Shifting Ethos in the Face of Digital Reformation: Reaching Out to Classroom Teachers Throughout a District Embracing Personalized Learning

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**Setting and Context**

The setting for the proposed project is Fulton County Schools (FCS) in Atlanta, Georgia. Fulton County Georgia spans more than 70 miles from top to bottom (“Organizational structure,” n.d.). More than 95,000 students attend a total of 105 PK-12 schools. The school system has a diverse racial mix of students: 42% African American or Black, 30% White, 15% Hispanic, 10% Asian, and 3% Multi-racial. The district covers rural to urban areas; because the city of Atlanta maintains their own school system, the county has two distinct regions known as South County and North County. The district as a whole has 45.7 % of students are eligible for free or reduced meals. The school system’s average SAT and ACT scores are higher than state and national averages. The system employees more than 10,500. Fulton Schools has state funded prekindergarten to 12th grades and provides education via traditional schools, virtual/online school, and in various charter schools (“FCS Facts-At-Glance 2016-2017,” 2016). They offer a variety of options depending on individual school from STEM focused schools to schools for the performing arts and has just recently added two career technology programs in aviation and film and television production.

In 2012, Fulton County Schools became district charter school system. Due to the differences in community needs in the various areas of the district, a more autonomous system was needed which resulted in the change. Additionally, in 2011 the system established four regional learning communities: Northwest, Northeast, Central, and South. Fulton County School system was established in 1871. Recently, the district has adopted personalized learning framework and a 1:1 technology plan. This plan calls for all students in 6-12 grade to have 1:1 devices during the 2017-2018 school year. Elementary schools will have a 1:3 ratio within the same timeframe. In order to effectively utilize these devices, the system has chosen to focus on personalized learning environment. They are currently in year 3 of implementing blended personalized learning in all of its schools.

This shift in educational model poses problems for the district as a whole as well as individual schools. Some of the problems include parents objecting to students utilizing digital devices throughout the day, developing teachers’ skills in technology, defining personalized learning with clear expectations and goals, setting expectations for blended learning, and building an infrastructure to support technology requirements. Fulton County Schools is an early adopter in the area of technology- based personalized learning. Taking on a shift in educational model while launching a 1:1 device initiative has been challenging. For example, stakeholders in the educational process have to be educated in the meaning and implementation of a blended personalized learning model combined with a 1:1 technology plan. The district has faced some difficultly in executing their plans for several reasons. For example, not all pathways are accessible to all students: “FCS’s implementation of tools such as Georgia College and Career Pathways and FultonConnect provides students at the high school level with curricular options, however, access to a variety of curriculum resources is not available for all students across the district (e.g., only some schools have virtual class offerings” (“Personalized Learning Roadmap,” 2015 p. 12). Fulton County’s Road Map to Personalized Learning further explains: “FCS has a variety of curriculum options available to FCS students, however, many of these offerings are only available to subsets of student groups (i.e., high school students, gifted students, students attending a particular school)” (p. 13). The majority of teachers have not had substantive training in the area of personalized learning, “Only 21% of surveyed FCS Principals report that instructional professionals currently have sufficient professional development and training related to personalized learning” (“Personalized Learning Roadmap,” 2015 p. 12). It is important to point out here that this feedback clearly states “personalized learning”; personalized learning and technology are not synonymous. FCS has clearly laid out the key points of personalized learning and has gone so far as to define personalized learning for its district. The principles and explanations documented in table 1 come from Fulton County Schools and Kennesaw State’s iTeach department:

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| Table 1.  *Principles of Personalized Learning Fulton County Schools*  **Principal and Definition** |
| **Varied Strategies**  Students have available many strategies to help their learning (PL plans, portfolios, rubrics, online management and support, collaborative learning, PBL) |
| **Just-in-time Direct Instruction**  Students have access to just-in-time direct instruction. Direct instruction is available to students when it is needed regardless of the availability of an in-person teacher. |
| **Choice and Voice**  Students express their learning styles and preferences as learners in the lesson. This can include, but is not limited to: how they access material, how they build knowledge with tools, how they communicate with the teacher. |
| **Mastery-based Assessments**  Students demonstrated learning through mastery-based assessments he students drive the curriculum rather than the curriculum driving the students. Students are able to demonstrate mastery on their own timetable. |
| **Choice in Demonstrating Learning**  Students decide how to demonstrate learning. Students have multiple ways to demonstrate mastery of standards. This can include both technology tools and traditional tools. |
| **Flexible Pacing**  Students are allowed flexible pacing. Students move through the curriculum at a pace that fits their individual abilities and allows for mastery of learning rather than a time-bound learning boundary. |
| **Co-plan Learning**  Students are intricately involved in planning and setting goals for their own learning including demonstration of learning, determining their pace, determination of meeting mastery level. |

