experience, and one Year 10 students were confidently prepared to recall.

The preparation of questions in the questionnaire was rather hasty, reducing its effectiveness as a research instrument (Appendix 5). Having waited for a suitable opportunity to administer it while developing an understanding of the ways in which the school operated, the questionnaire had to be completed during tutor time at the end of the autumn term when a time-slot suddenly became available. Piloted only once (Appendix 4), the questions and layout had to be amended quickly.

Although the quality of data produced was adequate, with hindsight the final questionnaire would have benefitted from more thorough groundwork, yielding information beyond the immediacy of Year 9 experience. For example, for students denied first choices, the wording of Question 8 might have been clearer. It failed to differentiate between second or even third round opportunities. More could have asked about student satisfaction with their preparation units. Students could have been asked to justify their assessment of final outcomes in the decision making process. The questionnaire did produce sufficient reliable data to highlight differences between student accounts and some teacher evidence however, later confirmed by interview analysis.

Respondent error invalidated a small minority of student responses. This was probably due to students like Student 1, responding to personal agendas, talking or rushing to complete the exercise. Some students simply refused to accept the invalidity of their information – for example, Student 8, who claimed to have received all her first choices when her interview data clearly showed that she had not. She had adopted a literal belief in the validity of her experience based on the KS3 Managers' guarantee and could not seem to accept that her experience invalidated that certainty. Questionnaires were administered in the students' own form or teaching rooms, facilitating ecological validity.

5.5.4 Assessment of student interview methods and quality of data

Based on questionnaire responses the interviews provided opportunities for twenty students to clarify the meaning of their answers. In this way their evidence could be used to address the validity of teacher interview and student questionnaire data so that theories concerning the inequalities (or otherwise) of student access to the KS4 optional curriculum could be evaluated.

Taking place in strange places in order to secure confidentiality, the quality of evidence from these interviews varied. Although students were compliant and polite, they did not know the researcher prior to the interview and therefore had to be encouraged to participate. This took time and as the interviews were slotted in whenever an opportunity became available, some were rushed because time was short. The interviewer was anxious and may therefore have dominated some interviews. Sometimes a private room was not available. Having to interview students with a staff member nearby, who the students probably knew and I certainly did not, would inhibit discourse and undermine the ecological validity of the data. Unfortunately this situation could not be avoided as there were no other 'free' rooms available at the time.

To put students at ease some interview questions appertained to social and personal characteristics rather than an overly detailed focus of their experience. Nevertheless the data from student interviews confirmed that the KS3 Managers' guaranteed 'first choice claim' as an indicator of personalisation in KS3/4 wider curriculum choice was certainly not universally upheld. Later it emerged that there was very little difference in the experiences of normally achieving and underachieving students' experiences, except perhaps if the students were early language learners or recent immigrants.

5.5.5 Assessment of sampling procedures

In the time available, using Year 10 rather than Year 9 as a sampling frame proved satisfactory since the management process involved in KS3/4 wider curriculum choice was extremely tortuous, beginning at the same time as the research in September. While the investigation needed completion by April,

many Year 9 decisions would not be settled until mid-June. Moreover it was considered quite normal for about thirty students each year to continue negotiating changes throughout Year 10. Covering a much more extensive period than normal compared with other schools in the area, a focus on Year 9 would have created difficulties in completing the thesis on time.

5.5.5.1 The pastoral staff sample

Beginning with the KS3 Manager, the staff sample was selected because their pastoral role was connected directly or indirectly to the management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. The order in which these adults were interviewed after the KS3 Manager and Headteacher, as key players in this process, depended on availability, determined by their workload. The range of roles represented by this sample covered most aspects of the management process.

5.5.5.2 The questionnaire sample

Using two random tutor groups, the representativeness of this questionnaire sample (60 students) in terms of English language skills and geographic stability was confirmed by responses to Question 3 about length of stay in the UK and Question 4 concerning the students' period of attendance at the school. Institutional data on these issues was readily available from the SEF (2007, p.5). The gender balance of the sample was slightly different from the whole school, with rather more girls than boys.

The quality of data would have been more reliable if the sample had included the entire year group of 210 students, but this was not feasible for private research. Although it might have been possible to organise, data from a complete year cohort would have revealed a more accurate picture of the percentage of students not receiving their first choices. The volume of data produced however might have created difficulties in completing the research, given there were three research strategies to implement in a fairly short period of time. Moreover if the school's management team had found out that an entire year group was being questioned about an issue that had been dealt with some time ago they might have perceived this activity as a threat to their authority and integrity.

5.5.5.3 The student interview sample

A subset of the questionnaire sample, the interview sample of volunteer students was not representative since a substantial proportion (14/20) had been denied first choices. This 'non-probability sample' (Bryman 2008, p. 696) might have wanted to complain or felt confused because the KS3 Manager's guarantee regarding students' first choices had somehow failed to materialise. Whatever their motivation they provided some interesting evidence increasing the validity of the research.

5.5.6 Teacher assessment data

Widely used in most comprehensive schools today, professional perceptions of student progress accumulated as teacher assessment data are probably flawed because standardised criteria for assessment vary between courses. The way this criterion is used also varies between the members of staff asked to produce it. However it provides the only assessment evidence available for this research.

