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In Defense of Personalized Learning: Leading by Example

By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers on January 21, 2018 6:42 AM | [No comments](#)

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Dr. Nicholas Bruski is principal at the Montecito Union School District in California. An experienced leader who works with Personalized Learning, here Nicholas shares his views and experience.

Before reading on, we wanted to share a message we received from Nick on Wednesday: "We're building a school from scratch as our whole community was hit with mudslides - we're all evacuated and are holding school at the zoo and children's science museum today - borrowing space from city college tomorrow." He and his teachers are working at making the experience a positive one for the students. Here is just one of the photos he has shared with us. We look forward to Nick having the time soon to write about the challenges and good work that continues to go into the work of Personalized Learning all while living and working with challenges and in places unfamiliar to all.



John Wooden says, "The most powerful leadership tool you have is your own personal example." If educational leaders want "personalized learning" to live in their buildings and classrooms, they must practice what they preach they must create the conditions for personalized learning among the adults as well.

Unfortunately, as [Benjamin Herold notes in his November 7, 2017 Education Week article, The Case\(s\) Against Personalized Learning](#), one of the biggest challenges personalized learning faces is confusion over what personalized learning actually is. Despite the title of the article, Herold actually makes strong claims in support of personalized learning when defined through Bena Kallick and Allison Zmuda's (2017) interpretation rather than a narrow view of personalized learning as a fundamentally technological endeavor, for which he has valid concerns. Herold references Alfie Kohn's belief that "real learning happens when students are driven by intrinsic curiosity to pursue answers to their own questions about the world", which is exactly what Kallick and Zmuda aim to achieve through their vision of personalized learning.

In many school systems, decisions are made in a top-down fashion, with edicts being levied from on high. In an era of compliance and high-stakes testing, district offices and administrators often set "non-negotiables" in a top-down fashion, alienating teachers and subverting the potential positive change that comes with new initiatives and thinking. To combat this and truly support positive change, leaders need to personalize the learning of their school cultures both amongst the students and the adults. **By analyzing structures, systems and procedures, leaders can create a more inclusive and engaging professional culture that ultimately supports positive change in our school systems.**

Our Teaching & Learning Collaborative Works

At our school, we developed the Teaching & Learning Collaborative (with the convenient acronym of TLC) made up of representatives from the teaching staff. This group serves as a steering committee for our school, involving and personalizing the teacher experience. We treat teachers as allies, flattening the hierarchy through two-way communication, group decision-making, transparency, and collective accountability.

Kallick and Zmuda (2017) posit that,

We must encourage our students to become problem solvers and creative thinkers. If our students are to be successful, they will need to find work that is as satisfying to the human spirit as it is satisfying economically." (p.1)

But just as we want this for our students, do we not also want this for our adults? **Should our teachers be problem solvers and creative thinkers? Should they find their work satisfying to the human spirit?** By analyzing structures and practices within your school culture, there are many simple ways to move in this direction. Kallick and Zmuda explain that personalized learning consists of four key attributes: voice, co-creation, social construction, and self-discovery.

Voice - Students should not simply be passengers on their educational journey, but see the value of their own ideas while remaining open to

continuous learning. As with students, our adults also benefit from knowing they have a voice in their school's decisions and path towards continued growth. Leaders must ask themselves how they can involve staff in decision-making, planning, brainstorming and problem-solving across all areas of school governance. Does your school have a leadership committee? Are sub-committees used regularly to inform and advise decisions?

Co-Creation - Students need practice being innovative and creative, helping to identify problems, action plans and clarifying what is being measured. Leaders need to find opportunities for staff to be creative and innovative, to identify what success looks like at a school and to draft action plans on change such as implementing new curricula, re-examining student support systems, and outlining professional growth models. At our school, teachers were intimately involved in the co-creation of our teacher evaluation system. By engaging them in the process, they had ownership and buy-in into an often ineffective practice

Social Construction - Classrooms can be isolating. Teachers are often the only adult in the room for the majority of the day. However, most learning occurs through social interaction, dialogue and discussion. How can administrators create more opportunities for adults to interact professionally? When adults are together, how is that time spent? Can schedules be re-arranged to provide more interaction? At our school, simply installing a door between classrooms had huge benefits in allowing neighboring teachers to drop in on their peers, to ask a question, observe a lesson, or share a great idea!

Self-Discovery - As students engage in personalized learning, they come to understand themselves as learners, reflecting and becoming more self-directed. The more opportunities a leader provides for personalized adult learning, the more teachers understand their own values, beliefs, strengths and weaknesses. They can shift from a passive culture awaiting direction to one of advocacy, constant growth, inquiry, and independence.

Questions for Leaders

As you look to grow personal learning at your school, ask yourself these five questions:

1. How is curriculum identified at our school?
2. How do we spend our time at staff meetings?
3. Who decides the agenda?
4. How is it decided?
5. In what ways do adults learn, grow and seek professional development?

By looking through the lens of voice, co-creation, social construction, and self-discovery, leaders can identify ways in which learning can be personalized for the adults as well as the students.

We embrace Kallick's and Zmuda's philosophy that students need opportunities to develop and build social capital and learn how to develop a voice when dealing with people in power positions. We must also create these opportunities for adults. In order for students to develop these attributes, the adults must demonstrate them in their actions. In order for teachers develop these attributes in their students, school leaders have to build, protect, and encourage the environment that allows for this to take place..

Resource:

Kallick, B. & Zmuda, A. (2017). *Students at the Center: Personalized Learning with Habits of Mind*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD

Ann Myers and Jill Berkowicz are the authors of [The STEM Shift \(2015, Corwin\)](#) a book about leading the shift into 21st century schools. Ann and Jill welcome connecting through [Twitter](#) & [Email](#).

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