



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Sonia Caus Gleason

MAKE PERSONALIZATION THE AGENT OF EQUITY

When people talk about their favorite teachers, they usually speak of being known and encouraged as a learner and as a treasured and understood person. The personalization movement in education seeks to make this experience less episodic, to cultivate those types of experiences for *every* student, with regularity.

With systematic approaches to embrace and tend to each learner's gifts and challenges, personalization can be an equalizer. But for this to happen, we need to be intentional about increasing access and support, especially for students of color and the economically poor. We need to make personalized learning the agent of equity.

Just as wealthier families have more access to personal trainers and health care providers, curated entertainment playlists, and bespoke prom dresses, their children historically have more access to personalized learning experiences.

Wealthier communities are more likely to offer course choices and opportunities beyond the regular education curriculum, including more varied special education and support services, Advanced Placement options, extended day learning offerings, sports with their expensive equipment and fields, arts, and other extracurricular activities.

Furthermore, in more moneyed communities, families typically have the means to hire personalized options that schools don't provide, such as extra tutoring or college coaching, and they are more likely to have flexibility to drive their children to activities that suit their interests and passions — or the means to hire someone who does.

Higher-needs communities have less access to these resources, both within public education and outside of it. Statistically, students of color are more likely to be in schools that receive less funding, and subsequently experience fewer robust opportunities for learning broadly and personalization specifically. Family income currently drives both educational opportunities and outcomes (Carnevale, Fasules, Quinn, & Campbell, 2019).

Personalization can only be an equity lever if we acknowledge historic inequities and attend to them with fierce attention. Persons of color have suffered the most and benefited least from the laws, policies, and practices — including those in schools — that have made the U.S. prosperous and powerful.

Personalization can be a counterpoint to a national history that has rendered people of color invisible and less valuable. It can honor the richness of backgrounds, resilience of different groups, and individual gifts of students who encounter discrimination on a daily basis.

But this will not happen automatically. It requires intentional effort, especially in communities that are rich in racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity while being cash-poor. Educators can begin to make this effort by taking the following steps.

CHECK ASSUMPTIONS AND MINDSETS THAT HOLD PERSONALIZATION BACK.

Our knowledge about students and their families is essential to personalizing, and there is no substitute for understanding and appreciating each other across race, class, and cultures. And what could be more enriching?

We know that in high-poverty communities, the backgrounds of students contrast with those



Sonia Caus Gleason (scausgleason@nmeffoundation.org) is director of strategic learning and evaluation at Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

of teachers, and that in urban settings, teachers are largely white and students of color make up the majority of the population. While racial and ethnic minorities make up 20% of U.S. public school teachers, they make up 51% of public school students (Geiger, 2018).

It's impossible to ignore that, whatever our background, we've each grown and lived in contexts that sometimes quietly and sometimes overtly taught us to discriminate, favoring some ways of communicating or behaving over others. Our mindsets filter what learning we offer.

These basic facts require professional learning to embed attention to learning about cultures and races other than our own, and how we may be manifesting biases that can unintentionally give some students more access to interesting and challenging work than others.

ATTEND TO AND ADVOCATE FOR CULTURALLY COMPETENT PEDAGOGY, CURRICULUM, AND ASSESSMENT.

Educators should consider how their approaches to teaching and assessing connect with students' values and backgrounds. The nature and wording of engagement and feedback matter. For example, one study investigating how to restore students' trust in school found that offering "wise feedback" that emphasizes "the teacher's high standards and belief that the student was capable of meeting those standards" was particularly effective with African American students, especially the African Americans most mistrusting of school (Yeager et al., 2014).

Cultural competence also reveals

itself in content. Students need to connect what they're learning to prior knowledge and experiences, and they need to see themselves and people like them in the subject matter and materials. There is a growing range of resources online and elsewhere to help individual educators improve their cultural competence, but there is an overarching need for policies and resources to support more inclusive curriculum and pedagogy.

COLLABORATE WITH COLLEAGUES AS NECESSITY, NOT NICETY.

Personalizing in a way that meets the equity imperative is too much for any one teacher to do alone, especially in large schools and in upper grades when classes are departmentalized. Collaboration becomes a necessity. Relational trust among adults makes schools stronger and raises student achievement (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Professional communities create a relational space for educators to contribute to and draw upon. These may include colleagues within and beyond our schools that help us tap the range of information and resources educators need to personalize. When an equity commitment is the driver, educators are pressed to go beyond the usual people and places we tap, find what individual and groups of students need, and use personal knowledge to help colleagues on the same quest.