5.6 Discussion

The research produced conflicting accounts of the freedom with which student's democratic right is exercised, encapsulating the research problem. The evidence in response to the research question (RQ): 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' was inconclusive.

Given the singularity of his role in managing access to the KS4 wider curriculum, the KS3 Manager was able to keep hidden vital information about the way student choices were handled, given that the evidence from this research suggests that students did not receive first choices in every case.

Several staff members, including the Head of Language Support and the Inclusion Manager, hinted away from the recording device at the importance of student belief in the universality of the KS3 Manager's claim. Encouraging their democratic participation in the construction of personalised scripts like Option Choices (Miliband 2004b, Leadbeater 2004a, 2004b and 2005), their participation however, did not exclude the possibility that powerful adults

might 'legitimately' use this involvement for manipulation and social control (Rose and Miller 1992).

What distinguishes the research school from hypothetical situations alluded to by postmodernist and Marxist critics is that any manipulation, if it took place at all, was minimal and benevolent. The interests of the school (external examination results, performance in education league tables etc.) were not placed above the interests and welfare of the student (personalisation). The management of this policy was designed to optimise/maximise the outcome for each student and the school. That is why clear paths were available for confident students choosing courses commensurate with their potential and a more tortuous route for early language learners. Nevertheless there were very few students who felt their optional courses had been chosen for them. Their democratic right to choose, highly valued by the KS3 Manager, was preserved as far as it could be for every student.

Alternatively, the decision-making process was determined by the timetable and class sizes alone.

5.7 Summary

This chapter considers the pressure of power relationships inherent in the dialogue between student and manager involved in student decision-making during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice.

Bearing these issues in mind, a suitable analytical strategy was devised providing answers from research data to Specific Research Questions (SRQs 1-11). Synthesis and discussion follow, placing this evidence in the context of significant theoretical contributions identified through the Literature Review. Research strategies used to produce these answers are evaluated in the context of the research situation. Suitable theories emerge in answer to the Research Question (RQ): 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?'

Chapter 6 - Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to test the validity of claims and counter-claims that personalisation through student voice creates opportunities for equitable, motivating choice, revealing more about the stakeholder role in a contemporary English comprehensive school.

6.2 Research aims and objectives

In the context of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice in 2009/10, this investigation intended to uncover the effects of power differences between students and pastoral managers, and between students from a range of social and economic backgrounds on student decision-making. Its purpose was to provide evidence of one way personalisation has been interpreted through Personalised Learning (DfES 2004a) and to establish whether 'personalisation' as a concept is misrepresented in Personalised Learning.

In the fulfilment of these aims, the research question (RQ): 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?' was formulated. To provide evidence that addresses this question the following Specific Research Questions (SRQs 1-11) were drawn up. SRQs 1-4 and 6-8 addressed the point of view of pastoral managers while SRQs 9-11 aimed to reveal a student perspective, reflecting the dialogue involved in the research focus – student decision-making during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. SRQ 5 required factual information, linked to performativity and interpreted in the context of this study. In the course of this inquiry the following information was revealed.

6.3 Summary of the study

Thus, addressing issues concerned with personalisation in education:

SRQ 1: What is the meaning of personalisation in an inner city school today?

Interview data revealed there was no agreed institutional definition, but personalisation had an important role in raising attainment. In the context of wider curriculum choice, personalisation meant there was student input in extending the range of course and subject options. Students would choose from this list and at least two thirds would succeed in accessing their first choices, motivating them to attend school more often.

SRQ 2: How is KS3/4 wider curriculum choice managed?

Interviews with pastoral staff revealed the important role of Form Tutors in ensuring equity for individual students. The Head of Year dealt with problems arising at Form Tutor level. The KS3 Manager had devised the management system. Having complete control, he lead assemblies, produced teaching resources and handled all student returns. His role in facilitating student access to the KS4 optional curriculum had been shaped by his personal values.

SRQ 3: In the school context, how much freedom of choice and voice is afforded to students in the management of a Personalised Learning strategy like KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?

From the KS3 Manager's interview it became clear that student 'voice' is firstly engaged in developing the optional curriculum in KS4 by students giving their ideas for new courses and subject opportunities. If teachers have the skills and knowledge to teach these new subjects and courses, and the timetable will allow them, these additions are included in the list of choice opportunities. Access to these opportunities is controlled by the KS3 Manager, using timetabling problems and student oversubscription to justify denial. Claiming a universal guarantee of access to first choice opportunities, nevertheless student questionnaire data showed that the first choices of at least one third of the student sample may have been denied. This was done in order to precipitate further applications, possibly because the first choice application was not regarded as commensurate with student potential – or possibly this was because of timetabling and oversubscription issues. If student freedom of choice was manipulated, the intention was largely benevolent and could be regarded as an institutional development of 'personalisation.' Subsequent

choices might be accepted. Student satisfaction appeared generally high overall, possibly justifying this procedure.

SRQ 4: How if at all does the experience of underachieving students differ from this norm?

From the Headteacher's interview, the evidence suggests that as the over-arching aim of the school was to raise the achievement of every student, the school's response to underachieving students was positive rather than negative. Additional support through extra staff, out of hours teaching in small groups and specialist language assistance were offered to those who were disadvantaged. Otherwise potentially underachieving students were treated with fairness, dignity and respect. Raising student achievement has moral justification in this school because the material deprivation of the surrounding area.

