

***Teach Plus Rhode Island
Teaching Policy Fellowship:
Teacher Voices on Personalized Learning***

Personalized Learning in Physical Education

By: Jackie Greaves, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

December 18, 2017

HUFFPOST

The goal of my class is simple: to build active learners who have the skills to succeed healthily in college and the world beyond. I asked my 5th grade P.E. classes to respond to this question: "Why is it important to get exercise daily?" The most striking response that helped reinforce the reason I use personalized learning was one from a 10-year old student: "Exercise helps keep me disease free so I can live longer." A simple answer really when you break it down, but one that made me feel happy because I as her teacher was able to help her see this very important connection between exercise and longevity.



Getting my students to see this is easier when I connect learning to their own lives.

I started our Jump Rope for Heart Month by sharing a story about my father who died from a heart attack. I showed my class a video which tells the stories of several young children and the stories of their heart disease. My students then participated in a whole class discussion based around their own experiences and understandings of what it means to have a healthy heart.

I asked some of my students to suggest different types of cardiovascular jumping exercises that they thought would be fun to do during our Jump Rope For Heart Month. My 5th graders came up with lots of creative ideas that only kids can: box jumps, tire jumps, the agility ladder, hopscotch, the skip it, and line jumps. I implemented these ideas as stations and gave my students the opportunity to test them out and to see which ones got their hearts beating the fastest. Maria, one of my 5th graders, wrote: "jump roping gets my heart beating much faster than running, I would like to practice jump roping with my Dad." Another 5th grader, Jose, wrote: "I did not know exercise could make you feel happier, I would like to teach some of these exercises to my family."

Once I got my students connected to cardiovascular health and sharing what they learned with their own families, I implement the program's healthy challenges that students can do at home with their loved ones. The challenges involve students and a family member making pledges to eat more fruits and veggies, drink more water, and get more exercise daily. Students were coming up to me each day telling me about a new pledge they made with a grandparent, cousin, or sibling. The greatest thing I heard was a student telling me that they "can't wait to go home to try and beat their Mom in a jump roping contest."

Personalized learning gave my students the opportunity to share what they were learning with their family. This eventually led to our school's Family Fitness Day where my students got to bring in their family members to participate in several different exercise and healthy eating challenges that they learned in class. Seeing students share their expertise with their own families was incredibly fulfilling. One parent said: "Having the chance to do this with my child is amazing and I am very thankful for this event!"

Giving my students the opportunity to implement their own ideas and then to follow through with testing them gave them power over their own learning. My students were excited to discover different cardiovascular exercises and to implement them in our own classroom. By giving my students the power to make educated decisions about their own cardiovascular exercise regimens, it allowed them to discover more on their own than they ever would have had I planned and taught the whole curriculum myself.

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With Bootstrap Algebra, My Students Learn to Love Math



By: Lisa Biswas, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

December 14, 2017

Lori spent most of her days in my eighth grade pre-algebra class fooling around. She had very limited English and after years of falling further and further behind in math, she thought she was incapable of doing it. I knew that I needed to a new strategy to help Lori and students like her who struggle with math. My solution was Bootstrap Algebra, which applies mathematical concepts and rigorous programming principles to creating a simple videogame. I paired the students up so that no one was alone in their new venture. We started with very basic programming. Lori's partner Gabby, who also struggled with math, but was very interested in the idea of making a video game, said, "See it's not that tough! We can do this!"



As a teacher, I am always in search of alternate ways to help the kids who believe they can't do math. The secret is for my students to feel that they have some choice and get to do what they are interested in. With Bootstrap Algebra students who spend so much time playing video games get to see all the work that goes into making them. At first, I was unsure if I could teach the programming portion of the curriculum and I worried if my students would actually learn. I also worried if the English language learners in my class will be able to comprehend it. My first time teaching it I literally went step by step with the programming portion, and even read some verbatim from the lesson plans. After teaching it one time through, I was at ease. I still tell the kids I'm no expert in the programming portion, but I can handle it.

The process of Bootstrap Algebra is not easy. First, Lori and Gabby had to learn the basic language of the program. We practiced and I let them play around and explore. As they got various error messages, they learned how to debug the program. Next, Lori and Gabby figured out how to solve the order of operational problems and learned the language for proper coding. When they finally got the hang of it, and I told them they now had the right order of operations, they were in disbelief. After more practice, they learned to decode word problems, and turn them into code to make their very own video games.

After finishing their project, Gabby and Lori helped others who were still troubleshooting bugs in their code. Not only were they confident enough to complete their own game, but they were confident enough to be willing to help others. And best of all, Lori loved an assignment that had to do with math.

Here are a few tips on how to get your students more interested in math.

Be patient and keep trying. Lack of success does not mean failure. There is not one right or wrong answer for what will or will not work. The right thing will not fall right into your lap. But when you find that thing which connects to your students, the results are amazing. Many unsuccessful attempts can make you feel discouraged, but when it does work, the smiles on the kids' faces make it all worth it.