Technology’s role in their plan is critical, however, it is a secondary role. These 7 principles make up personalized learning program for this district, and these are the critical structures that teachers need professional development on. But, that begs the question: if personalized learning is a partnership between schools, teachers, and students, aren’t schools obligated to teach teachers how to support students in becoming active, responsible, engaged decisions makers in their own personal learning decisions?

**Statement of Problem, Need and Rationale**

Personalized learning is a trending catchphrase in education-ese as 21st century learning collides with digital technology cost-effective enough to place in the oft clumsy hands of school-aged children. Perhaps personalized learning is doomed to the annals of fads and fashions of such pedagogical shipwrecks as whole language and zero-tolerance – time will tell. However, the trend towards interweaving technology in the classroom is definitely a movement that will continue to develop despite the whims of educational mania. However, the variable that will ultimately decide personalized learning’s fate is how well students adapt to it and harness technology’s power in creating a learning path that allows all individuals in developing and achieving their goals. The ultimate goal of K-12 education in the United States is to high school graduates who are capable and prepared to start their careers or go to post-secondary educational institutions. In order for students to accomplish one of these two goals, they need to determine an educational path that will allow for them to develop areas of interests into career pathways.

Allowing students to focus on areas of interest or engage in problem based learning are not new concepts in education. However, student-centered learning and problem-based learning are being revived in the face of personalized learning and technology-based learning initiatives: “The roots of problem-based learning can be traced to the progressive movement, especially to John Dewey's belief that teachers should teach by appealing to students' natural instincts to investigate and create” (Delisle, 2016). The Office for Educational Technology’s *Future Ready Schools Plan* states: “Learners with agency can ‘intentionally make things happen by [their] actions,’ and ‘agency enables people to play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times’” (Thomas, 2015). The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) states on its webpage for personalized learning: “The shift toward personalization changes the dynamic between the teacher and student. Educators take on new roles as mentors, coaches and facilitators, and power and control shifts to the students” (Able, 2016). The hopes and dreams of personalized learning and all technology-based instructional design is to engage students in their learning. Parents, teachers, administrators, and students want learners to have an intrinsic or self-motivating reason to learn. Curiosity is a great catalyst for motivation, so when students link concepts taught in the classroom to interests in the real world, learning takes on a greater meaning to individuals. What professional development can teachers engage in to change their mindsets from being the director of learning to becoming a guide to the learner as he or she travels an individual, custom learning path?

Problem: Many teachers do not know how to begin turning learning over to their students. Classroom teachers need to develop skills and strategies for personalized and blended learning which will scaffold student-driven instruction.

A personalized learning environment (PLE) ideally creates a co-decision making system that provides students choice and voice. The first step in developing this system is to give teachers the knowledge, skills and strategies they need to successfully accomplish this work: “Teachers need help in designing the learner profile and strategies that encourage students to own and drive their learning” (Zimmerman, 2010). Teachers and need high quality, engaging professional development to assist them in creating learning that helps build students’ abilities to co-plan and direct their learning. The majority of teachers in Fulton County schools are not comfortable and are not sure how to allow learners to make important decisions about their learning. They need professional development that de-emphasizes high-stakes testing and emphasizes learner engagement as a means to build agency in all students.