Addressing performativity and achievement matters:

SRQ 5: What is the school's current record on student attainment?

Evidence from the Headteacher interview showed that in 2009 the school's 5 A*-C rate was 70%, but when Maths and English GCSE were included in these figures the 5 A*-C rate dipped to 34%, leaving the school quite close to becoming a National Challenge school. These schools have less than 30% 5A*-C when Maths and English GCSE incorporated into their school data. This would represent the school, possibly unfairly, as a 'failure' in the local media.

SRQ 6: What problems does the school face in meeting future targets?

Interview evidence from the Headteacher highlights the following problems:

The school caters for the children of immigrants, some of whom have no English or previous experience of education. They are often very poor. The school must help these students learn the language, integrate them into the school and sometimes deal with the effect of traumas these students may have experienced literally 'in transit'. Local children often have low levels of prior attainment. The school has to work hard to improve their confidence and

achievement. The greatest problem the school has is dealing with huge numbers of students with English is a second language.

SRQ 7: How useful/successful are current interpretations of student choice and voice during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice in motivating students?

From the interview with the KS3 Manager, advising students to choose subjects and courses they might enjoy improves attendance rates in Year 11, NEET rates (of students Not in Education, Employment or Training) later and leads to higher than average rates of progression into Higher Education.

Evidence from the Headteacher interview suggests that the KS3 Manager's interpretation of the student stakeholder role in this way is only one of several measures contributing to the success of the school.

The interview with the Inclusion Manager revealed that in her opinion, students who enjoyed their studies would achieve more.

Thus addressing the research problem:

SRQ 8: How, if at all does the school reconcile the philosophy behind 'personalisation' with the performativity agenda?

From interview evidence, the Headteacher claims that the institutional reconciliation of tension between personalisation and performativity is justified by social 'inclusion'. The implementation of achievement raising strategies is morally defensible as a means of providing access to employment and/or higher education opportunities for students who would otherwise be materially and socially deprived for the remainder of their lives. They need qualifications to secure decent futures so the school is simply acting as a facilitator in this regard. He is not in favour of attainment-raising to the detriment of student learning however.

Reflecting the dialogue between student stakeholders and pastoral managers, specific research questions require a student perspective on personalisation and performativity in the context of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. Thus:

SRQ 9: What is the student experience of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?

Evidence from questionnaires and interviews suggests variation in the degree of personalisation experienced by students. If personalisation meant accessing first choices, student questionnaire data suggests possibly about a third of them had no experience of it. If, as is more likely, personalisation means achieving a satisfactory outcome that meets student needs, then the majority experience personalisation.

Thus as the range of choice opportunities has increased since Personalised Learning was introduced 2004, the decision-making process for students today may have likewise become increasingly complex. From student interview data matched with teacher assessment data, it was possible to identify three student groups with differing experience of personalisation – normally achieving students who received their first choices, normally achieving students whose first choices were denied and underachievers whose choices had similarly been refused. There were potentially two explanations for the disparity in accessing the KS4 optional curriculum.

The first was the timetable and subject/course oversubscription. The second was that students had not made choices commensurate with their potential. As this might damage future outcomes – the students might become bored or disheartened, needing to be withdrawn from entry before course completion. This would be damaging for the student and the school. To avoid this possibility students were asked to take control of the situation for themselves by making further choices until suitable decisions emerged that were acceptable.

Providing a demonstration of the way neo-liberal self-surveillance strategies operate (Rose and Miller, 1992) this explanation remains a possibility. Evidence from the KS3 Manager suggested that applications were scrutinised and students asked to show commitment in order to access popular subjects like Business and ICT. Articulate students could easily negotiate their own personalised settlement. The less able had to proceed democratically. They might progress through several rounds of choice-taking until an acceptable

solution was found. Supported by Form Tutor encouragement and advice to 'try something new' or 'do something they might enjoy', these students may possibly have had a different experience from that of normally achieving students but they found the final outcome of this process perfectly acceptable.

SRQ 10: How does student evidence of the KS3/4 wider curriculum choice experience compare with pastoral managers' views?

Student questionnaire and interview evidence differs from evidence provided by the KS3 Manager. His universal guarantee of first choice access does not seem to be substantiated by student accounts of their experience. Suggesting a uniform approach to student satisfaction, their experience according to student interview data varies considerably. Moreover it is difficult to understand the rationale behind some decisions without access to teacher assessment data. Possibly the 'guarantee' was used to engage students in participation, selling them the opportunity of choosing part of their own curriculum. Ultimately they would have access to subjects and courses that they had chosen, but it might not occur at the first opportunity.

SRQ 11: How does the experience of underachieving students differ from that of normally achieving students during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice?

Student interview data suggests that underachieving students, except the lowest achievers like early language learners and/or those without prior experience of education, are no more likely to be denied or achieve access to first choices than normally achieving students in this school. This latter group, the lowest achievers, have covert specialist support throughout the wider curriculum choice negotiations to raise their potential. In this way they can at least, like everyone else, participate in their own decisions.

