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Family Matters: Teachers' Perceptions of Community and School Culture after Seven Years of Personalized Learning Reform

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Abstract

This paper explores the school culture and sense of community of a Midwestern middle school after seven years of personalized learning reform. This mixed method study identified a strong school culture based on the School Culture Triage Survey. Focus group interviews supported the survey findings and attributed the successful implementation and expansion of the personalized learning program to affiliative collegiality, autonomy/innovation, being student-centered, and intentional. These findings can be powerful for any school in instituting personalized or customized learning models.

Introduction

Personalized learning is an innovative and unique approach that has grown in popularity since the advent of Schwahn and McGravey's seminal work *Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning; Learning in the Age of Empowerment* (2012). Much of the current literature about personalized learning has focused on student outcomes rather than the conditions that support a successful launch and sustainable implementation of a personalized learning model. However, major school reform initiatives, such as a personalized learning model, need a strong and supportive school culture from which to build (Brucato, 2005).

The current study explored the culture and community at a midwestern middle school that had grown a personalized learning program over seven years. While community and student buy-in were likely a part of the equation, this study focused mainly on the teachers' perceptions of ways in which community and culture supported and was supported by the implementation and growth of personalized learning.

Literature Review

School Sense of Community and Culture

A school is not merely a physical structure housing students and educators; rather, it is a dynamic ecosystem comprising intricate human interactions, beliefs, and behaviors. One way to conceptualize these complex interactions is to investigate a school's sense of community and culture. In the literature, these types of social

connections and interactions have been described in several ways, including but not limited to, climate, connectedness, community, and/or culture. For simplicity, this paper will refer to these ideas as school community and culture.

School community and culture encompass the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize interactions within educational settings (Phillips, 1996). Van Houtte (2005) stated that school climate encapsulates the shared beliefs and experiences among colleagues. "School culture is the shared experiences both in school and out of school (traditions and celebrations) that create a sense of community, family, and team membership" (Wagner, 2006 p. 41). Wagner's specific conceptualization of school community and culture identifies professional collaboration, affiliative collegiality, and efficacy as critical domains. Each of these domains are assessed in the School Culture Triage Survey. When schools have a strong, supportive sense of community among teachers, the entire school environment sees positive impacts.

Melton-Shutt (2002) conducted a study across 66 elementary schools in Kentucky, establishing a positive relationship between scores on the School Culture Triage Survey and state assessment scores. Higher scores on the survey corresponded to higher state assessment scores, underscoring the influential role of school culture in academic outcomes. Similarly, Cunningham (2003) replicated these findings in a study involving 61 schools in Florida, where higher scores on culture surveys correlated with

higher reading scores on Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test.

Beyond student achievement, Brucato (2005) suggests that any major school reform initiative should begin with establishing a strong and supportive culture. Positive perceptions of school community and culture foster collaborative practices among teachers, which are essential for effective implementation of reform initiatives (Bryk et al., 2010). A positive, cohesive school community characterized by trust, collaboration, and a shared vision fosters teacher buy-in, commitment, and innovation, thereby enhancing the implementation and longevity of reform efforts. Conversely, a negative or fragmented school culture may impede progress, leading to resistance, disengagement, and ultimately, the failure of reform initiatives. Recognizing the pivotal role of teacher perceptions in shaping school culture is essential for designing and implementing effective strategies for educational improvement and systemic change.

Personalized Learning

The popularity of personalized learning can be somewhat attributed to the reception of Schwahn and McGravey's (2012) book, *Inevitable: Mass Customized Learning: Learning in the Age of Empowerment*. The book proposes a radical shift in education, moving from a standardized "assembly line" model to a system that customizes learning for each student's individual needs and interests. This resonates with educators who desire to cater to diverse learners and maximize their potential. However, this reform movement has had significant criticism regarding teacher training, infrastructure, overlooking core knowledge standards, and a dehumanizing over reliance on technology (France, 2019; Wilson, 2014). Despite the criticism of mass customized learning, many schools have applied the basic tenets as a foundation for building their own unique personalized learning models specific to the needs of their learning environment. Some schools have adapted the foundational ideas of mass customized learning in alternate models, commonly referred to as personalized learning (France). As different schools adapt personalized learning ideas to meet the needs of their own schools, what it means to be "personalized" is hard to pin down (Tomlinson, 2017).

