Transforming School Culture through Personalized Professional Learning and Collaboration

By Dr. Autumn R. Turk

About the Author: Dr. Autumn R. Turk currently serves as a Curriculum Director for Burrell School District in Lower Burrell, Pa. She has also served as a middle school assistant principal, upper elementary assistant principal, intervention specialist and first-grade teacher. Dr. Turk is committed to using collaborative practices to personalize professional learning for educators in transforming school culture.

Over the past year, educators have experienced an urgency to enhance instructional practices and engage students in new, nontraditional learning environments. Many school districts shifted from primarily traditional instruction in brick-and-mortar classrooms to offering virtual instruction in remote learning environments. This shift yielded benefits such as use of technology and curation of digital curriculum resources; however, it also created a renewed need to focus on the efficacy and professional learning of educators. Rising concerns with equity, learning loss and mental health have added additional pressure for school leaders, teachers and support staff. Leaders must reimage the future of education and strategically plan flexible pathways to make the vision a reality.

This transformation in school culture from traditional instructional practices and classroom structures to a personalized learning environment requires a renewed focus on professional learning, collaboration and growth. Teachers often default back to traditional learning structures and directive instructional practices due to the pressures of standardized testing; yet our schools continue to produce startling trends in student achievement (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017; Turk, 2020). In order to overcome these barriers and improve student achievement, school leaders and teachers must work collaboratively to promote professional growth, strengthen relationships and motivate student engagement through personalized instructional strategies and learning experiences (Turk, 2020). Almost 80 percent of classrooms still use direct instruction models for teaching, presenting a need to reimagine learning in our nation's schools and shift our instructional practices (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017).

The Power of Collaboration

Teaching in an ever-changing world requires a high level of social consciousness and responsibility, still a spirit of unity and collaboration can alleviate pressure and make the demands feel more manageable. Efficacy is strengthened through perseverance during times of uncertainty and change, yet traditional professional development rarely focuses on how efficacy influences performance and does not correlate with teacher efficacy or personalized learning (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001; Turk, 2020). Teachers may take a few strategies that interest them back to their classrooms, but ongoing or embedded learning is rare. Engagement in learning affects ongoing practice, and over time, traditional structures dull the creative potential of the individual and stifle the collaborative nature of learning. A crucial factor for increasing efficacy and agency among teachers is ongoing, embedded professional development that is intrinsically motivating, relevant to current practice and personalized to strengths and needs (Karmeshu & Nedungadi, 2012; Turk, 2020).

In a study comparing the success of Finnish schools with the Global Educational Reform movement, investing in people made the ultimate difference in cultivating an environment that could carry out the vision and ascension of the Finnish school system (Muhammad, 2018). Finnish schools prioritized building shared responsibility and trust through collaborative and customized learning, creativity, risk taking and innovation (Muhammad, 2018). Whereas, the Global Educational Reform Movement was anchored in standardized teaching, focused on literacy and numeracy, used a prescribed curriculum

> **"Teachers may take a few strategies that interest them back to their classrooms, but ongoing or embedded learning is rare."**

and market-oriented reform ideas and relied on test-based account-ability and control, using external forces to instill a sense of fear because performance on standardized as-sessments impacted school funding (Muhammad, 2018). Rather than the Global Educational Reform Movement achieving the preset proficiency expectations, the government mandates further constrained educators and school systems without closing achievement gaps or providing an equitable system for learning (Muhammad, 2018).

Reimagining Our Schools: Casting a Vision

Staggering student achievement in the United States has led many states to adopt strict standards-based curricu-lums, which put tight constraints on teachers making it difficult to personalize instruction or offer students a voice in their learning (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin & Roberts, 2015). Traditional schooling is often teacher-centered and focused on instruction, with linear exposure to grade level standardized content as the primary mode of school improvement; however, there is research to support the effects of personalization for academic and social learning on improving performance (Rutledge et al., 2015; Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). Schools must shift from the ideology of making students fit into past educational models and allow new models of thinking to evolve through person-alization. If school leaders wish to improve student learn-ing, they must consider what is causing their current results (Schwahn & Spady, 2010).