6.4 General conclusions – original knowledge emerging from this research

Using the evidence provided by SRQs 1-11 it is possible to answer the Research Question (RQ): 'To what extent is the equitable empowerment of

underachieving students affected during KS3/4 wider curriculum choice by the 'performativity' agenda?'

In the research school the position of underachieving students – those students who, according to the Headteacher in SRQ 6 come into the school either in Year 7 with low attainment or at various stages of their educational experience as asylum seekers or immigrants with scant experience of the English language or English customs – is supported positively, enhancing their stakeholder role during KS3/4 negotiations. Whether additional support makes their status equitable or not is open to discussion since the Heads of Language and Learning Support claimed the service offered by their departments was, despite the acute need of the students, under-funded and therefore imperfect.

The Senior Management Team must take a broader, whole school perspective to management. The allocation of finance must be balanced to cover, however thinly, the needs of all. Therefore too great an emphasis on the needs of their lowest achieving cohort might appear to be taking 'inclusion' too far, something the Headteacher was expressly against, arguing that:

'This school is very strong on inclusion' but *'If you're not too careful you can go too far down the inclusion line of making sure the children are safe at the expense of the achievement side where it doesn't matter if the children don't get a good set of GCSEs as long as they're happy, well cared for and safe. And that's not my understanding of inclusion at all. It's not about being inclusive while they're here; it's about being inclusive in society.'*

Providing a moral justification for performativity, the Headteacher tries to make the position of underachieving students as equitable as he can within budget while balancing their needs against the needs of other students. Nevertheless underachieving students are supported so they can have the opportunity to negotiate more equitably.

Therefore, if the KS3 Manager's marketing strategy can be set aside, the underlying message from research evidence is that this school fits Fielding's (2007, p.395), description of a person–centred school (see Table 2.2 in Section 2.3). It operates as a learning community where numerous strategies

are applied to maximise the achievement of categories or groups of students with differing educational needs. Attainment raising strategies are personal, caring and respectful, demonstrated by the evidence from pastoral staff. The school operates as an inclusive community of teachers and learners where Form Tutors assume a trusted and active pastoral role. Underachievers are not specifically targeted but drawn up and into a vortex of positive experience where strategies are implemented to overcome rather than concentrate on their difficulties.

This situation may change in the future however, if the added pressures of performativity reduce its status to that of a Challenge School.

6.5 A retrospective evaluation, generalisability and limitations

Through its management of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice, this investigation provides a detailed picture of the way personalisation operates. To my knowledge such a detailed investigation of this area has not been attempted before.

The value is limited however as a means of assessing New Labour's education policy because of its restricted focus and the limitations of sample size. As a case study representing one of many potential responses to the adaptation of PL in a particular location, it is therefore difficult to generalise from these findings. However the detail of its 'rich description' may prove valuable.

6.6 Implications for further research

Further studies might involve the same or similar strategies, focusing on

students' roles in KS3/4 decision-making, but extending the external validity of data by comparing it with evidence from similar 11-16 comprehensive schools. Taking ethnicity as a variable, similar research in a predominantly white working class school might reveal different interpretations of power and social control, as well as institutional values and strategies for raising student achievement. Adding the input of stakeholder voices from a rural middle class area, research into KS3/4 wider curriculum choice might reveal the impact of

social class on student's freedom of choice. Drawing evidence from all three situations together would provide a richer, fuller picture from which to assess Labour's education policy.

Alternatively it would be interesting to compare this evidence of KS3/4 wider curriculum choice with Foucauldian interpretations of other elements in PL, like workforce reorganisation or community links to see whether, like Bragg's investigation into Students as Researchers (2007), elements of manipulation do in fact lie behind their introduction and practice.

Appendices

Appendix 1 - Headteacher letter, requesting permission to use the research school. April 2009

Dear (Headteacher's name)

As part of my research into the tension between personalization and performativity I have reached a stage when I need to begin my research, 'in the field' so to speak, testing the pitfalls and hazards of managing students as a researcher rather than a teacher. Furthermore I need to do this from the beginning of September 2009 for about six months.

Since my research focus is the Year 9 Options process, concerned with student empowerment and equity (personalisation) and the practical effects of league tables (performativity) on student choice, involves recording interviews with several teachers and carrying out a student survey, followed by student interviews, also recorded – hence the length of time necessary for the overall process to take place.

Students will be asked to recall their Options experience, influences on subject choices etc. while teachers will be interviewed about their role in managing KS3/4 wider curriculum choice. With their permission, I could pass on a transcript of evidence to the school if this was of any interest to you or SLT.

This student group should be made up of random ability students and therefore could come from a single tutor group. I would need to meet them briefly beforehand, hand out letters and once sufficient returns were made, arrange for the questionnaires to be administered and the interviews to take place. Certainly the survey could take place during one of the quieter tutor periods later in the term or it could be when the Form Tutor wants a bit of space to deal with specific students who were not part of the pilot group.

While the target group for the final research will be Year 9, I am expecting that Year 10 students may settle quickly and be more confident, facilitating the piloting process. If this proves correct and to minimise the intrusion, I may

only need to have one group session with them. Since the interviews may take longer, I would in the interim be willing to act as classroom support with groups of Yr.10 students if this was helpful to the school. To do this obviously I will need a CRB check which I will investigate, together with various levels of consent - hence my writing to you now.