A 1:1 PLE requires learners to be arbiters of their learning. A major part of Fulton County School’s personalized learning plan is rolling out 1:1 devices in grades 6-12. Student choice and voice in learning is dependent on the student’s self-advocacy in accessing the learning strategies available to him or her. Students will be held to high standards, and educators will be required to provide evidence of students’ mastery of learning: “Standards-based accountability seeks to mold the K–12 system by creating common expectations for student performance—and, ultimately, incentives for *instructional changes* to help students achieve them. In other words, personalization and accountability meet in the middle…. (Hyslop & Mead, 2015 p. 4). Teachers must clarify instructional standards in meaningful ways using language that is not dependent on pedagogical knowledge in order for learners with limited prior knowledge and very limited educational vocabulary to participate in developing learning goals. Teachers, students, and other stakeholders have to share a common understanding in order for students to exercise agency in a PLE: “A threat to any change initiative is a reliance on people who either do not fully understand the initiative or who have not been adequately prepared to successfully participate in it,” (Fridley & Rogers-Adkinson, 2015 p. 5). The learning curve involved with personalized learning is huge.

Objects and Deliverables

The necessity to provide professional development that aims at helping teachers to scaffold their learning with the purpose of turning responsibility for learning over to students. The goal of this project is to create a professional learning opportunity that will help participants identify strategies and tools that will allow them to begin to change their ethos towards co-planning of learning with students. In May 2017, the following objectives should be met:

* Improve teachers’ understanding of co-planning of learning in a personalized and blended learning environment.
* Provide strategies, skills, and resources for teachers to practice co-planning of learning with their students.

In order to achieve these objectives, the following deliverables will be assessed:

* Organize a full-day professional development conference with relevant content for K-12 teachers.
* Provide 4-6 opportunities with in the conference for teachers to learn tools to assist them in developing co-planned lessons with students.
* Develop an online survey for teachers to gauge the level of co-planning they have done in the past and a post-survey to see if they have increased their level of co-planning with students before the end of the school year.

PSC Standards

This project directly aligns to the Georgia Professional Standards Commission’s Instructional Technology Standards. The first standard states: “Visionary Leadership Candidates demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to inspire and lead the development and implementation of a shared vision for the effective use of technology to promote excellence and support transformational change throughout the organization” (PSC 1). Providing teachers with skills and strategies to develop personalized and blended learning as they co-plan instruction with students demonstrates leadership of PCS’s Standard 1 and ISTE’s Standard 1 for coaches: “Shared Vision Candidates facilitate the development and implemenation of a shared vision for the use of technology in teaching, learning, and leadership. (PSC 1.1/ISTE 1a). Fulton County Schools’ *2012 – 2017 Strategic Plan: Building Our Future* lays out the path of learning for the next 3 years that is dependent on teachers and students planning paths for success:

Increased flexibility in pacing so that students can move on with their learning when they are ready or have additional time when needed; more utilization of the internet and web-based tools that align with the technology and information-rich culture of our students (p. 5)

This project meets PSC Standard and ISTE Standard 1b by facilitating implementation of Fulton County Schools strategic plan. These standards state: “Strategic Planning- Candidates facilitate the design, development, implementation, communication, and evaluation of technology-infused strategic plans”. Fulton County Schools has taken on the mantle of blended personalized learning as supported by the federal Future Ready Schools Plan; by providing professional development micro-conference for personalized and blended learning, this project meets this standard.

Finally, PSC1.3/ISTE 1c challenges coaches to provide educators with procedures and programs to support schools’ strategic plans as they relate to technology. Indeed, this project provides support directly to classroom teachers who are the grassroots of making a successful personalized learning and blended learning program.

Project Description

A professional learning event will be coordinated for metro county teachers in which educators attend a micro-conference in which they engage with tools and strategies to facilitate personalized and blending learning in their class. The shift towards personalized and blended learning requires an ethos shift for most teachers practicing in the field now; teachers’ attitude towards educating students is hyper-focused on delivering rigorous instruction that address all state standards while moving through the curriculum at a pace dictated by testing schedule rather than dictated by student proficiency.

First project item.

Kennesaw State University iTeach will host a micro-conference for teacher throughout the metro area. The conference is entitled PERSON-alizing Learning: Emphasizing What’s Important. Sessions and learning opportunities will be focused on implementing personalized and blended learning into classrooms while the teacher takes the role of advocate of learning rather than director of learning. Discovery Education, Education Elements, Georgia Public Broadcasting and Kennesaw State’s iTeach coaches will work together to provide tools and strategies for teachers begin to co-planning lessons and projects in which the teacher and the students work together to create an engaging learning plan.

The second project item.

