

# CONCEPTUALIZING PERSONALIZATION



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## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE IDEA

Personalizing schooling is basically about changing teaching. It is about adapting traditional group ‘instruction’ to the differences among individual students; moving from the student adapting to school, to school adapting to the student.

Be clear, though, that teachers don’t *learn* students. Students learn; teachers help. Someone once memorably said: Farmers don’t grow corn; farmers help corn grow. Helping the student learn starts with motivation, as Jack Frymier explained to Minnesotans years ago. “If young people want to learn, they will”, he said. “If they don’t want to, you probably can’t make ‘em. *So any successful effort to improve learning will begin by improving student motivation.*”

And young people differ, in what they find of interest; find motivating. In the school only the teacher knows the students as individuals. So the work of personalization rests with the teacher; to understand the interests, aptitudes, capacities and backgrounds of each. Obviously it will help enormously if school is arranged to give the teacher the time and autonomy needed for so difficult a job.

### The importance of clarifying the concept

When a new idea appears it is important to have a clear definition of the terms used to describe it and a clear understanding of the concepts embodied in it. Educators have an understandable tendency to pick up a newly popular idea—‘site management’, Montessori, ‘social-emotional’ learning’, ‘teacher leadership’ or ‘innovation’—and say: “We’re doing it!” A clear understanding of the concepts helps identify what’s real and what isn’t.

Today ‘personalization’ is an idea generating much interest. So it important to understand what it is, and to see how far it is becoming real in Minnesota.

In truth, public education in Minnesota is personalized to a greater extent than most people recognize. What was until about 1980 essentially a public utility has been transformed by the introduction of a range of public options for students and teachers. It is a remarkable change, not well understood.

So to explain personalization we can look at what exists. Still, an effort to conceptualize personalization will also be useful, perhaps as a guide to the way in which the idea might, or should, develop in the future.

## Why personalization is important

The rationale for personalizing schooling rests fundamentally in the differences among young people: differences in aptitude, in personality, in sociability, in their interests and in their family background.

Personalization has not been the history of education policy. Public education began instead with standardization, largely for administrative convenience. Students were grouped by age, taught in classes. It was 'batch processing'. Distinctions were about groups: 'bright pupils' and 'slow pupils', those 'college material' and those not. Students in a given 'grade' might be divided, sorted to different teachers' rooms according to the school's perception of 'ability'.

Recently the 'accountability' movement has tested students' performance on 'standards'; classifying by race, ethnicity and socio-economic status. This produces the anxiety about disparities; the notorious 'achievement gaps'.

But such comparisons of proficiency-levels are suspect as a guide to understanding the achievement of both students and schools. The differences in 'performance' reflect more than anything differences in the educational level of parents. Some young people come to school advantaged by early exposure at home to vocabulary and learning and to the family's sense that education is important; others arrive in these respects disadvantaged. From this emerges a fundamental inequity in public education.

In a multi-district metropolitan area like the Twin Cities public education functions as a private market. Families financially able to live where they choose move into districts financially able to provide superior facilities and the broadest programs and to have the students scoring highest on the measures of conventional achievement. These schools, filled with the children of well-educated parents, are then defined as 'quality' or 'high-performing' schools; those enrolling children of not-well-educated parents are described as 'failing' schools.

This means, as John Goodlad pointed out, that some schools will always be, appear as, 'good'; but only a few. Some will not. The 'achievement gap' in other words is built into the system by the social and economic differences among families. This is what leads some analysts to say that ultimately the strategy for better education lies in change and improvement in the economy; in work and incomes.

But suppose schools personalize. Focusing on individuals we would see achievement defined not by the conventional measures and by comparisons of groups. We would see learning measured against the progress each young person makes. The 'gap' will change; will be the distance a student has still to go to reach her/his own objectives and potential.

## The dimensions of personalization

The effort to conceptualize personalized schooling, teaching, should begin by identifying and distinguishing among (a) *'pathways'* to personalization, (b) *'practices'* of personalization and (c) the *degree* to which those practices are in use.