If you or SLT wanted any further information, I would be happy to provide it. You would, needless to say, be given open access to all research findings. Meanwhile, I hope all is well at College. I trust I will hear from you very soon and I enclose a stamped, addressed envelope

Best wishes,

Yours faithfully

Appendix 2 - Introductory topic outline for questions in teacher interviews concerning research into the Options System at this college

This research concerns the tension between personalisation and the pressure on state education to improve educational achievement (performativity) year on year.

1. What is/was your role in connection with the Options process?
2. How long have you been involved in this or any other role concerning Options?
3. How long have you been involved in this or any other role concerning Options?
4. What do you feel has been the effect of personalisation on Option Choice?
5. What do you feel about any changes?
6. How have these changes affected student achievement?
7. This School operates a 'First Choice' system r. e. wider curriculum choice. Would you agree or disagree with this statement? Please give reasons.
8. What effect has this policy had on the College as a whole?
9. What factors do you think most influence student choice?
10. Which is most important in your role – personalisation or improving grades?
11. What for you is the purpose of education?

Obviously both the question content and the ordering can and I hope will change. This e-mail is simply meant to provide rough guidance, acting as a focus for your thoughts beforehand. Any problems – please let me know.

Many thanks,

Jenny.

Appendix 3 - Parental/ student consent letter for interview participation

Leicester
10th December 2009

Dear Parent or Guardian,

Research project into influences on students' choice of GCSE options.

As part of a research project at Leicester University into the effects of personalisation on students' choice of GCSE options, I would like to ask permission for your child to help by completing a brief questionnaire during tutor time during the week beginning December 14th. Further short interviews to clarify their responses may take place in the New Year (2010).As part of wider research into the development of personalisation, this project is particularly important since personalisation affects every child in this country. Meanwhile this topic is seriously under - researched.

While I am asking you for your assistance in my role as a researcher, your son or daughter may benefit from taking part if s/he has opted for Business or Sociology where at some time s/he might need to conduct a research project of his/her own. The discussion will be recorded for sound. However video recording will not be used. While summaries of transcribed data may be made available to Mr Buckle and/or Mr Boyd, student identities, along with that of the college, will be kept confidential. Meanwhile both Mr Boyd and Mr Buckle have consented to this research taking place. However I now need your consent along with that of your child. Could your child return the reply slips to his/her Form Tutor before Monday 14th December 2009 please? Failure to do so will mean your child cannot participate in the research.

Thanking you in anticipation,

Yours faithfully,

Jenny Martin.

Parents' Permission Slip

I ………………….. (Parent's name) give my permission for my son/daughter

…………………… (Student's name)………….. (Tutor Group) to take part in research in Option Choices at this Community College. I understand that any information resulting from this interview will be kept confidential along with the identity of the school. However if I wish to discuss any aspect of this research I can do so by e-mail to: jm124@le.ac.uk

Student's Permission Slip

I ………………………………. (Student's name)…………..(Tutor group) agree to take part in research into the effects of personalisation on my experience of the Options process in Year 9. I understand that any information resulting from this interview will be kept confidential along with the identity of the school. However if I wish to discuss any aspect of this research I can do so by e-mail to: jm124@le.ac.uk

Appendix 4 - Pilot of student questionnaire

Options Experience Research-please answer these questions

1. Remember last year –options, what subjects/courses did you choose?

2. Were you able to have all your first choices? Yes/No Please explain the reasons for this

3. Which were first choices and which were not?
   a………………….. b……………..c………….……..d……………...
4. How many vocational courses were you allowed? Why? (please give reasons)

5. Are you happy with the subjects and courses you are doing now? Yes/No. Please give reasons

a.

b.

c.

d.

6. Why did you choose them? Was it because

(a) you had a career in mind
(b) your parents had encouraged your choice
(c.)advice from your Form Tutor
(d) not enough students were interested
(e.) the course was oversubscribed?
(f) your friends encouraged you
(g) another reason, please specify

Please cross out the reasons that do not apply to you, but tick those that do. From the boxes you have ticked, please rank the reasons from 1-7 in terms of their importance in influencing your choices

	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
(a) you had a career in mind				
(b) your parents had encouraged your choice				
(c.) advice from your Form Tutor				
(d) not enough students were interested				
(e.) the course was oversubscribed?				
(f) your friends encouraged you				
(g) another reason, please specify				

Thank you for completing this questionnaire

Appendix 5 - Student questionnaire

Options Experience Research - please answer these questions

Remember last year's-option choices, what subjects/courses did you choose? This research is concerned with influences on students' option choices. From the questionnaire data, further informal interviews will take place with a representative sample of the population completing these questionnaires, so firstly

1. Can you include an identity code here, please? (e.g. jm124) ……………
2. How old are you?
3. How long have you lived in England? ……yrs. ………….months/ all my life……………..
4. How long, approximately, have you been attending this school? Please tick where appropriate.

Less than a year	1 years	2 years	3 years	4 years

5. Were you able to have your first choices in all three Option Blocks? Yes/No
6. If no in any Option Block, please explain the reasons for this

…………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………….