School transformation involves listening to teachers' and students' voices to understand what learning looks and feels like through a journey of self-discovery and social construction (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). Teachers' strengths are optimized to achieve results, and positive contributions are celebrated by uniting around a common vision of en-suring learning for all (Schwahn & Spady, 2010). Educators shift from being individual deliverers of content to collabora-tive partners who contribute to shared learning experiences and solutions-focused discussions (Schwahn & Spady, 2010). The best minds in education favor environments where their creative spirit and hard work are realized, appreciated, and activated through collaborative structures that support student-centered practices, personalized pro-fessional development, collective efficacy among teachers, and a focus on learning (Muhammad, 2018).

Leaders must go further than merely casting a vision, but strategically think, plan, budget, and develop their finan-cial and human resources toward the vision in which every student and teacher are learning at a high level (Kotter, 2001). The most success-ful visions are real, tangible, and focused on individual and collective needs, including the adults who have the biggest impact on student learning (Kotter, 2001; Muhammad, 2018). Personalized learning has the capacity to level the playing field by mobilizing material and social resources in schools of varying classes, creating a new method of school reform (Beach & Dovemark, 2009). Doing what is best for stu-dents is priority; therefore, allocate necessary personnel, time, and resources to personalize professional learning and promote growth.

A Loose-Tight Philosophy for Accountability

As with any change, leaders must decide what they prioritize to oversee and where teachers should have defined autonomy. The professional learning community (PLC) process empowers educators to agree on norms for collaboration, set goals, make instructional decisions, and look for trends in data to improve learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many & Mattos, 2016). These elements are loose because teachers have autonomy in making instructional decisions based on students' needs.

Leaders must be tight on cultural elements of the PLC process by expecting educators to work collaboratively rather than in isolation, taking collective responsibility for ensuring all students are learning at high levels, and upholding mutual accountability for achieving common goals (DuFour et al., 2016). It eliminates the teacher lottery by giving students equitable access to content, knowledge, and skills through guaranteed, viable curriculum and collaborative teams who analyze evidence of learning to inform instructional practice, deliver personalized interven-tions, and extend learning within multi-tiered systems of support (DuFour et al., 2016). Collective teacher efficacy, teacher beliefs about student learning, and students' beliefs about their ability to achieve are the top three factors re-lated to school cultures in which students are learning at high levels and making sustainable growth (Muhammad, 2018). Shifting school culture through improved efficacy, relationships, and trust, must come before the more popu-

ar technical changes many schools employ (Muhammad, 2018). People must believe they can produce the desired results and follow through with actions to support those beliefs; therefore, intrinsically motivated, high-performing teachers produce intrinsically motivated, high-performing students (Muhammad, 2018).

Building Capacity for Personalized Learning

As schools gradually shift toward interdependence of learning, their systems and structures promote core attributes of student-centered personalized learning practices through student voice and ownership, co-creation of personalized learning plans, social construction through flexible pathways, and self-discovery through a competency-based system of accountability (Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). Instructional practices become progressively student-driven by incorporating design elements such as personalized assessments, technology, rich discussions during whole group learning, and connecting career future-ready skills with out-of-school learning (Olofson, Downes, Smith, LeGeros & Bishop, 2018). When combined with the core attributes of personalized learning, the design elements have the potential to transform instruction, improve student-learning outcomes, and inspire higher self-efficacy in students by developing the habits of mind, emotional intelligence, and workforce ready skills that prepare them for life (Olofson et al., 2018; Kallick & Zmuda, 2017).

Personalized learning is not merely teacher-led differentiated instruction, technology-driven customized learning, or individualized learning plans. Teacher and student agency, relationships, and collaboration are anchored within the foundation of the core attributes and design elements, which help students improve their communication skills, self-management, and persistence (Jacobs, 2018; Kallick & Zmuda, 2017). Personalized learning helps students transcend traditional learning limitations by inspiring inquiry, maximizing relationships, and offering access to rigorous coursework (Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). Learning occurs at a high level for all students; however, the pathways to get there may be personalized based on students' strengths, needs, interests, and agency.