Personalized learning is defined as an educational approach that specializes instruction to the individual needs, strengths, and interests of each student (France, 2019). Personalized learning practices meet the developmental needs of students and focus on student autonomy. Each school that implements personalized learning programs has its own unique take, but most focus on student voice and choice. Students have flexibility in how they engage with content and freedom in how they demonstrate their own understanding. In general, personalized learning aims to involve and engage students in the learning process, rather than design a curriculum that is then delivered to students. Hammond (2014) identifies this distinction as independent vs dependent learners. Dependent learners rely on others for learning and support. Independent learners, on the other hand, think critically, ask questions, have independence, and engage in a learning process.

The benefits of personalized learning include increased student engagement and motivation, improved academic achievement, and closing achievement gaps (Blomeyer & Rhodes, 2017; Kilinc, 2018). Personalized learning places a strong emphasis on student ownership and agency, enabling students to take an active role in their own learning and to set goals for their educational progress (France, 2019). Self-determination theory is one model of motivation that explains how personalized learning can positively impact student motivation. The foundation of self-determination theory is that all humans have innate needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the need to have control over one's own life and decisions, competence refers to the need to feel effective and capable, and relatedness refers to the need to feel connected to and cared for by others (Deci & Ryan, 2012). All three elements can be positively impacted in personalized learning environments (Netcoh, 2017; Netcoh & Bishop, 2017). Autonomy-supportive teaching practices result in heightened student engagement and motivation (Deci et al., 2001).

Despite the potential benefits, implementing personalized learning in K-12 schools can be challenging due to a lack of teacher training, limited access to technology, and resistance to change (Cavanagh, 2017; Horn & Staker, 2011).

Technology plays a crucial role in personalized learning by providing access to a wide range of resources and allowing for real-time data analysis to inform instruction (France 2019; Horn & Staker, 2011). However, technology should not be relied upon as the sole solution, but instead used as a tool to support student learning (Bowen, 2012). A common concern with mass customized learning (predecessor to personalize learning practices) was that students would work through computer modules for several hours a day. Spending several hours a day working through these modules, with a keyboard and mouse, limited the modalities in which students could engage with content (Wilson, 2014).

Effective teacher training is essential for successful personalized learning, as it helps teachers understand the concept, develop effective pedagogical strategies, and use technology effectively (Blomeyer & Rhodes, 2017; Kilinc, 2018). In conclusion, the research suggests that personalized learning has the potential to greatly enhance student learning in K-12 schools, but careful planning and implementation are necessary to ensure its success. Personalized learning should be based on evidence-based practices, such as formative assessment, differentiated instruction, and project-based learning, to ensure its effectiveness (Blomeyer & Rhodes; Kilinc).

The Current Study

This study examined the sense of community and school culture at a Midwestern middle school (for this paper we will anonymously refer to this school as South Middle School or SMS) that developed after seven years of personalized learning reform. The foundation of the school's reforms was driven by their commitment to a student-centered personalized learning environment. SMS implemented a pilot personalized learning program that expanded to the entire school over seven years.

SMS School Context

The primary investigator had toured SMS with undergraduate teacher education students on several occasions. After a few of these tours, the building principal and the primary investigator developed a collaborative partnership to investigate various aspects of the unique learning environment. For example, one project

explored the character trait development of the students in a personalized learning environment. For this study, the SMS principal invited the primary investigator's team to examine the SMS teachers' sense of community and culture after the seven years of reform and expansion of their personalized learning program.

The difference of the personalized learning environment at SMS compared to a more traditional middle school can be felt each morning as the students begin their day with Daily Dish. Daily Dish is a meeting of students and their teachers (each grade has its own Daily Dish time). A few minutes are dedicated to reminders for the students and some announcements, and sometimes a teacher will share a personal story or anecdote that relates to the students, habits of mind curriculum, or other soft skill reinforcement. Then each content teacher presents their "offerings" for the day. The students then pick which classes they want to attend and at which periods during the day. The students can select experiences that match their current needs. For example, a student taking social studies could choose to participate in a supply and demand activity during first period or wait until fourth period and work on her market economy project. A student could also "double dip" and take a second section of a class he might be struggling with.

Once students are in their classrooms, the personalized learning approach is continued in lessons and activities that leverage student choice and autonomy. One foundational component of the classroom learning is in the mastery projects, where students demonstrate their understanding of a particular topic. These mastery projects are often varied and creative. For example, when working on mastery projects over Egyptian cultural history, the student utilized a variety of approaches. Some students created Egyptian figures on the 3-D printers, others created videos with green screen backgrounds, and some crafted Egyptian styled spears out of a variety of materials. Each project was individualized to allow students, or groups of students, to have autonomy over how they demonstrated their understanding of the curriculum standards.

