DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION AND PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Education Elements

For more than a year, Education Elements has explored the alignment between personalized learning (PL) and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Through interviews, observations, and conversations we came to a clearer understanding of how these fit together. It is not that DEI and PL have a dependent relationship; a school or district could prioritize one without the other. Yet, the alignment between PL and DEI is also more than complimentary; **DEI is critical when personalizing learning.** We have come to realize that while one may benefit the other, personalized learning is most successful when educators prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Educators who want to personalize learning should prioritize DIVERSITY, EQUITY, and INCLUSION.

This guide is organized into three sections. Each section explores the connections between personalized learning and the elements of DEI. These sections - diversity, equity, and inclusion - include self-reflection prompts as well as discussion activities and additional resources for further exploration.

Personalized learning calls on educators to "[tailor] learning for each student's strengths, needs and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible." (Aurora Institute). Successfully meeting those needs and preferences is what makes learning relevant and builds student ownership of learning. Education Elements published "The Core 4 Elements of Personalized Learning" to name the most common instructional changes that teachers and teams implement when they personalize learning for students.

The teachers and schools that best personalize learning recognize the unique backgrounds, interests, and identities every student brings to class. They approach that uniqueness as an asset and as a responsibility. That uniqueness can both enhance an individual's learning experience and the experience of the entire class. It also requires educators to better know their students and themselves. The implementation of personalized learning creates an opportunity for educators to meet the needs of all students, honor their uniqueness, and build ownership of learning. When schools prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion, they create the environment where personalized learning is most likely to be successful.

DIVERSE educator backgrounds, interests, and identities can help ensure that every student's personalized needs and interests are met.

EQUITY provides a powerful reason to personalize learning for students, and it requires us to reimagine the systems that are not supporting the success of all students.

INCLUSION builds trust and understanding across the stakeholders necessary to successfully personalize learning for every student.

DIVERSITY

DIVERSE EDUCATOR BACKGROUNDS, INTERESTS, AND IDENTITIES HELP ENSURE THAT EVERY STUDENT'S NEEDS AND INTERESTS ARE MET.

WHAT IS DIVERSITY?

Diversity is a state of variety, when there is representation from different backgrounds and identities. We often think about diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, language, ability, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity.

- Educators who share their students' backgrounds, interests, and identities can better meet the needs of their students and help their colleagues do the same.

- Student ownership of learning is tied to self-actualization. Students are better able to self-actualize when they see a part of themselves reflected in their teachers.

- Educators who personalize learning must unpack their biases if they are to truly honor all of their students.

EDUCATORS WHO SHARE THEIR STUDENTS' BACKGROUNDS, INTERESTS, AND IDENTITIES CAN BETTER MEET THE NEEDS OF THEIR STUDENTS AND HELP THEIR COLLEAGUES DO THE SAME.

Lessons that personalize learning give students the opportunity to explore their interests. This can mean having a choice in the topics students research, the books they read, and the form in which they demonstrate mastery. In order to truly leverage those interests, teachers need to deeply understand their students and their own connection to a student's identity and background. It is impossible for every teacher to share the backgrounds, interests, and identities of every student. However, a school that has teachers with diverse backgrounds and identities, who have differing interests, can collectively share ideas and advice with one another. The diversity of the group better positions individual teachers to support all students.

Consider a student who loves being in the school's marching band. Having a teacher who was also in a marching band creates an opportunity to further develop that student's interests. That teacher can point them to resources and create learning experiences that are more meaningful than a teacher who has no background knowledge about marching bands. Understanding that student's background is critical if teachers are to appreciate why this interest exists. Maybe the student loves the marching band because their sibling is also in a marching band at a historically black college or university (HBCU). If no teacher has ever heard of the term HBCU before, much less attended one, then the ability to truly personalize that student's learning experience is limited.

SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

- What are your backgrounds, interests, and identities? Understanding yourself is critical when connecting with students.

- Which teachers did you connect with the most in school? What did you two have in common?

- What do you have in common with students you connected well with? What about students you've had a difficult time connecting with; do they have anything in common?

- To clarify: Connecting with students goes deeper than understanding them. Building a connection with students is a demonstration of mutual trust and respect. Any teacher may understand that a student is upset, but a teacher who connects with them can realize the varied reasons why that student is upset and can support them through those challenges.

DISCUSSION ADVICE

Educators often feel compelled to be good at everything. **Recognizing that not everyone has the same set of strengths and opportunities** to build connections with students can be difficult for some to process. Consider the "hook" that will be most compelling for your audience.

- **THE HEAD:** Share the research that shows the positive impact that teachers who share the race of their students can have ([Dee, 2004; Institute of Labor Economics, 2017; Wright, 2015; Wright, Gottfried, Le, 2017](#))

- **THE HEART:** Ask people to share stories about the teachers they did and did not connect with. Why did they connect with some more than others? What did they have in common with those teachers they connected with?