Breaking the Mold and Reimagining Our Future

The traditional structures and practices of our education system have produced startling student achievement trends; however, many schools continue to stand by the way they have always done it and continue to get the same results (Schwahn & Spady, 2010). Educational reform has standardized teaching practices, with leaders feeling as though they need to fix the problems through systematic and structural changes (Schwahn & Spady, 2010). These surface-level types of reform provide temporary relief but do not promote lasting organizational change. State and federal legislation must be updated to eliminate standardized testing and allow flexibility in meeting students' and teachers' learning needs through personalized practices and competency-based systems of accountability in our nation's schools. This systematic change would allow

school leaders to use strengths-based approaches by lifting the pressure to fix problems and instead focus on opportunities.

Last year, legislators called upon the Pennsylvania state government to suspend state assessments and apply for a federal waiver of accountability measures due to the COVID-19 global pandemic to allow for flexibility in offering virtual learning. It should not take a global pandemic to transform our educational system and provide our nation's students and teachers with equitable opportunities to learn. A transformed educational system starts with placing trust in our local school districts and teachers, as the most influential factor in a student's academic growth is teacher efficacy, not a standardized test (Muhammad, 2018).

Starting small with personalized professional development is likely to produce the social-structural influences to support a shift in culture. As the amount of personalized professional development increases, collaborative and personalized learning practices will likely increase. Relationships, trust, and ownership promote safety in taking instructional risks and co-designing learning. Teachers are a product of the systems in which they learned and are under immense pressure to perform. This clash of public policy with professional practice needs addressed at the state and national level to allow teachers to shift from adherence to standardized, rigid practices to a genuine system that supports learning and is flexible to unique needs.

Dewey's (1902) vision of transforming the educational system started with balancing social and intellectual learning within schools by encouraging educators to regularly collaborate and reflect on how they are preparing their students for the world. Over one-hundred years later, societal pressures to standardize instruction and conform to traditional structures constrain the modern learner. Personalized learning offers educators an opportunity to transform education and ensure learning for every student. The urgency to remain relevant in our ever-changing world is essential for the future of public education. Personalized learning offers hope for our educational system and starts with a courageous vision for change.

For more information, you may contact the author at **autumn.turk@burrell.k12.pa.us**

Transforming School Culture through Personalized Professional Learning and Collaboration

References

Beach, D. & Dovemark, M. (2009). Making 'right' choices? An ethnographic account of creativity, performativity and personalised learning policy, concepts and practices. *Oxford Review of Education, 35*(6), 689-704.

Dewey, J. (1902). The school as social center. *The Elementary School Teacher, 3*(2), 73-86.

DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., Many, T. W. & Mattos, M. (2016). *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Solution Tree Press.

Jacobs, J. (2017). Pacesetter in personalized learning: Summit charter network shares its model nationwide. *The Education Digest, 83*(6), 32-41.

Kallick, B. & Zmuda, A. (2017). *Students at the center: Personalizing learning with habits of mind.* ASCD.

Karmeshu, Raman, R. & Nedungadi, P. (2012). Modelling diffusion of a personalized learning framework. *Educational Technology Research & Development, 60*, 585-600.

Kotter, J. P. (2001). *What leaders really do.* Harvard Business Review.

Muhammad, A. (2018). *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division*. Solution Tree Press.

Netcoh, S. & Bishop, P.A. (2017). Personalized learning in the middle grades: A case study of one team's successes and challenges. *Middle Grades Research Journal, 11*(2), 33-48.

Olofson, M. W., Downes, J. M., Smith, C. P., LeGeros, L. & Bishop, P.A. (2018). Teacher practices for personalization survey. An instrument to measure teacher practices to support personalized learning in the middle grades. *RMLE Online, 41*(7), 1-21.

Rutledge, S. A., Cohen-Vogel, L., Osborne-Lampkin, L. T. & Roberts, R. L. (2015). Understanding effective high schools: Evidence for personalization for academic and social-emotional learning. *American Educational Research Journal, 52*(6), 1060-1092.

Schwahn, C. & Spady, W. (2010). *Total Leaders 2.0: Leading in the Age of Empowerment*. Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Tschannen-Moran, M. & Woolfolk-Hoy, A. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 17*, 783-805.

Turk, A. (2020). *Creating a culture of personalized learning in the middle school: How teacher efficacy impacts implementation*. Point Park University.