A common criticism of customized or personalized learning environments mentioned in the literature review is an overreliance on

technology. Critics will site examples where students spend hours a day on computers working through passive modules on a website (France, 2019; Wilson, 2014). At SMS students, rarely engage in these types of practices. Instead, students use technology to create outside of a screen, keyboard, and mouse. Stop motion videos, podcasts, green screen videos, models, games, and other artifacts allow students to interact with content in different sensory modalities. Technology is used to help students connect and collaborate rather than isolate themselves on individualized computer models.

For example, students work together to program and utilize the school's farm bot that plants and supports various seeds as they grow to harvest. Another example is in how students disassemble broken paper towel dispensers and use the motors for various robotics projects. SMS has been honored as an Apple Distinguished School because of its innovative implementation of Apple technology products. This is an award that has only been given to 888 schools in 37 countries. "Apple Distinguished Schools are centers of leadership and educational excellence that demonstrate Apple's vision for learning with technology — and we believe they are some of the most innovative schools in the world" (Apple.com, 2024, para 1).

SMS has had several iterations of their personalized learning model over the past several years; yet they have remained consistent in adhering to key basic tenets: building and fostering student relationships, making space for collaboration (personal and digital), providing students a high level of choice, encouraging students to advocate (use their voice) for their learning, and fostering flexible thinking. The level of choice involves scheduling and learning artifacts. Learners in the personalized learning program do not have a set schedule; they create their schedule each day based on offerings created by teachers and sometimes the recommendations of other students. Choice in learning takes the form of varied mastery projects.

This project was a collaboration between SMS and the primary investigators' team of researchers. The school administration asked us to investigate the culture and sense of community of the school environment. The personalized learning program at the school began as a small subgroup of students and

teachers. Initially, families had the option to enroll their students in a traditional or personalized learning track. Each year the families choosing to enroll in the personal option increased. After seven years the number of families opting for the traditional dwindled to very small numbers and SMS moved to only offering personalized learning. (Note: As of this writing, SMS does still maintain a small group of "advanced honors students" that maintain a traditional schedule and structure, but the program is only open to students with qualifying test scores and not an option for all students).

The school viewed this reform and innovation as incredibly positive and effective, in part because of the expansion. This study aimed to identify teachers' perceptions of how school community and culture supported and were supported by the school's implementation and expansion of a personalized learning model.

Methods

This study employed explanatory sequential mixed methods, which involves first collecting and analyzing quantitative data to explore patterns, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis to provide deeper insights and explanations for the observed quantitative findings (Creswell, 2015). Initial data gathering began with a quantitative school culture survey of all teachers (n= 21) and was followed by qualitative focus group interviews with small groups of teachers (n= 15). Given that the survey was sent to all the teachers at SMS and the same group of teachers were also eligible to take part in the focus group, it is to be assumed that some of the teachers who participated in the focus groups also completed the survey. However, this could not be confirmed due to the anonymous nature of the quantitative survey. Still, the survey and focus group samples provide a strong representation of the approximately 44 teachers working at SMS.

Quantitative

The School Culture Triage Survey (Wagner, 2006) was administered to the teachers at SMS. The School Culture Triage Survey assesses a buildings' culture across three domains: professional collaboration (do teachers work together to solve professional issues), affiliative collegiality (do teachers enjoy working together), and efficacy (do teachers work to improve their

skills). This survey consists of 17 questions broken down between the three domains and each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale. The instrument can be used by the school administration to assess their school's culture.

According to the instrument guidelines the scores should be interpreted as follows:

The lowest triage score is 17 and the highest score is 85. After using the triage questions in several program evaluations, our data suggest the following:

- *17–40 Critical and immediate attention necessary. Conduct a full-scale assessment of your school's culture and invest all available resources in repairing and healing the culture.*
- *41–59 Modifications and improvements are necessary. Begin with a more intense assessment of your school's culture to determine which area is in most need of improvement.*
- *60–75 Monitor and maintain making positive adjustments.*
- *76–85 Amazing! We have never had a score higher than 75! (Wagner, p. 43).*

To understand more deeply what the quantitative results say about the climate and culture of SMS, the researchers engaged in focus group conversations with teachers.

Qualitative

Focus group interviews were conducted to gather additional information about survey findings. Researchers were curious to discover if qualitative data would corroborate the results of the quantitative findings or reveal new information useful to understanding teachers' perspectives and perceptions of school culture. Focus group conversations were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were then reviewed independently by the three researchers and themes were identified. The team of researchers then met to collaboratively identify common themes that related to school culture and sense of community. Analysis of qualitative data resulted in the emergence of four themes: affiliative collegiality, autonomy/innovation, student-centered, and intentional and supportive administration.