Practice before doing with your students. If you are not sure what you are doing, you may get frustrated and that will deter the students from getting excited or even be willing to try. If they think it is hard for you, they will believe it is too hard for them and not even want to try.

Be enthusiastic! When the students see that you're excited, that has a great buy in power! Enthusiasm is contagious. Students are much more willing to get excited when they can see the genuine enthusiasm that you put forth.

With Bootstrap Algebra, My Students Learn to Love Math

By: Lisa Biswas, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

I am always doing everything I can to reinvent myself. I try to take every opportunity to learn new things to teach my students. Today, there are so many new cutting-edge ideas that can benefit our students and help them become more successful in their future. It is our job as educators to do everything we can to help them receive the tools they need to get ahead in life – including developing a liking for math.

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Making Students' Work Relevant Through Personalized Learning

By: **Brian Bordieri, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow**

December 12, 2017

HUFFPOST

My education experience before college might feel common to many students: I saw it as a waste of my precious time. I went to a great high school with an awesome community, great teachers, and a rigorous traditional curriculum that interested me, slightly. I learned best with my grandfather out on the farm, discussing machinery, the environment, and the Second World War in which he fought.



I became a teacher because I didn't enjoy fixed learning and I wanted to change the experience for my students. I wanted them to have relationships with their learning, I wanted them to feel as though their time was worth more than learning recycled facts that had little to do with their actual future, and I wanted them to feel like their voices were worth something more than a possible commodity for the future. Today, I am privileged to educate in an environment where the focus is teaching to the individual student. The guiding mission of my school is "One student at a time." Each student has a learning plan that we develop collaboratively and the result is a student-centered learning experience.

My students' work is relevant, rigorous, and authentic, and what makes it all work is the fact that I have a cohort of 16 kids and I keep them for all four years of high school. The relationships that this approach fosters have allowed many students who may have dropped out or struggled otherwise in traditional environments to become successful. When a student comes to me and says that they don't like to read, I have the liberty to alter their curriculum with them to find a text that excites them. Students read at a higher level when they have a connection to high-interest material. Here is the evidence that we are on the right path in my students' own words:

The best experience is just being accepted, I transferred from a public school with no individuality where I was struggling socially and academically. To have an advisory, a family that cares about you and your interests was truly the greatest feeling one could have at school.

Before I transferred I had just stayed back a grade and was seriously considering dropping out. The Met changed everything, from my attitude to my interests. At previous school I never would have rediscovered my passion for animals, or had an opportunity to work with them and educate others. It's safe to say that The Met turned my life around, I will always be grateful.

Designing my own projects definitely made my learning better because it was my own. Having a schoolwork assigned is different than actually coming up with a project and process on your own and doing it because you want to. When I wanted to do a blood drive I made sure I knew everything there was to know about the process. I went above and beyond in every project because it was mine; it was something that made me feel independent.

So how can we bridge the gap between small school culture and the traditional large school model? I believe that large schools need to be broken up into smaller groups of learners so that teachers have a chance to know their students. You cannot personalize a learning plan if you do not know who you are teaching. Teaching teams should never be so large that the whole team cannot come to one physical table and discuss how to solve the problems facing the student or the school. And curriculum needs to change from a model focused on covering what is on the test to one that has flexibility for students to find meaning in their learning so that they will retain the essential skills.

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Most of all, teachers need PD and resources. Personalized learning is like the improv exercise 'Yes, and...' where the student drives the inquiry and you are not allowed to say 'no', you have to go with it, find the learning goal, and trust the process. It can be scary to let the student drive, but they will arrive at their chosen destination. After all, isn't that why are we doing this work?

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Personalize Math Education in Rhode Island

By: Ellen Foley, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

December 5, 2017

HUFFPOST

Here in an urban high school in Providence, my students are craving math content that feels relevant and useful. They constantly ask me, “Why do I need to know this?” and “When am I ever going to use this in real life?” Too often my answer is “you will see it on the test.”



I love math: its order, efficiency, and beauty. But not everyone can see those qualities in my subject because we have emphasized the algebra-to-calculus pathway at the expense of other types of math. As someone who changed careers and began teaching high school just a few years ago, I immediately recognized this content as what I'd learned as a student in the 1980s, back in the days when an app was just the course before dinner. Given the stunning—and math-based—technological advances that have occurred in my lifetime, a stagnant math curriculum is a travesty. Coding, big data, and personal finance are not included in the Common Core standards, and statistics has been relegated to a quarter or two scattered throughout traditional Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II.