7. What subjects/courses did you choose?

(a)

(b)

(c)

8. What influenced your choice overall? Please tick the appropriate box.

Family's wishes	Career choice	Form Tutor advice	Enjoyed the subject	Teacher advice
Got on well with teacher	Connexions advice	Preferred teaching style	Fancied something new	Other, please state

9. Then give each reason a number, where 1 refers to your most important reason until you reach 10 as your least important reason.

Family's wishes	Career choice	Form Tutor advice	Enjoyed the subject	Teacher advice
Got on well with teacher	Connexions advice	Preferred teaching style	Fancied something new	Other, please state

10. Did you feel the units you covered in tutor time using your Student Progress file were helpful in making your choice? Yes/No
11. How helpful on a scale of 1-5, where 1 implies excellence and 5 suggests dissatisfaction, was the PDP Unit on Options?

1	2	3	4	5

12. Are you happy with the subjects and courses you are doing now? Yes/No

a. Option Block 1 Yes/No

b. Option Block 2 Yes/No

c. Option Block 3 Yes/No

Thank you for taking part in this research study.

Appendix 6: Teacher interview sample

Interview with Head of Learning Support -Tuesday 12th January, 2010

Q. You must be involved with children with special educational needs and their choice of Options in Yr. 9 so I wonder if you could comment to start off with on whether there is a different procedure for them, or whether the procedure is modified or whether it is exactly the same?

Ans. They have exactly the same procedure, exactly the same forms and exactly the same assemblies as every other child in this school. However we do put learning support assistants with our most vulnerable students to support them through the process. And if we know we have a particular student with particular difficulties choosing something they are obviously not going to be able to access, we discuss it with them because of their individual needs. So we're very much on the case, based on the fact that the child should be able to access what they want on a first choice basis. But we do have instances where that is not able to happen, either individually or with support from the LS Assistants, however they all begin on a level playing field.

Q. Can you give me an example of that?

Ans. I can -gives example of current Yr. 11 with learning disability and visual impairment, involving tunnel vision who wanted to take up a motor engineering course at Leicester College. The main problem was that he wanted to access the college independently, as he thought he was too grown up to accept the presence of an accompanying LS Assistant. Parents were extremely concerned. Long debate followed. He finally realised for himself that travelling across Leicester could be hazardous and the course might not be suitable given his disabilities, so he looked at Food Technology, decided he's always enjoyed it and took that instead.

Q. So to maintain his self-esteem, it was his decision?

Ans. It was his decision, it was his choice eventually but we never turned round and said he couldn't do it. We were always looking for ways to enable him if we could. There was a lot of parental input. They were quite frightened of him doing it. It was based on discussion with himself and his parents, and we came to an amicable agreement with all of them actually.

Q. Can you give me another example with a different resolution, please?

Ans. We have another student who desperately wanted to take up Business

Studies. And we said he might not find it easy but because it was his first choice he started the course in September with an LS Assistant helping him. He himself realised the work was far too hard for him. He was able to move into a space that had been allotted to him in his second choice. He'd had a go but right from the start I was aware there might be issues, but at least he'd had a go.

Q. So there are various responses, various strategies but central to all of this is the value that the child has the right to choose, they all have an equal right to choose and that choice is managed in different ways depending on the individual needs of the child?

Ans. There are a few provisos however - for example children who wish to do the Diploma are told beforehand that they have to be above a certain level in technology to be considered, in other words to be at the other end of the learning spectrum to access that course. And that applies to everybody. Everybody's told that if they want to do the diploma course, they must be able to achieve a certain level in English, Maths and Science because of the workload. The same is true for triple science. Applications have to be approved by the Head of Subject.

Q. That presumably would be based on the available statistical data?

Ans. And I think the students themselves, most of ours wouldn't even think of opting for such subjects. However the children at our end have the same forms as everybody else. They have support to fill those forms in. We do look closely at those forms to ensure they've filled them in properly and that they've not chosen something that's totally outlandish, apart from the tow examples I gave you. Usually the parents get involved and there may be real reasons for opting out of particular subjects.

Q. In this research, one of the theories I'm interested in concerns the stakeholder role. As an aspect of personalisation, this role was inferred in relation to students in 2004. But it wasn't specifically applied to students until 2007. Critics (e.g. Rose and Miller) considering the stakeholder role, imply that it's not really about rights (e.g. the right to choose) but it's actually teaching the student to control themselves through self-surveillance. For children here that controlling aspect is introduced through the processes preceding the Options - an aspect of

the preparation for children making their choices e.g. the Progress File where thinking about careers and considering the qualifications students might need acts as a 'control' and this may be particularly pertinent for children with learning difficulties.

Ans. Oh no, indeed a lot of the time we do suggest to our children that they choose something they enjoy, going down the route spelt out in initial assemblies where on the whole they are advised against making choices because their best friend has chosen it or because they like Mrs. Bloggs who teaches that subject etc. At that time the whole cohort is told if you've got a particular career in mind (e.g. if you're highflying and want to be a doctor, you might want to choose this particular science course etc.) But in this initial assembly as the whole cohort are given reasons for choosing this particular option and reasons for not, the same advice is heard by the special needs children as well. They're in the Assembly too and are not treated any differently.

Q. And it's not something that Learning Support develops more or less except when there is a problem as you indicated earlier?