The professional development/micro-conference will provide teachers with 4-6 technology-based tools to help them co-plan learning with their students. These tools will be demonstrated in concurrent sessions during the conference.

The third project item.

Develop a survey for teachers to take at the micro-conference to determine their level of co-planning of learning. Questions will also address tools, skills, and strategies associated with personalized blended learning. In May, the same teachers will be given a post survey, asking the same questions in order to determine if there has been an increase in co-planning of learning.

Table 2.

*Project Activities Alignment*

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Project Item/Activity | Project Objectives | Deliverable |
|  |  |  |
| Organize a full-day professional development conference with relevant content for K-12 teachers.  Provide 4-6 opportunities with in the conference for teachers to learn tools to assist them in developing co-planned lessons with students.  Develop an online survey for teachers to gauge the level of co-planning they have done in the past and a post-survey to see if they have increased their level of co-planning with students before the end of the school year. | Provide professional development that teachers can adapt and apply in their classrooms to support co-planning of learning in a personalized and blended model.  With the help of Discovery Education, Education Elements, Georgia Public Broadcasting, and KSU iTeach, I will create 4-6 opportunities for participants to learn and skill, strategy, or tool to asssit them with co-planning of personalized blended learning.  Survey pre-post to determine increase in co-planning of learning with students | PERSON-alize Learning: Emphasizing What’s Important  on Jan 17, 2017  On 1/17/17 at the PERSON-alized Learning conference there will be 4-6 opportunities for teachers to learn a tool, skill, or strategy to incorporate co-planning of learning in their classroom.  1/17/17 teachers at the microconference will be asked to take the survey. In the beginning of May, the same teachers will be asked to take the same survey to determine if there has been an increase. |

**Evaluation Plan**

Teachers are in the middle of discovering what personalized and blended learning can look like in their classrooms. They are trying new technologies and new strategies to engage students. The effectiveness of this plan will be determined by measuring the change, if any, in teachers involving their students in the planning of activities, lessons, and projects.

**First project item/activity.**

Kennesaw Statue University Bagwell College of Education’s iTeach department is committed to helping teachers achieve a personalized and blended learning environment in Fulton County Schools. One way in which iTeach reaches teachers is to provide high quality, engaging professional development to teachers in the area. In order for teachers to move forward with personalized and blended learning, they need PD that will support them in this endeavor. Providing a micro-conference in which multiple resources are brought together to scaffold this shift in thinking for teachers is a significant part of the technology coaching I want to create and conduct.

**Second project item/activity.**

A successful conference provides participants with an array of strategies and tools. From this array, individual teaches will select sessions in which they can grow professionally to develop their skills. Giving teachers 4 – 6 strategies or tools to learn will help to build their bank of professional knowledge to carry out effective and engaging personalized and blended learning. At the micro-conference, teachers will get to select 3 tools or strategies during concurrent sessions. The concurrent sessions will provide a step-by-step approach to learning new tools, or it will provide a strategyteachers can learn and adapt for their classroom.

**Third project/activity item.**

A pre-survey and a post-survey will be given to participants coming from Fulton County Schools 6-12 classrooms to determine if the level of co-planning in a personalized and blended learning environment increases when teachers are given professional development to help them scaffold their pedagogy towards providing student-driven instruction.

**Project Timeline**

This project will occur on January 17, 2017; however, work to create the conference and evaluation afterwards will occur.

Table 3.

*Project Timeline*

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| Month | Project Item/Activity, or Evaluation Item | Hours |
| November | Planning Event  Scheduling  Securing speakers  Securing co-sponsors  Securing coaches | 20 Hours |
|  |  |  |
| December  January  Feb-May | Event Planning and Prep  Working with co-sponsors/presenters  To develop concurrent sessions  Publicity for the event  Coordinating attendee information  Developing pre and post-survey  Event Prep  Communication with sponsors, presenters, and attendees  Micro-conference Day  Follow-up with stakeholders  Continuing follow up with attendees  Post-survey data analysis | 43 hours  4 hours  12 hours  10 hours  3 hours  4 hours  4 hours |
|  |  |  |

Note: Month = the month during which activity or item will take place. Project Item/Activity, or Evaluation Item = statement to describe what learners or evaluation plan will do to meet the objective. Hours = hours necessary to create and implement, or evaluate content.

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