Calculus is essential for engineers, yet for few other careers. Probability and statistics, on the other hand, must be interpreted and used in almost every discipline. The good news is that college entrance tests are starting to reflect the importance of applied math and many states are aligning their secondary requirements with these tests. Here in Rhode Island, the state requires high school students to take the suite of assessments developed by the College Board: the PSAT 9, PSAT 10, and the SAT. While these tests are aligned to the Common Core in that they emphasize algebra, there is also increased focus on problem solving and data analysis. Students must be able to interpret and apply information gleaned from graphs, charts, and statistics. This change in the test required for college admission is a great opportunity to reimagine what math looks like at the secondary level.

Other opportunities for rethinking math also exist. Rhode Island is arguably the nation's epicenter of personalized learning: it is the home of the Highlander Institute and the Big Picture Company and the MET, organizations that have received millions of dollars in grants to help push personalized learning forward. Providence Public Schools were recently featured in the Atlantic as a model for developing district-wide approaches to personalized learning. My school alone participates in personalized learning initiatives developed by Highlander, Lighthouse (an initiative of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg), the Carnegie Corporation, and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. The state has a robust Advanced Course Network, which provides students access to courses that appeal to them and supports their academic achievement. And Rhode Island's Governor, Gina Raimondo, has championed a Computer Science for All initiative that has brought coding and computer science initiatives to schools across the state.

We should capitalize on this momentum by rethinking what we want math education to look like. The goal of personalized learning is to provide instruction, content, and learning options that meet the needs of individual students. Students who want to learn the traditional math canon should be able to; but those who want to apply math concepts to computer science, coding, statistics, data analysis, and personal finance should not be penalized.

What if a future social scientist wants to study statistics deeply, or a future entrepreneur wants to emphasize personal and business finance? Through a personalized approach, we have the opportunity to make math a subject that not only feels necessary to students, but also relevant to their lives and goals. Rhode Island Education Commissioner Dr. Ken Wagner stated as much in his response to questions after his state of education address this year: “We should shift our focus from the algebra-calculus pathway to more applied math.” To that I say, hear, hear. And here. Here in Rhode Island.

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How Personalized Learning is Breaking the “GYM” Class Stereotype

By: **Brian Kampper**, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

November 6, 2017

HUFFPOST



When I introduce myself as a physical education teacher, the two most popular responses I get are “Oh, you must love being a gym teacher, just playing sports all day must be great” or “I hated gym class when I was in school, all we did was...” Unfortunately, most people think of physical education as a class where athletes take control while all others wait for the bell to ring to save them from having to participate in another game of dodgeball. While this is not the case in the majority of PE classes across America, the stereotype does exist and personalized learning is the key to breaking it.

In my early years of teaching, I always found it to be a best practice to praise any increment of progress that my students had shown in the gym. This praise was sometimes the first time a student had felt any sense of accomplishment in a PE class or any athletic setting. I saw the impact of this praise on my students when they became fully engaged in class and were actually excited to be there. I soon realized that I had to find a way for every one of my students to feel that level of accomplishment.

I first began to develop personalized fitness plans for my students in 2014. We started the year by doing the Fitnessgram (a series of fitness tests) that would measure their strengths and weaknesses. These scores would serve as a baseline for each student's progress throughout the year. I stressed during the plan's development that everyone's progress is different and the only concern should be what each one of us can do as an individual to improve on a personal basis. I worked with other PE teachers at our school to shift the focus from a traditional sports curriculum to a blended curriculum that included more student choice and allowed students to focus on their individual goals. We also started a Get Up And Go morning fitness program that allowed our students additional time to work on their personalized fitness plans.

Knowing how to develop a personalized fitness plans is a skill my students can take with them to college and beyond. It's not surprising that every gym's or diet plan's big selling point is a “personalized” plan to fit your needs: we all do better if a plan is tailored to us. If adults are willing to pay good money for such plans, why not teach our students these skills early on? I always start by teaching each of my students the five components of fitness—cardiovascular endurance, muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and body composition—and give a test associated with each one. Once we have a baseline score, students research exercises and techniques the help improve it and develop their own plans. We complete additional rounds of testing to see how students are progressing and adjust their plans accordingly.

Now that I am in my fourth year of personalized fitness planning, students have come back to share their successes. Sarah, a former 6th grader who was afraid to participate in a soccer game, is now on her high school soccer team. She came back this fall to visit with her sister during our open house and explained to me how she still records her workouts and progress in her own workout journal. She told me that being able to go back and see the progress she has made from 6th grade onwards continues to motivate her to push forward. Sarah's sister has been working out with her and is excited to develop her own fitness plan this school year.

I hope more physical education teachers can embrace a personalized learning approach. When teachers stop rolling the ball out and create engaging learning opportunities that meet the needs of each individual student, gym class will become physical education class. I hope that in the future, students will share their physical education experiences and let everyone how much they've LEARNED in class! That's the way to truly break the “gym” class stereotype.