Ans. It's just really that they are then supported through filling in the forms and going through the Option Booklets. They are encouraged to speak to parents and if they've no idea what they want to do as a career, we always advise them to consider the subjects they really enjoy, saying, well, if you've got to study this subject for the next two years and you've not got a clue, don't choose something you'll hate because once you're in it, you've got to do it. So we very much look into individual needs and try to include parents in this too. I did once have a 'statemented' boy who had a reading age of below nine, but he insisted he wanted to be a vet. This was totally, totally inappropriate because there was no way we would ever get to a stage where he could do that sort of thing. Eventually we encouraged him to do subjects he enjoyed. And when he reached post -16, he actually had been working in an animal welfare centre as a volunteer at the weekends, as a sort of 'kennel maid', but obviously as a boy. And he actually got a job with them when he left. So he never got to be a vet but he did work with animals - so I suppose the advice we gave him wasn't totally irrelevant. It was quite realistic and shaped by his interests in animals. There was no way he would have ever become a vet!

Q. So the students with special educational needs in this college have support with the paperwork before and during the Options process - and afterwards in dealing with any changes in course choices, if that's what they feel they want to do. The parents are brought in, so it's more of a 'collegiate' approach to options with the child leading the choice process throughout.

Ans. And ultimately, at the end of the day, when we're presented with the timetable, we then have to support that timetable which sometimes causes an absolute nightmare when I realise I have got half my SEN cohort between x number of subjects across each side of the timetable and I realise I haven't quite got enough staff to cover it all. And then you have to start looking at priorities of support. So on the whole, I try. I supply the child with literacy support in their option lessons or I with an LSA who will work with them at lunchtime to catch up with work. Hopefully we manage to ensure that they choose courses they can access and enjoy.

Q. And then you scaffold support?

Ans. Then we try to put support in to help them. I'm not saying that we're perfect and it always works because often it doesn't. We have had students who have chosen things which in our heart of hearts we've probably known were not going to work. But we've always felt that because they're so desperate to do it, we feel we've got to give them a chance and then things have had to change and they haven't got their first choice but at least they've got something they can access. I'm not trying to say we're perfect by any stretch of the imagination but I think we go a long way to provide support for individual to access the courses they want.

Q. So there's a degree of autonomy for them regardless of learning difficulty?

Ans. And as I say, I'm not claiming to be the most perfect SENCO in the world and I always get the choices right and the support right because we're all human beings and maybe you advise things…..

And I've been equally surprised the other way. Where I've had students choose subjects I've thought, 'Oh dear, he'll never ever access that in a month of Sundays,' but he actually did fairly well. So it does work both ways. For example I had a student not so long ago who was on the autistic spectrum

and chose Business Studies .I didn't think he could access or manage the coursework, manage presentations and various other things. And I thought he'd never, ever get to manage the subject, but he ended up with a D, and I didn't think that was bad at all, considering the issues he carried around and all the baggage he had, when he came out with a D, he'd done really well and I'd wanted to sway against him. It just goes to show what can happen if these students really want to do something.

Q. There was another aspect of this situation I need to ask you about. That boy got a D - is everyone always entered for exams?

Ans. Not always, there are issues.

Q. Do students just vote with their feet? So it isn't that students are perceived to be not good enough?

Ans. No, it's usually because they haven't completed coursework or they're doing design options and they've not produced any design work so if they've not done the work, students can't be entered. I've had students with quite severe needs who've come out with a G grade.

Q. And how do they feel when they've done that?

Ans. Some students are quite pleased. When they come back to collect their results, they're over the moon that they've got something and some of the staff are really over the moon about some of these children who have quite low ability when they come to us. We had one lad in Yr. 7, unable to communicate because he'd left Mum behind in, I think it was Somalia. He came over here to be with Dad and was extremely traumatised. He couldn't put a sentence together and would sit under the table. When in Yr 11 he got a G in RE, he was absolutely over the moon.

Q. Do you think that personalisation has made much difference? Has it widened the choice and given children more scope?

Ans. I don't know. Some people link this to 'inclusion' and are very much into the idea that children should have an open choice. But then again, I think some children - if they have wonderful expectations that they're going to be a doctor or a vet, well we have to be realistic with them. And that's the thing that does worry me a bit. Giving students this open choice right from the beginning leads to wonderfully high expectations, when at the end of the day, all they're going to get instead of three GCSEs is a few G grades.

I think we're doing them a disservice if at the end of the day they just get Gs. And that's the other side of option choice that worries me. The children are given advice that if you do this course you will leave with 2 GCSEs, but I worry that we're raising unrealistic expectations - as with the little boy who thought he was going to be a vet, when he never was. I feel we could be feeding children a pipe dream, when at some stage we will have to be realistic for them.

Q. How valuable is the concept of career in shaping children's choice?

Ans. In many cases the children may not have any ideas of career so I try to say to them, do something you enjoy - hopefully that will give them a framework for choice - and choose a broad spread. But the pipe dream idea still worries me. For example - the three children who should have gone into Special schools, an idea unpopular with their families. Demonstrating probably the lowest levels of ability previously seen in school e.g. one has a brain injury while another has severe autism. Already in negotiation with SLT, trying to reduce the number of option for them from 3 to 2, to allow more time for one-to-one literacy and counselling specified in their statements. This will take up some time, but is in the interests of the child and therefore needs to come first, but the language of Option choice seems inappropriate for these children. Hard decisions will have to be made.