PERSONALIZE IN A WAY THAT CONSIDERS AND EMBRACES FAMILIES.

Customized learning and giving youth voice in shaping their education is not necessarily a go-to mindset

across all race, class, and culture groups. In fact, the opposite is often true in working class and immigrant communities.

Many parents believe children should do what the teacher asks, be respectful, compliant, and appreciative of their school and teachers. Many of us have heard a parent say, "Just let me know if my child steps out of line in your classroom." This was as true when I was raised as a daughter of displaced citizens in the '70s as it is now.

Does this mean these families are against personalization? I don't think so. While many lead with the desire to have their children follow the rules and behave in school, it does not mean they don't recognize their children may need special supports.

If a child is falling behind, families typically don't wish this to be so, even if they do not know what to do about it, even if they don't know that something could be done. Nor does a family's desire for their children to be good in school mean they don't understand that their children have gifts, though they may not be clear on whether or how to pursue educational dreams amidst competing priorities.

It becomes important, in the push to personalize, to understand the potential and needs of students alongside the sensibilities and wishes of families for their children. Personalizing requires a dialogue with students and their families.

EMBRACE HUMILITY AND INTENT IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING.

It's brave and important work to embrace an equity commitment, especially as we recognize our country has not significantly narrowed the

achievement gap for students of color, English learners, and the economically poor since the War on Poverty in the 1960s.

The U.S. has tried many innovations over time, and we are not getting to every student doing well. Not close. Yet in the face of that, to say each and every student is important, and to seek to personalize for them, is a daring move.

It says that we don't know everything but are committing to what's needed. It says we're willing to check our own assumptions and prejudices to understand what we may be doing that holds students back.

It means there's a willingness to draw upon people within and beyond our schools to serve and challenge students. It means there's

an understanding that we can't make headway without family perspectives in the mix.

This combination of intent and humility, of together listening, testing, learning what works, and adapting, is what will allow us to make headway. It says each student deserves to be known and treasured, and there's a demonstrated commitment to learn and do what's needed to make that happen.

REFERENCES

- Bryk, A. & Schneider, B. (2002).** *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement.* New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Carnevale, A., Fasules, M.L., Quinn, M., & Campbell, K.P. (2019).** *Born to win, schooled to lose: Why equally talented students don't get equal chances*

to be all they can be. Washington, DC: Georgetown Center for Education and the Workforce.

Geiger, A.W. (2018, August 27). *America's public school teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students.* Pew Research Center Fact Tank. Available at www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/27/americas-public-school-teachers-are-far-less-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-than-their-students.

Yeager, D.S., Purdie-Vaughns, V., Garcia, J., Apfel, N., Brzustoski, P., Master, A. ... Cohen, G.L. (2014). Breaking the cycle of mistrust: Wise interventions to provide critical feedback across the racial divide. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 143*(2), 804-824. ■

CALL TO ACTION / Denise Glyn Borders

Continued from p. 8

PROVIDE SUFFICIENT RESOURCES.

Superintendents create budgets that establish and sustain effective professional learning. District leaders also work with their teams to manage schedules that provide ample job-embedded learning time. They staff their systems to include instructional

coaches and others with expertise critical to sustaining continuous improvement.

District leaders allocate resources to support the learning of leaders themselves. Principals and district administrators have unique learning needs within an aligned system, as do superintendents and board members.

The superintendent's authority and decisions impact hundreds to thousands of learners along with the communities they serve. While the actions here are certainly not the only responsibilities of a district leader committed to high-quality professional learning, I'd argue they are essential. ■

BEING FORWARD / Monica Martinez

Continued from p. 9

need, either as a whole or for smaller groups, such as new teachers or English language arts teachers. Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, balanced a long-term commitment with diverse voices by establishing a standing committee with various teachers serving annually.

Maintaining a learning culture, for both adults and students, is an important factor in whether these

strategies will be implemented successfully. Personalization is more likely in open, trusting cultures where teachers feel safe to open their doors and invite others to give constructive feedback.

Some schools have the opportunity to build this culture from the ground up, like many that are part of the XQ school network. XQ provides resources and support to help these schools reimagine high school and what

adolescents can achieve. Others have to make intentional efforts to alter their culture.

For students and teachers alike, we need schools to make learning constant, not episodic. If we are going to prioritize equity and assume collective responsibility for all students, we have to do the same for teachers. Each of us is only as good as the whole. ■