WHAT DOES PERSONALIZED LEARNING MEAN?

EXPERTS WEIGH IN

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

We asked five experts what it means to personalize learning for students and what role professional learning should play in these efforts. Reflective of the diversity in the field today, their responses reveal both commonalities and notable differences (for example, some see technology as central, while others believe personalization can happen without any technology at all). But all agreed on the importance of building educators' capacity through high-quality professional learning.

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Personalized learning tailors learning to each student's strengths, needs, and interests. Students co-construct their goals and have "voice and choice" in determining what, how, when, and where the learning occurs. Personalized learning is *per person*. That means each student receives the help he or she needs, every day, to reach the highest possible community-driven standards and develop the skills needed to succeed.

In contrast, our current education model dictates that students progress at roughly the same pace, and many students fail after a high-stakes test at the end of a unit instead of receiving individualized, timely supports until they master each concept.

It needs to be said that a conflation is happening with personalized learning and educational technology. They are quickly becoming shorthand for one another, and that is unfortunate. While technology is an important learning tool — it can, for example, help educators manage increased access to content, research, and ideas — personalized learning is a far bigger idea. It is essential, equity-driven, and people-powered pedagogy.

Educators are critical to the success of personalized learning, but their role has to be reimagined. They will draw on a range of experiences and act in a variety of roles, including instructional designers, resource managers, coaches, facilitators, change managers, and advocates.

Professional learning for personalized learning must impart clear, specific educator competencies; develop teachers' professional judgment for operating in a student-centered learning environment; and build greater assessment literacy. These skills are built over time. Professional learning therefore cannot be done once and then shelved.

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Personalized learning is a pathway that unlocks opportunity for all students by preparing them to be creative, confident thinkers, ready for our ever-changing world. Educators draw upon real-world experiences to bring learning to life, but learning is led by the learner. Students advance based on demonstrated competency, not time spent on a subject.

Personalized learning is rooted in a deep understanding of each student's academic and nonacademic needs, interests, and strengths. Educators thoughtfully connect to a student's identity, culture and context, and draw upon real-world experiences to bring learning to life. By this definition, personalized learning looks different in each classroom.

This transformation hinges on professional support that itself is personalized to teachers' unique context and learning style, mirroring the type of student experience they ultimately will create. Our organization helps educators develop the knowledge and skills to bring their visions to life so that they can design learning experiences that engage and inspire students.

In our largest program, which we call the Pilot Network, educators receive a minimum of 102 hours of professional learning over 18 months. They explore the evidence base for high-quality personalized learning and participate in a yearlong implementation pilot, in which they create detailed profiles for each of their students, physically redesign their classrooms to support a range of learning modalities, and interpret data on student progress. Coaches support teachers as ideas emerge and challenges arise. Teachers who embrace these practices often tell us they'll never return to their old way of teaching.

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In Albemarle County Public Schools, having all students own their learning is important for our equity goal of a rich and rigorous learning environment for all. At the high school level, our district has had great success in traditional metrics like test scores, but not with all of our students. We recognize the need to expand the notion of what rigorous success looks like so that students see there is more than one version of how to succeed.

To meet the goal, we are working to integrate elements of project-based learning, differentiation, and other methods of personalization in our high schools. Our immediate goal is to push innovation at a small scale, learn from it, and then scale it up. Across the schools, you will see a range of instructional practices on any given day, and that is intentional.

At one of the high schools, which we call the Center One school, the work is 100% student-driven passion work. Its students don't opt out of their comprehensive high school, but instead choose to go there 50% of the time and to the Center One school 50% of the time.

For those students who want this and are ready for it, Center One allows them to dive deep into their passions. As one student said, "I get to work on what I love for one whole day every other day instead of one period a week."

We are looking at what practices we can replicate from the Center One school in traditional schools — for

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A personalized learning experience is one that is responsive to and makes use of each student's talents, interests, background, and needs to develop students' academic, social, and emotional competencies.

A student's pathway is unique to him or her. This doesn't mean that students work in isolation, but rather that the bundle of experiences they engage in over time adds up to the best mix of experiences for each one of them, be those experiences group or independent, in- or out-of school, teacher- or student-led.