Findings

Quantitative

The teachers surveyed at SMS scored the school at 68, which places them in the second highest category on the School Culture Triage Survey. This indicates that the culture and professional community of SMS is strong, supportive, and productive. Additionally, it is worth noting that of the three domains, affiliative collegiality was scored the highest by teachers. This indicates that teachers report strong personal connections, feelings of community, communal celebrations, and that teachers generally enjoy the company of their colleagues, even outside of school.

Qualitative

Affiliative Collegiality

As noted above, affiliative collegiality was the highest ranked area from the quantitative survey data and qualitative data supported those quantitative findings. Words used by teachers to explain their relationships with fellow teachers included, "friendly," "supportive," and "accepting." One teacher mentioned that having a mentor was helpful to professional growth and development. References were made to having connections outside of the school building. While a few went on to share that they felt like fellow faculty were like family, there was not enough evidence to consider "family" to be a theme. In general, faculty reported an overall collegial spirit. One teacher commented, "I think that's a big thing at our school is we have a pretty decent support system within our teams, within our neighboring teachers..." A teacher who had returned to the school after working in a different school the previous year, mentioned that it felt good to be back in an environment where someone would ask her how she was doing, how her weekend was, and took a genuine interest in her well-being.

A collegial spirit and productive collaboration via teams was noted as crucial to the ability for the school to carry out its student-centered philosophy. One teacher commented, "I think you would be walking into a very different school if we did not have our team time." Many recognized how much their success depended on the synergy of their teams as well as the stability they had been able to build over the past several

years, which led to more trepidation about the fact that a new school was going to be built and some of the teachers might be moving to the new building.

Student Centered

It was very clear that the daily choices made by teachers in the school centered around the needs of the students which embodies the principles of personalized learning. References to collaborative teams were made. One teacher shared, "...the push is always on the student and what's best for the student" and went on to say, "...recognize them as individuals." Another teacher said,

So, I see my students as an extension of my family. I often, you know, treat them like I would treat my own children. Um, I want to provide a safe environment for them to be who they are and to feel that it's okay to voice their opinion...

As with the importance of building collegial relationships with fellow teachers, many mentioned the importance of establishing a rapport with students with one teacher sharing,

...like the biggest thing is just building relationships and connections in any way I can and then using those relationships and connections to try to get them to buy into what I'm doing. Content wise, I can connect with a kid via sports video games, what they're reading, whatever, and then have those conversations, but then like leverage that whatever to be like, 'okay, now we gotta sit down and you don't want to read this thing, but read it for me because you have that connection for me kind of thing', so....

Another aspect of the student-centered approach was also described as preparing students for life beyond school. A focus on soft skill development and the need to help students in their development to become upstanding citizens was evident in stories shared. The administration of the school believes these soft skills are foundational and perhaps even more important than content knowledge, they are pillars of the school personalized learning philosophy. A teacher reflected on the message she wanted to convey to students, "Hey, you know, you're coming into the real world here. And so, sometimes there are some real-world lessons

that you need to start learning at this point." Another teacher mentioned how life lessons are weaved into her classroom experiences, "...we don't leave trash around my room, and I expect that [student] work is good too." The conversations amongst the teachers in the focus group did not reference students' grades in the class but rather focused on character development and growth mindset. Teachers mentioned the importance of guiding students to respect the school, themselves, and others. While the obvious student-centered approach was primarily referenced as a positive thing, a few did mention that sometimes the constant focus on students' needs comes at the expense of the needs of the teachers.

However, long-term teachers made note that the school had not always been like this. One recounted,

The transition is it's very noticeable...we've switched from being teacher centered to being student centered and, and really... having high expectations for students and wanting to develop them into...responsible students who advocate for their learning and want to be at school rather than being forced to be at school.

A special education (SPED) teacher who had been with the district for three years applauded the administration's perspective and believed that the shift to a personalized learning approach had "changed dramatically for the better" and described a "culture of acceptance" in which he felt administrators had a better understanding of the SPED students and their needs.

Autonomy/Innovation

Teachers made frequent reference to the fact that they were allowed a great deal of autonomy in their classrooms and felt administration trusted them. Some referred to this as freedom "[we have] freedom to do what we feel is best for our students."