Deciding among the different routes now available to complete the requirement for compulsory schooling clearly is a step in personalizing a student's education. But that decision is only a beginning. Along a given pathway a student might or might not find practices that truly personalize teaching and learning. Ultimately it is the practices that matter most.

**Pathways**—Early, when public education was a classic public utility, pathways existed within the district. Some important distinctions were ignored: Children starting kindergarten at 'age five' might be almost six, or might just have turned five a month before. Over time, as the need for different pathways became clear, options were sometimes provided in the district and sometimes set up outside, within the larger public system.

Pathways do exist within conventional school. Electives are available along with the 'required subjects'. Magnet schools offer different pathways. Special education is a large and important pathway; a program, incidentally, established in Minnesota before Congress began to provide national financing in 1970. Extracurricular activities provide ways for young people to develop their talents in athletics, the arts, language.

Outside the district schools were established for the deaf and blind. So also were 'reform schools' for 'delinquents'. New York, Boston and some other large eastern cities created 'exam schools' that students would test-into for admission. The schools of the Bureau of Indian Affairs provide a pathway alternative to attendance in the regular district public school.

Some pathways once inside the district have been removed: vocational education, most significantly; taken out of high school and moved into post-secondary systems. This elimination of vocational training continues to distress leaders in communities around Minnesota who need young people to stay and operate the economic base of the city.

In recent years, conspicuously in Minnesota, new pathways have appeared outside the local district, usually available to students generally. These are now familiar: the alternative-school option, the post-secondary option, the inter-district option, the chartered-school option, the online option.

**Practices**—A few examples will suggest how personalizing the path to the diploma can fail to individualize the student's learning experience.

- The district into which a student ‘open-enrolls’ might be different in some ways important to the student, yet not personalized in the way its schools go about teaching and learning.
- Students electing the post-secondary option are personalizing their pathway, but still might find themselves in a large classroom listening to a lecture.
- A student entering the chartered sector is not necessarily entering a school personalizing learning: Minnesota’s program has some deliberately conventional schools along with those designed to be innovative. A student entering this sector can, however, if s/he wishes, enroll in schools offering remarkably personalized approaches to teaching and learning. Minnesota’s charter sector has operated as an R&D sector for its public education.

Truly to personalize, a school does need to adopt practices that *individualize*.

That can mean, in conventional schools, providing additional ‘helps’ to ensure each student masters the material; using tutoring, peer teaching and computers. Some greater degree of personalization would appear were these schools to broaden their objectives to include critical and creative thinking, and skills in cooperation and communication.

Personalization becomes more substantial when it involves the interests, aptitudes and personal objectives of each individual student. Then independent study and project-based learning appear. Students can take more time if they need more time, can pursue a topic they find of interest, or move ahead if they finish the work before the end of the semester or the year.

(Interestingly, this ‘competency-based progression’ is conspicuous on the *athletic* side of high school. Recently in Minnesota a number of young people excelling in basketball, tennis, gymnastics, hockey and perhaps other sports have been ‘going on the varsity’ while in eighth or even seventh grade, some after that excelling at top university and even elite world levels. Why not on the academic side, as well?)

**Degree**—It is essential to note *the degree to which* a practice is available. Is the tutoring, for example, in small groups or truly individual? How often; for how long? Does the student have internet resources available? Of what quality? How often, and for how long? How fully has the school moved to make the students responsible for their own learning? Is the interest in ‘teacher leadership’ serious or not?



One practical effect of personalization, seemingly unnoticed and unmentioned in the discussion to date, will be on the practice of specializing programs by school. Program options will exist for individual students within a given school. For districts the rather large implications for transportation should quickly be apparent.

## **System changes to encourage personalization**

Key elements of the system can be—perhaps need to be, and ought to be—altered to encourage personalization. First, the concept of learning could be defined as realizing so far as possible the potential of every young person. Second, individual schools and teachers could take the initiative to personalize their work. Third, new understandings from the science of learning could be brought into teaching.

Let's take the three separately—the first two having been touched on earlier. We might think of them as 'institutional practices'.