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To teach students who've experienced trauma, first make them feel safe

By: Julio Alicea, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

September 6, 2017

The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE
MONITOR

Every year in my history class I teach the poem, "The Rose that Grew from Concrete" by the late rapper Tupac Shakur, and every year its many themes resonate with my students, who are predominantly low-income and of color. In the poem, Tupac makes a call to celebrate the rose's tenacity for successfully blooming in unforgiving concrete – a metaphor for urban poverty – rather than obsessing over its damaged petals.



The first year I taught the poem, I had a student, Jorge, who had come to my school with a history of trauma. He had witnessed extreme gun violence firsthand and he came to us emotionally calloused, hardened by consistent exposure to the "concrete" on the South Side of Providence.

For much of his first year, Jorge struggled to adjust to a personalized environment in which our students address all staff by their first names and gather daily in small, four-year advisory cohorts. He grappled, also, with the level of encouraged connectedness with adults as well as the amount of attention he received for his academic potential. A budding social critic, Jorge regularly impressed his history and English teachers (myself included) with the depths of his thinking on a wide range of contemporary issues.

Jorge's interest peaked during the fourth quarter when we began our interdisciplinary exploration of race across our biology, English, and history classes. Included among the many complex texts we read were Tupac's poem and a related public health article that utilized a garden metaphor to explain the three levels of racism: institutionalized, personally mediated, and internalized.

Throughout these lessons, I made sure my students knew what I expected of them: a willingness to be vulnerable and make a personal connection to a controversial topic. After all, a core element of trauma-informed teaching is creating a safe space for students to discuss their experiences in a supportive environment.

To facilitate the creation of a safe space, I employed another trauma-informed strategy: restorative justice. In my classes, students create "classroom constitutions" that guide our interactions. I follow up with meetings, either during lunch or after school, so that my students can reflect on both the causes and the consequences of them violating the constitution.

Oftentimes, trauma can manifest itself in students acting out in class so it is important to see behaviors in the larger context of each student's lived experiences. I saw this early and often with Jorge because he would react strongly to any perceived negative attention from his teachers. Once I learned this about Jorge, I personalized my interactions with him in order to build trust. In doing so, we talked often about our unique lived experiences as Latinos in addition to our mutual enjoyment of hip hop. As our relationship grew over the course of the year, he became more ready and willing to receive my feedback and support.

Jorge, who has trauma-related anxiety, had struggled all year with blurting out answers. Rather than punish him for doing so, I celebrated his perceptive insights while gently reminding him that he needed to wait to be called upon before speaking. During the lesson on Tupac's poem, Jorge excitedly raised his hand and said to me, "Mister, that's you! You are the rose that grew from concrete!" I replied, "You too, are a rose and so many of us in here are." In that powerful moment, I saw what a trauma-informed approach could do for a student like Jorge. Not only did Jorge gain a critical understanding of his experience, but he was also able to develop a positive relationship with an adult who embraced his damaged petals.

To teach students who've experienced trauma, first make them feel safe

By: Julio Alicea, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

Remembering that moment, I framed the teaching of the poem slightly differently this past year. I asked my students why Tupac chose a rose as his metaphorical flower. After receiving many responses about the iconic nature of the rose in popular culture, I said, "I think he chose roses because roses are meant to be admired. And I admire each and every one of you. You all face struggles that make it harder for you to wake up in the morning, harder to make it to school on time or at all. But you all do it, most of the time at least, and for those reasons I admire you." At the end of the class Tyler, a poor white student who had been quiet for much of the year, approached me.

Tyler told me about an incarcerated family member who was facing deportation. He hadn't shared much of this with our school so I brought it to the attention of his adviser. Afterward, we were able to make sure that Tyler had access to the socio-emotional support he needed, including one-on-one meetings with a certified counselor, a series of follow up exchanges with his mother, and individual check-ins from some members of his team of ninth grade teachers. Tyler, feeling validated by my lesson and cared for by his larger school family, went on to have his best quarter academically.

Sometimes a trauma-informed compliment can reach a student more deeply than one might intend. In many ways, support and encouragement act as the water and sunlight needed to aid roses growing in the concrete. Let's do that for more students like Jorge and Tyler. Let's put the "person" back in personalized learning.

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Personalized Learning Can Help Students to Find Role Models Who Look Like Them

By: Emily Berman, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

August 29, 2017

HUFFPOST

Tara's eyes lit up in a way I had not seen before. I could almost hear what she was thinking: "Felicia is amazing." Felicia, a local organizer for the NAACP, had just given a talk to our students about how to make change and organize in their community. When Tara looked at Felicia, she lit up not only because the older woman is a skilled public speaker with a powerful message, but also because she was able to see a reflection of herself. I'm white. Tara and Felicia are both black, and there is no doubt that working with and learning from Felicia would enrich Tara's identity beyond what I can provide. As a teacher, I know that the value of personalized learning goes beyond alternative ways to receive credit and show mastery of subject matter; it provides an opportunity for students to find role models that reflect their own identity.



