THE NATIONAL CENTER ON SCALING UP EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

Using Personalization to Get at the Core of Student Learning

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Abstract

With the study that has gone into personalizing education by the National Center for Scaling Up Effective Schools in recent years, there now must be the consideration as to how personalizing the actual curriculum should occur. In the current testing environment created by the implementation of Common Core, this will be a challenging endeavor. We know students can benefit from personal relationships throughout the school day; unfortunately, during actual instruction, the student often vanishes to test preparation in the form of common assessments, impersonal writing prompts, and other often-times frantic practices in which the primary goal is simply to manipulate test scores. The emphasis on data becomes the focus, rather than the quality of instruction. Many practitioners understand that the standards of Common Core, at their most basic level, can be applied to any lesson that has true value, and the skills themselves are often useful ones that will lead to preparing students for college. But even the skills lose authenticity in the current data-driven environment. The goals of this paper are to address the following areas:

- Review the positive impact that Personalization of Academic and Social-Emotional Learning has had on schools in Florida
- Look at how the emphasis on testing data and learning gains hinders personalizing the curriculum
- Discuss the ways in which teachers might implement Common Core with ease, authenticity, and in a way that connects with students

Using Personalization to Get at the Core of Student Learning

Early in the 2012-2013 school year, my principal asked me if I would be interested in participating in a project in which several universities would be collaborating with high schools across Broward County. The goal of the project was to use personalization to improve how students experienced school, and teachers were being asked to help create and implement a personalization model for Broward. The kickoff event was that week, so I had to let him know if I would like to represent Monarch High School.

A few days later I was sitting in a large banquet room with teachers, counselors, and principals from across Broward, the Superintendent of Broward County Public Schools, and representatives from several universities. There were formal introductions, a dinner, and then a presentation explaining the merits of personalization. During the presentation, my mind was working. I wanted to know how much of a role teachers would actually play in this. And I also had my concerns. Broward County is the sixth largest public school system in the country. It had seen its share of initiatives over the years. All had promised to be one-size-fits-all makeovers, and yet none had ever worked for me. I wondered how this would be different.

The first NCSU session was the next day, and it answered a few of my questions. The presenters explained that the idea for PASL originated in a study that pinpointed personalization as one of the key elements of effective schools. The teachers, counselors, and principals from Broward were being asked to take that information and use it to create some kind of prototype that could be used in high schools in order to foster this much-needed facet of education. There were three schools that the prototype would be tested out on: Piper, Flannagan, and Blanche Ely. The other schools involved, Monarch one of them, were there to offer suggestions in order to facilitate a range of perspectives. What was the actual prototype supposed to be? That was

entirely up to us. It had to be feasible. It had to be adaptable. It had to be effective.

It took most of the year before we finalized what we thought the prototype should look like. Part would focus on teaching students how to "do" school—setting goals and dealing with stress. The other part would be getting together a team of adults to mentor students and check in with them during the year—in short, to let them know they had someone on campus whom they could speak with.

Piper kicked off their 2013-2014 school year with an event that brought the incoming freshmen class, their parents, and others from the community into the school. Here, the students and their parents heard about the importance of succeeding in high school, and the incoming freshmen made a pledge to graduate. Teachers in 9th grade Science, Language Arts, and HOPE classes followed a cohort of students in order to check in with them and make sure they had everything they needed to succeed. Flanagan implemented lessons through 9th grade HOPE classes to help students learn strategies for school success, particularly in regards to interpersonal skills. Students were taught how to deal with stress and how to react in certain situations by "pausing" before reacting. Flanagan also had their 9th grade teachers check in with their period 2 students on a regular basis. Blanche Ely perhaps took up the most daunting task, attempting to implement PASL to their entire school through their period 1 teachers. This task was taken up by checking in with every student to make sure they were getting what they needed from teachers, counselors, and administrators.

The results were impressive. By comparing current freshmen with 9th graders from previous years, the three PASL schools reported fewer absences, more students on track for graduation, fewer disciplinary issues, and positive feedback from parents. What was more impressive was the change in school cultures, from greater empathy inside and outside of the

classroom to a more positive feeling for students toward their schools. Administrators meanwhile talked about how students were taking more responsibility for themselves and their studies. Teachers formed better relationships with their students, who in turn felt more included in classroom activities.

Since Monarch was not one of the innovation schools, we did not implement the PASL prototype, but I took what I could from the time spent working on the project. One strategy all three innovation schools had decided to use were RCIs (Rapid Check-Ins), which were a way to make sure teachers were reaching every student in their cohort. Flannagan, Blanche Ely, and Piper each decided to track their RCIs, taking note of *which* students were "intentionally" contacted, *when*, and *what* was learned from the brief interaction. I chose to commit myself to a less formal approach. I made it my goal to be more mindful of those students who often faded into the background of my classes. The quiet ones. The defiant ones. The not-so-thrilled-to-be-at-school-today ones. I hoped that by following these students and committing to checking up on them as often as possible, they might view my class (and school in general) in a more positive light.