Coupled with that was the push to innovate. That pressure to innovate was primarily attributed to administration, but some teachers also felt the pressure to match the innovation of their colleagues. One commented,

When you start off, there's a perceived pressure. Like if I'm not doing something

that's outside of the box or interesting or whatever, then I'm not, as you know, I'm not keeping up with the Jones' is kind of a deal...

Many saw the drive to innovate as an exciting aspect of their job, while some expressed the exhaustion that stems from feeling like they must always be generating new work and ideas. One used the term "frantic" to describe the unrelenting feeling to constantly innovate, but then also said that perhaps that word was too extreme. Another mentioned a common message is to "do better, be better," but felt that came with the fact that the school was in a period of growth and transition. A teacher who was new to the school perceived the push for innovation as a form of empowerment because of the administrative support that was also provided. One recalled a conversation that occurred during his job interview in which an administrator had reportedly said, "We expect you to fail. Try new things. We expect you to fail. And if you're not failing, you're not trying new things and, and, um, figuring out what's best for your kids." The idea that a teacher at this school could not rest on one's laurels was evident in teacher comments. One teacher recounted the story of a teacher who didn't have his contract renewed because he "shot for the middle...and the middle is the bottom." Witnessing that changed his perspective in that,

Like, you always have to shoot for the moon and you're going to miss. There are so many times that it's just a hot mess in my room, but then I'm able to learn from that and make it better. And so, like going with the phenomenal staff, yes. We have so many wonderful professionals there and I can go to any one of them, watch their class and take something out of there that I can use in mine.

Teachers with the school before the changes had acclimated to the pressure. One teacher, in reference to herself and three other colleagues, said,

Us three have been here for a while.... I feel like we've kind of been able to grow with it. So, it's like, we're just adding a thing or two every year. Whereas if somebody comes in at this point...it's like a tidal wave of...need[ing] to catch up on those previous six years where we've been able to do it

incrementally. Whereas other people have to come in and just kind of figure it out.

Therefore, there was a recognition amongst the teachers that what they were doing at their school was so innovative that "new" teachers or teachers transferring from other districts would face a pretty big learning curve.

Intentional and Supportive Administration

When asked about the role of administration one teacher commented, "I do think they're very intentional...I think they're always thinking about how we can be a better staff, like how we can come together". That teacher went on to say, "I think they really do try to make sure we have that family atmosphere, and they want us all to be connected." All faculty interviewed noted there was no confusion about the school's ultimate mission and vision. Many references were made to the fact that the administration was very clear about the expectations for teaching and student outcomes. One teacher shared that when he joined the school, it was immediately clear that the vision and mission was relational. One teacher appreciated the student-centered approach that was set as the expectation was "researched based" and teachers could believe in it and trust that it was for the benefit of students.

Discussion

The commitment to an innovative personalized learning environment at SMS has been considered successful in that over seven years, the personalized learning model expanded from a small pilot initiative to school wide implementation. This paper has explored the culture and sense of community of a personalized learning model expanded from the small pilot to implementation across the entire school that has significantly transformed their learning environment to a personalized model. The reform has been effective largely because of the commitment of the administration and faculty. Many schools embrace various reform initiatives only to abandon them a few years later. At SMS, the school was able to maintain focus and commitment to an innovative application of personalized learning practices. Teachers at SMS saw administration as focused and intentional while also being supportive of teacher autonomy and creativity. In addition to

this administrative support, teachers believe a commitment to students and their colleagues have been critical components in developing this innovative educational environment. There was a bidirectional impact of the community and culture at SMS during their transition to personalized learning. There was an initial sense of community and culture that was foundational to launching the initiative. However, over time, the initiative itself fed the sense of community and culture of the teachers. This bidirectional impact was particularly evident in comments teachers made about autonomy and innovation in the classroom. This bidirectional impact is crucial for the continual evolution of reform initiatives like this one.

Conclusion

Schools interested in replicating the success of SMS should emphasize these ideas. In the case of SMS, it was most effective to begin reforms with a smaller group of invested and committed faculty. As administration supported the experimentation and autonomy of the personalized learning reforms, an interest in the program spread across students and teachers. As the program expanded commitment to experimentation, innovation and autonomy remained. SMS admission continued to emphasize innovation and improvement, in a few cases teachers viewed this relentless approach as exhausting, but overall, teachers viewed the ‘never stop improving’ philosophy as a significant reason for school success. Schools hoping for similar personalized learning reform success should also push themselves to continually refine and improve practices, but it is critical to create a supportive, cohesive, and committed faculty that can support each other during hard work these reforms require. In short, schools should focus on culture and community development as much as they focused of the logistical details of a personalized learning environment.

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