Personalized learning can take many forms. At the high school where I teach, my favorite aspects of it are our requirements for two job shadows, a service-learning project, an internship, and a senior project. All four of these tasks are monitored by a staff member at our school, but also include a community mentor. These mentors are, for the most part, not trained teachers, but they give students the opportunity to find a role model who reflects their ideals, interests, and identity in a way that I cannot, due to my own cultural experiences. Identity is complex, and is rarely affirmed for minorities; shouldn't we give our students of color every opportunity we can to receive affirmation for who they are?

In theory, the race of the teacher shouldn't matter to the success of the students. But research has shown how important it is for a student to have a teacher who is of the same race and shares their cultural experiences. Many of our students of color today are taught by white teachers who did not grow up in the same neighborhoods as them, and this can keep students from connecting with adults during their high school years.

Tara is not unique in her experience. Another student, Julia, struggled to have goals or to find a passion in school. With our community members, we set up a job shadow for Julia with a state representative in her town, who, like Julia, is Latina. The experience ignited a spark in Julia for public service and civic engagement. She attended multiple rallies at the statehouse and the Pride Parade in Providence. Through this personalized learning experience, she found her passion.

In addition, the intersectionality of identities that students experience today means that finding an adult in a school building who exactly reflects our students can be difficult. Alex, a trans Latino student, had a rough past year. Even with our strong, supportive relationship, it was impossible for me to understand his experience as a trans male. Through a job shadow, Alex was able to connect with a community organization called Youth Pride. He found other teens working through gender identity, and came back with a focus and drive for both his service-learning project and his senior project. Now, Alex is working on a way to educate our school on his passion: transgender rights.

Through our school's personalized learning program, my students can meet adults who look like them and have had the same life experiences as them. They can follow their passion and find someone who grew up in their own neighborhood and has the same values. The experience of working with a member of the community for an internship has dual benefits. The students have a role model who reflects their identity, and the community gains an adolescent that becomes invested in the community, whose mentorship experience is often a formative experience in high school. I care deeply about my students and what they learn in my classrooms. But I'm not selfish about who facilitates this knowledge. Personalized learning and internships fill a gap that our school and I can't provide, both in terms of developing new skills and finding membership in a community.

Personalized Learning Can Help Students to Find Role Models Who Look Like Them

By: Emily Berman, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

In the end, Tara found a mentor in another woman of color who works for an organization that dissuades teens from drunk driving. Tara recently lost a cousin to a drunk driving accident, and has thrown herself into this work. I think she already cared about the topic, but working with her mentor, another black woman, has affirmed Tara's identity and strength, and has made the internship experience even more impactful. Personalized learning isn't just a way for Tara to earn credits to graduate. It's a way for her to continuously grow, develop, and connect with people in her community.

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Personalized Learning Helps Students Tackle Real World Complexity

By: Chris Stanley, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

August 17, 2017

HUFFPOST

Matt snarled at me. His baseball cap was turned backwards, broken-in Chippewa Boots left a trail of dirt on my floor, and I could see his shoulder droop under the weight of a huge chip. Matt had transferred from another district to Ponaganset High School with failing grades. He was living through the morass of a contentious divorce and was dropped in my 10th grade US History class with a 2nd grade reading level. His first words to me were not "Hello, it's nice to meet you." They were, "I don't do school."



Eventually, Matt started attending class albeit irregularly. When he did attend, he participated in the small group discussions and shared his thoughts with the class. He appeared articulate and informed and made contributions that encouraged the other students to think about the course of history. One afternoon, the class was examining the weaknesses inherent in the Articles of Confederation. Matt, without skipping a beat, shot up on his feet and exclaimed, "The Revolution was about avoiding taxes. They have what they want but it doesn't work. The federal government needs to be able to collect taxes. How else do we pay for stuff like roads and bridges!" He was absolutely correct. In fact, he will never admit to it but he was "doing" school.

I knew that Matt needed more to keep him engaged and that something more couldn't be accomplished inside the cinder block walls of my classroom. He would writher in his seat, stand up, walk around and disrupt the other students. He appeared to be a busy-body. He needed to move if he was going to achieve success. He yearned for the opportunity to move around and get his hands dirty as he learned. I needed to both personalize his experience and build a stronger connection with him.

My solution was to literally have Matt get his hands dirty and share a part of my own life with him in an unusual way – through clambaking. As a volunteer firefighter in my hometown of Warren, Rhode Island, I look at the clambake as not only a rite of passage but an activity that defines our community. I decided to take a risk and placed Matt in charge of preparing and serving a traditional New England clambake to raise funds for a field trip to New York City. Neither he, nor anyone in my class, had ever done this. If Matt failed it would certainly mean colossal embarrassment on my part.