Throughout, educators play an important role in guiding students in self-reflection of their goals, progress toward those goals, and what they need to help them achieve those goals.

But the system to provide for personalized learning is underdeveloped. Important questions include: What do schools look like that do this work? How should we train educators differently, and how do we shift our current training systems and policies to do that?

To address these questions, CRPE's 2018 report, *Personalized Learning at a Crossroads,* examined the first two years of an initiative that funded six districts and regional partners to design, launch, and replicate personalized learning models (Gross & DeArmond, 2018). (The initiative was funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Next Generation Systems Initiative and Next Generation Learning Challenge Regional Funds for Breakthrough Schools.)

Researchers observed classrooms in 39 schools, surveyed 908 participating teachers (as well as a nationally representative sample of 3,600 teachers), and conducted over 450 interviews with teachers, principals, superintendents, and central office staff. We found that:

- Personalized learning had strong supporters in schools, and teachers put significant effort into changing their practices.
- Principals let teachers define personalization for themselves, which impacted academic rigor, created inconsistencies, and caused student frustration.
- Though teachers were asked to innovate, principals and central offices did not provide sufficient strategies and supports for doing so.

Our results suggested that there is more work to do in building educators' capacity. District leaders and regional partners can help create a path forward that includes, but is not limited to, building knowledge management strategies and identifying which schools should innovate and which should adopt and adapt.

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example, incorporating lab environments and regrouping time and kids. We also rechartered our charter middle school so that it is now 100% mastery-based grading. As the director of professional learning, I am working on this question of how to use our learning from the smaller centers as a resource for teachers in other schools.

I am also continually working with teachers on harnessing the power of project-based learning in a meaningful way. Too often, what educators call project-based learning ends up looking like a bunch of identical student products instead of a reflective and constructive learning process. Also, projects tend to get really big really fast and then teachers end up marching through a traditional academic year with one big project at the end.

We are encouraging teachers to do quick project-based learning cycles instead. When students experience more frequent cycles, they become more reflective and learn more from the process.

We start by asking teachers, "How do you take something you're already doing and increase the project-based elements without feeling you need to build the Taj Mahal?" A project can be one week long and still be rigorous.

As we bring in new elements to our schools, we have to make sure teachers see how the elements connect to each other and that they are not disparate new initiatives. In the past, we have had pockets of innovation, but that left students' experiences up to chance. Thoughtful, coordinated professional learning helps create a shared sense of what we're working toward: a powerful instructional experience for students.

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Personalizing learning is the approach in which students have choice over their learning based on interests and needs, flexible pacing, and/or access to differentiated content based on learning needs. Teacher and student instructional decisions are frequently based on data.

Differentiation is important for equity. All students deserve access to rigorous content and excellent instruction, but currently access is not equitable. Students of color and those from low-income families have less access to rigorous coursework and instructional materials than their peers.

But high-quality instructional materials alone are not enough, according to a study from the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard, which found no significant differences in achievement growth for schools using different math textbooks and curricula (Blazar et al., 2019). Even with high-quality instructional materials, differentiated support is necessary to ensure that struggling and striving students can access and master rigorous content.

Technology is part of the solution for offering that differentiation, and professional learning providers need to make technology and differentiation part of their practice. Otherwise, they are preparing teachers for classrooms that are not reflective of current practices. After all, 65% of teachers are using technology for instruction on a daily basis (Clayton & Marken, 2019), yet teachers often say they need more professional learning on how to use technology effectively.

At the Robin Hood Foundation, we see the power of using technology for personalizing learning, and we are investing in partners in New York City to use technology for blended literacy. Blended literacy, as defined by the Robin Hood Learning + Technology Fund, seeks to combine the advantages of content-rich literacy instruction with a personalized and blended (face-to-face and technology-supported) approach.

Our investments fall into three buckets: curriculum development and revision, professional learning designs and implementation, and research. Our investments in professional learning include support to Literacy Design Collaborative, TNTP, CenterPoint Education Solutions, and Teaching Lab. Our focus is on teachers and students in schools with large populations of low-income students. Our aim is to transform literacy instruction to improve student achievement.

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