Interview terminated by the closing bell.

Appendix 7: Interview with Student 9

This began with the student confirming his identity code from the questionnaire. The interview progressed as follows:

Q. I'd like to clarify a couple of things about your background, if I may, at first, just by way of introduction – Are you the oldest in your family?

Ans. (without any hesitation) I'm the youngest.

Q. How many brothers and sisters?

Ans. (again without hesitation) I've got two sisters.

Q. So you're the 'longed for son, are you? Were you born here?

Ans. Yes, I was born here.

Q. At the General?

Ans. Yes. (He laughs)

Q. So you're the youngest. The girls, are they working, are they much older than you or are they in Higher Education?

Ans. Four years older. One of my sisters is in university. My other sister is working.

Q. Right, right, so what's the one who's in university, what is she going to be?

Ans. An accountant.

Q. And the one who's working is?

Ans. She's doing a working course so she's training to become a teacher at the same time.

(Interview interrupted by someone wanting us to vacate the room. Interviewer apologises to student.)

Ans. continues. She's doing an NVQ course where she works and she gains a degree as well.

Q. Right, that's brilliant isn't it? So she's the one in the middle then?

Ans. No .she's the oldest.

(We move to another room. Student interview continues.)

Q. And how would you describe your background? What are you – presumably a Muslim?

Ans. I'm Muslim, yes.

(Interviewer apologises for having to reset the recording device because of the move.)

Q. Sorry. So your background? You're Muslim?

Ans. I'm Bangladeshi.

Q. Oh that's great, great. I'm trying to get a spread of different people and it's working out very, very well. Yes. So why did your family come here?

Ans. Erm (pauses for three seconds while he thinks about his answer), my granddad came to work here first.

Q. Did he?

Ans. Yes. He came to work here and then he brought my dad along and my dad wanted to stay so then he decided to stay.

Q. So did your granddad stay?

Ans. No, my granddad's gone back.

Q. That's often the way isn't it, that they - older people feel very much that their home is where they were brought up, which is fair enough. But you are happy to stay here?

Ans. Yes I'm happy to stay here.

Q. So you would see yourself as British Asian?

Ans. (very firmly) Yes.

Q. That's good. Right so you've been here (in this school) for four years. All of your secondary education was in this school. So that's fine, so presumably this school was your first choice?

Ans. Yes.

Q. But in your Options you weren't able to have your first choices? (of Law, ICT and Business)

Ans. Yes.

Q. And the reason you didn't get into these courses was that they were full? But Business and ICT are very popular at this school, aren't they?

Ans. Yes.

Q. Have you got a career in mind?

Ans. I'm thinking of going down the Medicine and Law path, either. It's between them.

Q. Right. So when you're choosing your courses at advanced level, choosing the right ones will be critical.

Ans. Yes.

Q. What particularly draws you to these areas?

Ans. Erm (pauses for two seconds while he thinks). I think they're interesting. Law, I'm interested in. Medicine and Science are just as interesting. I've always been interested in them as well.

Q. So you intend to go to QE then?

Ans. Yes.

So when you made your Options Choices, which course was a career choice? Which one was it?

Ans. Law was my career choice in my Options.IT and Business I was advised by my sisters to take.

Q. but Law dominated at that time, did it?

Ans. Yes.

Q. So there were reasons for your first choices – that it (Law) was your career choice. You were quite into Law at that time but possibly you wouldn't know a great deal about it? Did you do Work Experience in a solicitor's office?

Ans. No, I didn't go into a solicitors'. I chose office work - something like that – just to see how I'd be. I got the Royal Mail instead.

Q. So you had a great deal of control over that choice.

Ans. Yes

Q. Well, OK, but it's still people working together as a team, isn't it? Your family - they're quite keen that you're into these professions, or is that just your sisters?

Ans. They advise me but they don't really force me to do anything. They just say 'You do what you want to do, really, whatever you feel like you want to do.'

Q. So you enjoy your subjects now. Which do you enjoy the most?

Ans. Now that I've been there, I enjoy Law.

Q. You do?

Ans. Yes!

Q. Now you might have stepped on something there! Of course you have to do Psychology to be a Medic. And Media is helpful with written communication skills, so those choices are quite sensible and still keep your career options open. But were you allocated these subjects or were they your own choices? You said they were your fifth and sixth choice.

Ans. Yes

Q. You were told to take these subjects rather than your first choices?

Ans. Yes.

Q. OK. How helpful were the preparation materials – SPF etc. Your questionnaire response suggests you were not so impressed by them?

Ans. Mostly because, like, I've got two sisters….

Q. And did they come here?

Ans. Yes. They mostly told me, so most of what I did in form time, I sort of already knew.

Q. So it was just that you felt it was a waste of time because you knew it already?

Ans. Yes.

Q. So although you felt this aspect of Options was a waste of time, you seem to be extremely happy with the outcome?

Ans. I am very happy with my Options and I wouldn't change any of them.

Q. I suppose you realise you chose three subjects that were completely new to you – but you're still happy with them?

Ans. Yes.

Q. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Ans. No.

Q. Thank you.

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