Throughout the experience the class researched, discussed, and analyzed the history of the traditional clambake and how it is still part of New England folkway. The project provided Matt with an opportunity to review basic math, and to learn food preparation, public relations, and communication skills. This is personalized learning in a nutshell: giving students an opportunity to learn 21st century skills through a complex project for which they take primary ownership. By aligning Matt's strengths with his learning style and interests, he refined his communication skills and developed leadership skills that may have otherwise went unrecognized.

During the three weeks of the project, my students experienced every aspect of hosting a great clambake. We travelled to rocky shores of Sakonnet Point to collect the rockweed. Matt grew into a steely, dedicated young man who waded into the chilly waters of Narragansett Bay to gather up rockweed. He later helped the class gather up the rocks and wood, and erected the tall crib that was set ablaze to cook the food. He washed bushels of clams, cut fish, and bagged all the other delicacies that guest expected to consume. He served each guest with a smile and was excited to learn everything he could about what it took to put on a successful clambake. And he gained the satisfaction of raising money to offset the cost of a field trip to the 9/11 Museum and Memorial in New York City.

Personalized Learning Helps Students Tackle Real World Complexity

By: Chris Stanley, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

The essence of personalized learning is that students learn best when they are truly engaged in a project. When Matt was given the opportunity to explore, discuss, and experiment, and then put the concepts and skills I was trying to develop in him to the test, he became ready to learn. In fact, he became the star of the show. While he was planning, preparing, advertising and serving the clam-bake, he did not even seem to notice that he was in school. In fact, Matt learned a series of skills that will serve him far beyond high school. As a result of the project he is better prepared for today's increasingly complex life and work environments. By weaving in skills such as collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving into the content I'm ensuring Matt is ready to tackle the real world.

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All students can learn with personalized learning approach

By: Kristen Re, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

June 15, 2017

HUFFPOST

A few years ago, Nina, a ninth grader told me that she couldn't do her work because she was "stupid." I was almost rendered speechless, except that I knew I needed to tell her it wasn't so. That moment has remained one of the most heartbreaking I've experienced as an educator, and there have been many.



Nina wasn't stupid, but somewhere along the way, she wasn't given enough time to master a necessary skill before moving on to the next level. Over time, this caused her to fall behind. This happens far more than people realize because in most schools students are expected to learn the same content at the same pace and speed as the "average student." As adults, we know that we don't always learn new things at the same pace as our friends and colleagues, so why should we expect our kids to do this?

As a teacher, I believe that we need high quality standards and instruction; I also believe that, in order to be successful with all students, we must provide them with a much more individualized and tailored education experience. Personalized learning allows us to offer what students like Nina need in order to be successful. It requires us, as educators, to really get to know and understand where a particular student is starting from, how they learn, and what it will take for them to be successful learners moving forward.

When we personalize a student's learning, we start where that student is and work with them until they can demonstrate proficiency or competency in that area before advancing to the next level. For students like Nina, this may mean giving her more time to learn a new concept. Another one of my students, Elliott, was having trouble identifying the main idea of a persuasive essay, so rather than moving on to supporting details, we devoted more time to mastering the concept of the main ideas. Students can't successfully learn new skills until they've learned the foundation.

When I began working with Nina, she was reading and writing at a second grade level, seven grade levels behind. Through targeted, personalized assignments and one-on-one instruction, she grew in her abilities. As a senior, she is now reading and writing at a high school level, and has already earned multiple certifications, including one to be a Medical Administrative Assistant.

Because I was afforded the opportunity to personalize her learning, Nina was able to pursue several internships outside the classroom, in early childhood education, where she learned skills normally reserved for college students. It was this engagement with her community and other adults with specialized knowledge that helped Nina discover her ability and inclination to help others, which motivated her further.

A personalized education approach looks different for each student. In order to do this, I as a teacher have to get to know my students, find out what drives them, and use it to engage them in their learning. Like adults, kids have disparate strengths and passions. This takes time and patience; we cannot always race to the finish line. I can empower my students by enabling them to learn in ways that work for them—whether it's in our classroom, at an internship, working with a member of the community, or taking a college class.

All students can learn with personalized learning approach

By: Kristen Re, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

My students appreciate my support and the freedom I give them to learn as they need. I know that this drives them to work harder and to be successful. I dread to imagine what could have happened to Nina had she not gone through the personalized learning program, but am grateful to know that she no longer thinks of herself as "stupid" and is excited and motivated to continue her education in college next year.

Kristin Re teaches at the Met High School in Providence. She is a Teach Plus Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow.

Why I Teach Where I Teach: To Give Students Their Fair Shot

By: Kristin Re, Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow

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The Education Trust

Kristin Re is a teacher at The Metropolitan Regional Career and Technical Center in Providence, Rhode Island, and she is a Teach Plus–Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellow. About half of the student body at Met High School is Latino, and one-quarter is Black; two-thirds of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. Kristin, who is pursuing her Ed.D. from Northeastern University, has taught for seven years.