### **1. Focus on 'realizing every child's potential'**

The idea of defining achievement as 'realizing every child's potential' is appearing now in Minnesota's policy and political discussion, in the effort by Alan Page, former justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, to secure an amendment to Minnesota's constitution requiring 'quality education'.

This has the potential to make personalized teaching and learning central. But it does have its challenges. It is one thing to help each individual student learn to read and compute and to do well in the subjects taught in secondary school; to meet conventional system objectives. It is quite something else to set 'realizing individual potential' as the objective. How will the individual student's potential be identified? How will its realization be developed and its success be measured?

There are answers. The Ball Foundation has worked for years—initially with people in educational psychology at the University of Minnesota—to identify aptitudes. A short and less expensive version of its 'Aptitude Battery' is now available online. Will the measures of success be quantitative? Probably not in the conventional way. Yet in most areas of life the test of success is satisfaction. And 'satisfaction' can be quantified. Or do as they do in Finland: If you want to know how a student is doing, "Ask the teacher".

## **2. Make it possible for teachers truly to lead the learning.**

Early, an organizational innovation appeared in Minnesota; in its new charter sector. It was the idea of teachers having full control of ‘professional issues’ through a workers cooperative or professional partnership they formed.

This arrangement operates successfully: It works, in practice if not in theory. It has proved of interest to the teacher unions, who have been unable through legislation or negotiation to secure for their members a significant role in decisions about professional issues. A Minnesota nonprofit, Education Evolving, will in November 2022 hold, in Minneapolis, its fifth national meeting of teachers interested in learning how to develop and run a ‘teacher-powered’ school.

Personalization, to put it plainly, holds the potential to make teaching a professional—a better—job and career.

## **3. Incorporate the science of learning**

Learning, it develops, is more or less successful depending on the way students study and on the way school teaches.

As teachers are able to ‘call the shots’ it will surely be helpful for them to understand what has now been learned about learning. Much of that understanding is available now in Minnesota where *Make It Stick*, an astonishingly successful book about the science of learning, has been written. Different individuals do have differences in the kind of ‘intelligence’ they possess. One category validated by research distinguishes among analytical, creative and practical. These differences are important. It is terribly unfair to evaluate achievement for all young people by the one measurement that demonstrates the achievement of children from the advantaged families.

Unfortunately, too, it develops that conventional testing causes students to ‘learn’ in ways that—while perhaps helpful for scoring well on the test—do not produce lasting learning; learning that ‘sticks’.

So in introducing personalization it is important for teachers to know how to find these differences in their students, to understand the style of teaching that best serves to convey real learning and to use testing as an aid to learning rather than as part of the effort at ‘accountability’. As with other similar vocations, truly professional teaching implies and requires substantial continuing professional-development.



It is a problem that no significant effort seems yet to have been made to move these understandings from the educational psychology community into the world of practice. This is a problem to which Minnesota might help contribute a solution.

## **Personalization beyond public school**

The law permits a family to meet the requirement for education privately. This can mean enrolling their children in private school—at private expense. Or homeschooling their children, under the supervision (presumably) of the district superintendent.

We do also need to keep in perspective that there was learning before there was school, and there still is learning not school-based—most of which is personalized.

There are courses and classes which families buy privately; notably in the arts and world languages. More than one young person has taken and read magazines explaining how to build one thing or another; has bought a chemistry set, or put together something electronic. Most striking today, of course, is the access to knowledge available through the internet.

On the horizon are interested businesses with ideas about how to do much more of this. Most would be interested in contracting with public schools and districts, but would look to marketing directly to families should the schools and districts prove unreceptive. If public education wants to personalize, it needs to move rather decisively.

## **Describing, and improving, ‘personalization’**

Please treat this paper as a start; as ‘notes toward a definition of’ personalization. We will appreciate corrections, additional background and comments about our basic conceptualization.



It is important to describe the pathways and practices more fully, and to indicate the extent of their use in Minnesota. That effort has been made, with the good help of persons in the state Department of Education, in a separate paper by Michael Lipset, also available on the website of the Center for Policy Design.

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