

BLUE SKIES LEARNING

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A report out this week by a Labour guru calls for a different approach in schools, with children playing an active part. But, wonders John Crace, will ministers take it on board? Turn off the dual carriage-way in Cramlington, nine miles north of Newcastle, and you come to a flat, wind-swept open space. On one side there's a fenced-off building site; on another there are some low-rise buildings from the 1960s and 70s that look well past their prime. It's somehow hard to reconcile all this with anyone's shining example of a school in the last century, let alone in this century. And yet a new report, to be published by the Innovation Unit this week, suggests that is precisely what Cramlington community high school should be. What Next? Twenty One Ideas for Twenty First Century Education is Charles Leadbeater's synthesis of the current best practice in six schools (or groups of schools) that have been working closely with the Innovation Unit over the past 10 years. Leadbeater's Demos report, Personalisation Through Participation, helped kick-start the slow drift towards personalised learning in government education policy, and his recent book, We Think, argues that participation will become the central organisational basis of society. He believes that schools which don't understand - or pay attention to - their changing relationships with their pupils and their communities are the ones that struggle. "Learning can no longer be seen as something that is done to children by teachers," he says, "nor even as something that happens only in schools between the hours of 8.30am and 3.30pm. It is now something that can happen at any time and in any number of different ways; schools have to be able to adapt to these new circumstances and continually reinvent themselves to find new ways of engaging with their students." This might all sound a bit theoretical and idealistic for some tastes, but Leadbeater insists there are schools that are doing just this and that the people who are leading them, far from being idealogues, are pragmatists. "This isn't about abandoning the standards agenda," he says.