A few years ago, I had a ninth-grader tell me that she couldn't do her work because she was "stupid." It has remained one of the most heartbreaking moments I've experienced as an educator, and there have been many. This student was — and is — not stupid; somewhere along the way, she wasn't given the time to master a skill before moving on to the next, and over time, this caused her to fall behind.

Working at the Met High School has given me the opportunity to help this student change her perception of herself. During the next few years, I worked with her, personalizing her education. We utilized her interests to make her work engaging, and we started where she was academically. We created assignments that targeted her areas of need, and we found ways of accessing content and skills that best complemented her learning style. She had manageable deadlines, but even when she struggled to meet them, she was not penalized punitively.

This is what I do with my students for the four years (grades 9-12) they are with me. In addition to personalizing each student's education based on their needs, wants, and interests, I am able to get to know my students as humans; we have relationships. They can call or text me, and they do — at all hours. This type of educational setting is what attracted me to the Met.

That student who claimed to be stupid is about to graduate with a much more positive impression of herself. This is why I teach where I teach.

Before this fellowship, I didn't know what personalized learning was. Through this fellowship I was able to connect with many teachers and professionals in Rhode Island to better understand personalized learning and what aspects of this I can use in my classroom. I was able to form professional relationships with a lot of impressive educators, and I am grateful for that opportunity. In my classroom, I will definitely use what I have learned in the fellowship. I will be more thoughtful about how I implement personalized learning in my classroom. This fellowship also gave me the confidence and skills to take on more of a leadership position in my school. Even though I haven't been teaching many years, I know that I can be a leader in my school.

-Emily Berman

In my classroom several key components of a "Personalized Learning" have been implemented such as: creating personal learning paths for each student by using modules, measuring mastery against clear goals and standards by employing well-constructed rubrics, fostering a flexible learning environment, incorporating student agency in the development of multi-disciplinary projects, and enhancing lessons by utilizing technology to support each of these components. The fellowship has instilled the confidence in me to immediately create complex tasks that embrace blended learning. By combining the best methods of the classroom is a vibrant place to exchange ideas. Use online media to deliver notes, lectures and related course materials. By developing modules in the learning management system, Canvas, my students review materials at home and at their own pace. My classroom has now morphed into an extensive workshop where students complete hands-on work and I am free to field questions, engage class-wide discussions or offer each student one-on-one support.

-Chris Stanley

I very much enjoyed participating in this Fellowship. I enjoyed meeting and working with teachers throughout the state that share similar views. I also found the guest speakers very interesting and engaging. Personally, I found great value in our in person meetings engaging in deep meaningful conversations with teachers and other policy stakeholders. I have been able to contact various resources shared with me from the fellowship to make my teaching more personalized for students even in a district focus mostly on blended learning.

-Allison Strumolo

The Teach Plus Rhode Island Fellowship brings three words to mind: Impactful, Supportive, and Influential.

The Fellowship provided a structure for like-minded educators to share resources, explore new perspectives and collaborate on strategies for bringing change to our school systems. We were challenged to think outside of the bubble of our own classrooms and schools and apply that thinking to a larger scale. So rarely as educators do we have the opportunity to collaborate with peers outside of our individual school districts; it really was refreshing and inspiring.

The Teach-Plus Fellowship has been one of the most insightful and perspective-shifting professional experiences I've had to date.

We don't have all the answers but we do have a newfound dedication to continuing to make progress in the realm of personalized learning and project-based learning throughout our schools. The Fellowship may have technically ended, but the work continues. My colleague, Brian Bordieri, are proud to represent Teach Plus and The Met Center at The Mid-Atlantic Conference for Personalized Learning this February in Pennsylvania. We'll be bringing many of the insights and strategies discussed and developed during our time with Teach Plus to a workshop we're co-facilitating to teachers from around the country.

-Samuel Jean-Baptiste

The Teach Plus Fellowship deepened my understanding of personalized learning. Through our readings and discussions, I learned about the differences between blended learning and personalization, and where the two concepts overlap. What engaged me the most throughout the fellowship were the speakers.

-Liz Noren

Participating in the fellowship helped me to recognize that education requires balance. An obvious concept, but a balance of what exactly? I have only taught in personalized, small schools so the concept of focusing on an individual student and developing an individual plan is not a new practice. I do however see more of the challenge of making that personalized learning rigorous. When students, such as my current group, each have an independent curriculum driven by their specific interests, it can be very difficult to 'norm' the level of achievement. We do this by developing a deeper knowledge of the student and always looking at how we can build on an existing skill, pushing the student to the next level.