The more I interacted with these students, the more the mood in my classes became inclusive. One student who had said nothing for months started to joke around with me and his peers in the hallways and during class. One who had been skipping school at least twice a week began to come every day, smiling every time I congratulated her for making it to seventh period. Another who had a strained relationship with her mother and father and had been transferred out of my class due to class-size reduction returned at the end of the day at least twice a week to let me know how she was doing with her new teacher. Another remained shy and silent, but she would give me a smile whenever I said hello, and as the weeks progressed, her personality began

to come out more and more in her writing. I counted it as a minor victory. The RCIs were working.

But something still troubled me. Early on in the process of creating the PASL prototype, there had been a discussion about whether or not to put together a set of lessons that would focus on personalization techniques, a kind of curriculum for teachers to use. There was talk, a little preliminary work, but ultimately the idea was dismissed in fear of forcing some kind of doctrine on teachers. PASL, in order to be effective, needed to be adaptable. But I wondered if RCIs and strategies to succeed in school were as far as personalization could go. I wondered if the curriculum itself could be affected by personalization. I knew that stating outright how and what to teach would not work. Mandating a curriculum was the opposite of personalization. But I was not interested in writing curriculum; I just wanted to see how using personalization might affect what was already out there.

My first thoughts went to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). Most of the strategies I had seen and heard about in relation to teaching the Standards were not what PASL participants had in mind when we talked about personalization. The curriculum was often hurried along in the form of lecturing or note taking. Fear of end-of-course exams sometimes created a sterile, test-centered atmosphere as the focus on students' scores overshadowed the more practical needs of the students themselves. If the research showed that personalizing is inclusive and motivates students to stay in school, why weren't schools using personalization when it came to teaching Common Core? Was Common Core just about the test, or was it about the practical skills it addressed? Those skills, if applied in an authentic way that was relevant, would become more valued to students, and wouldn't that prepare them for college and beyond, along with any tests they were required to take along the way?

I continued to use what I had learned from being a part of the NCSU gatherings. RCIs had by now become a thing that I didn't even need to think about anymore. I liked the students and they seemed to genuinely like me. But even if a student likes a teacher, that student's attention can only be held for so long if the subject matter seems boring or insignificant. I wanted to see what would happen if I taught them skills with personalization in mind. I decided the best vehicle to test this on would be the personal essay. It would give them the opportunity to study other "mentor" writers, learn their techniques, and, most importantly, talk about their own lives and what is important to them. Meanwhile, I would be able to cover other skills along the way: constructing simple and complex sentences, using words and images effectively in order to paint a picture of their lives, the importance of audience and purpose… I planned to also include a writing workshop at the end so that we could discuss how well students in the class were getting their ideas across as well as to point out issues with style and grammar. The entire undertaking would teach them to read, write, edit, and have thoughtful discussions.

We got to work. It was a long process, and by the end, I was worried we had used up too much class time. But then the writing workshops began. We spread them out over a few weeks, taking the time to read each personal essay on the overhead projector. It was a process I had used in my Creative Writing classes, but I wasn't sure what would happen when the subject matter was about the students themselves and not fictional characters. What did happen surprised me. The workshops did not take on the tone of brief, polite conversations where I had to force students to verbally peer edit each other's work. Instead, the students looked at each essay as a way of getting to know aspects of each other they would not have known otherwise. They discussed the essays in ways that did not simply critique the grammatical mistakes, sentence structure, and clarity of their peers' work, but also the social implications these pieces were

addressing. They were learning about each other. They were learning empathy. Whenever I had assigned a timed writing prompt in class in the past, students groaned and barely made an effort. But now they were taking an interest in their writing and valued what their peers thought. They were eager to learn about each other, about their views of the world as well as their challenges and successes.

Seeing them genuinely take an interest in each other's lives in this manner was enough for me, but what had they learned in relation to Common Core? As I reviewed the Standards, it was clear that we had covered more than 90% of the skills a tenth grade student should be using in a Language Arts class. We had read mentor texts and discussed the techniques of authors. We had applied writing and language skills. We had learned to speak and, more importantly, listen to each other. And the entire time, they had been authentically engaged.

Worksheets, lectures, note-taking strategies, common assessments, and formulaic writing practices clash with the idea of a personalized education. Students will oftentimes dismiss a lesson if it involves filling in the blanks or sitting back passively while another talks at them. They don't want to be the passengers of a lesson; they want to drive it, to interact with it. PASL is the culture shift that enables this interaction to occur. The same information flows through the classroom, just in a new way. Personalizing the curriculum allows teachers to rethink the curriculum, to focus on their students and what is important to them. This adaptability gives educators the flexibility to teach the standards required for end of class exams along with the authenticity that makes any school environment more valuable for students.

PASL allows us to constantly rethink not what skills we are teaching but how we are teaching them; it allows us to adapt to students' needs and interests. When we change a school culture and make it more personalized, the way teachers bring information to their students does

not multiply, it simply transforms, and that fosters growth for all involved. Putting the student first—not some test—creates the atmosphere for authentic learning.