-Brian Bordieri

The journey through this Teach Plus fellowship has helped me to see the variety of options we have for personalization within the classroom. Coming into this experience, I wasn't at all familiar with personalized learning as anything more than differentiation. Thanks to the exposure to research and experts in the field, I now can see the foundational importance of personalization in classrooms across the country. The past year of research and learning within the fellowship has prepared me for the next steps in the growth of our school community. I work in a small charter school that is currently working towards a goal of expansion. As we work to prepare a new curriculum and build a culture for grade levels we don't currently serve, I am using much of the knowledge I've gained about school reform to build the dream we have spent the last year discussing. My hope is that this has just been the beginning of a journey that will play a part in reformatting education to fit the needs of students across our country in schools that are failing to meet their needs.

-Amanda Larner

First and foremost, joining this fellowship was very much liked an extended professional development opportunity regarding personalized learning. I like that we were able to hear from many experts in the field, including from Nellie Mae, RIDE, and local schools. Prior to the fellowship, I would not have known where to turn for the most up to date and research-backed literature about personalized learning. Secondly, it has been nice to be part of a cohort. At our in-person meetings, I enjoyed hearing from teachers of different content areas about how they implemented personalized learning. In all truth, I would have liked more opportunities to have these kinds of conversations. Thirdly, I am thankful for all that I learned from Anya and others regarding how to write an Op-Ed and Policy Proposal. These will be invaluable as I continue to exercise my teacher voice about personalized learning and other topics relevant to the communities I serve.

-Julio Alicea

I will be perfectly honest. I did not understand the true nature of personalization in the classroom until maybe the third month of fellowship. This is not a criticism of the Fellowship, but of me, of my peers, of my profession. And I still believe that most of my colleagues do not understand what personalization really means. It is a word that has been used before in our profession, at the advent of "advisory periods" instead of "homeroom." It was used when many schools were increasing technology for students, advocating for a 1-1 ratio. I heard it at a conference during which a representative from Rhode Island Department of Education discussed and promoted "blended learning." By the time I got to the fellowship, I had no idea what personalization meant. As I approached my op-ed, I was still confused. I had trouble choosing one particular element of what I was learning about personalization until one particular moment at an in-person session when I realized that personalization boils down to meeting students where they are, and giving them the avenues they can traverse on which to travel, whether it be technology, or interest, alternate settings, and in the traditional high school setting with very little technology, a sense of community. Though personalization implies individuality, I have discovered that it is the celebration of the individual within a community of learners who appreciate one another, and move towards common goals.

-Diane Feole

This fellowship offered me the opportunity to network, with not only other public school teachers, but also teachers from charter schools throughout the state. Too often being a public school teacher, charter schools are seen as the “enemy” and this fellowship allowed me to see behind enemy lines. This type of collaboration is so powerful, and so necessary, because instead of trying to tear each other apart about what was wrong with each system we were able to work together to determine how to improve both systems. This is a big win for everyone involved.

The second most valuable element of this fellowship was the ability to have a voice. I have had an opportunity to speak directly with Commissioner Wagner about issues that affect my school district and have published an op-ed in the Huffington Post.

-Brian Kampper

I believe that participating in this fellowship opened my eyes to the current educational climate here in Rhode Island and the gradual culture change that is happening across the country. I consider my collaboration with educators from various types of schools and educational institutes from our state to be invaluable. Who knew that our experiences could be so different in such a small state? The work that my policy group accomplished and the many conversations I engaged in with my fellow colleagues showed me that our goals are very similar, though our schools have very different visions of how the goals should be reached. I realized that my experience at The Met is very unique and that I am very lucky to have the ability to reach my students in an authentic and personalized way that may not be feasible in other school settings. I now have a better understanding of some of the difficulties many RI schools faces when trying to implement personalized learning strategies and policies and that many times, the student's well-being is not always at the center of school policy design or the decision-making process.

-Samuel Jean-Baptiste

My participation in the fellowship definitely gave me a broader perspective on personalized learning. I've been immersed in personalized learning through the lens of blended-learning and technology integration. Working with such a diverse group of educators opened my eyes to the wide range of aspects of personalized learning. From competency based grading to culturally responsive teaching I now have a deeper understanding of the variety of different ways that teaching and learning can be improved to better serve the needs of individual students. This new perspective will hopefully influence the evolution of the playlists I use in my classroom.

-Jason Appel

My classroom has followed a personalized model for a few years, but it is nice to meet other educators and hear about what personalized learning means to them. I don't think I made enough professional connections with policymakers to do something on a larger scale at the moment, but I am interested in pursuing that in the future. I think I have a better awareness of the educational landscape in Rhode Island, but I wish there was more opportunity to pursue relationships with those organizations.

-Rebecca Willner

The Fellowship has been a great opportunity to help me crystallize my thinking about personalized learning. As someone who teaches in a school founded around this philosophy, the fellowship gave me the time and space to reflect on my experiences and clarify the challenges and promise of the approach. Writing about personalized learning is something I have meant to do since embarking on my teaching career 5 years ago, and I just have never made it a priority. The Fellowship helped make it a priority and it was exciting to have my work published on a site with national readership.

-Ellen Foley

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