- **THE EARS and EYES:** Prior to the discussion, have participants talk to their students and ask them questions to better know them as unique individuals. Let participants share their insights. What did they learn that they didn't know before? What surprised them? What opportunities have they just begun to notice?

- **THE GROUP:** Recognizing that shared backgrounds, identities, and interests present an opportunity for the team can be a powerful recognition. Every teacher doesn't need to connect with every student; but every student must connect with at least one teacher. How might teams of educators pursue this goal?

READ MORE:
Andre Perry. "[The educational value of a Black teacher](#)" The Hechinger Report
Kevin Mahnken. "[Why Diversity Matters: Five Things We Know About How Black Students Benefit From Having Black Teachers](#)" The 74

STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING IS TIED TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION. STUDENTS ARE BETTER ABLE TO SELF-ACTUALIZE WHEN THEY SEE A PART OF THEMSELVES REFLECTED IN THEIR TEACHERS.

A critical piece of personalized learning is building each student's ownership of their learning.
In order to build ownership, students must have some understanding of themselves. Students need to know who they are, what interests them, who they look up to, and what they stand for. Some level of self-actualization is a prerequisite for owning the learning that further develops one's identity, and self-actualization is aided by role models. Every student deserves to see a part of themselves reflected in their teachers. Schools with a staff that reflects the diversity of the community they serve can ensure that every student has multiple role models they can look to as they seek to better understand themselves.

SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

Talk with your students: Ask them who their role models are; the ones they know personally and the ones they know of. What do they admire most about these role models? This may help you understand the qualities, values, and accomplishments they seek to build in themselves.

EDUCATORS WHO PERSONALIZE LEARNING MUST UNPACK THEIR BIASES IF THEY ARE TO TRULY HONOR ALL OF THEIR STUDENTS.
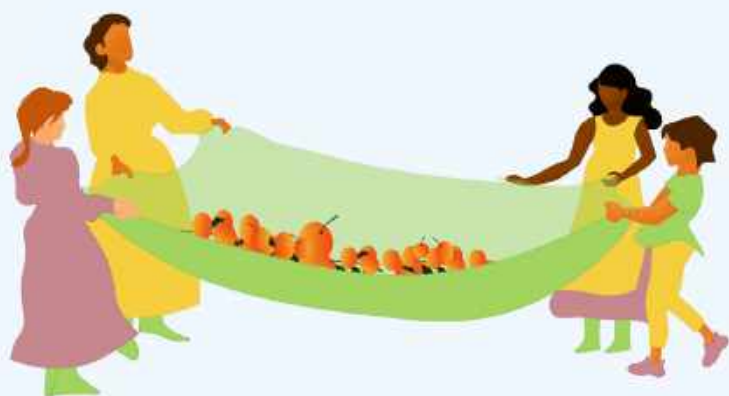
When teachers personalize learning, they have a greater opportunity to honor the cultural capital of every student and create the space for individual self-actualization. However, the potential of this opportunity will never be fully realized if educators do not take the time to unpack their biases. We cannot personalize learning for students if we do not address the biases that impact the assumptions we make about their cultures, perspectives, and identities.

Bias is a part of being human. Everyone develops biases that shape the way we view the world. Unpacking and addressing our biases is a journey that takes time, support, and intentionality. This journey sheds light on the negative assumptions we unconsciously make and requires us to exist in spaces that are uncomfortable. And it is absolutely a journey worth taking.

The teachers who leave the greatest lasting impact on their students are the ones who see them for who they are, often before the students even see themselves. These teachers uplift their students by developing their interests, celebrating their uniqueness, and challenging their assumptions about the world and themselves. It is not uncommon to hear a teacher say, "I see a part of myself in you." Until we unpack our biases, that full impact will only ever be felt by the small segment of students who are lucky to be similar enough to us to be seen.

We cannot personalize learning for students if we do not address the biases that impact the assumptions we make about their cultures, perspectives, and identities.

STARTING THIS JOURNEY

Find a friend who also wants to go on this journey. There should be mutual trust and respect, because you will be each others' sounding board and confidant. Explore your biases, the moments when they recognize them, the habits that can address them, and the issues you want to focus on. If the first friend you think of is a person of color; pause, and ask yourself - did I think of them because they know me or because I think they know something that I don't.

If it is the latter, remember that the responsity to unpack your biases is a personal one and it is not fair to seek out a person of color to help shoulder that responsibility, primarily because of their racial identity.

HELPING PEOPLE UNPACK THEIR BIASES

This is a necessarily challenging journey that can add incredible value to every classroom and school. Harvard's Project Implicit is a common resource people use to better understand their biases. It is also a resource that is most productive when used as a tool within a larger workshop. Teaching Tolerance has developed a powerful professional development article that pairs with the Implicit Association Test. This can be used as a shared reading or the basis of a presentation.

GLOSSARY

ASSUMPTION a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.

BIAS prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair. A bias is one form of negative assumptions.

UNPACKING BIASES a personal reflection process, meant to uncover the biases that are impacting how we see and interact with the wider world.

CULTURAL CAPITAL the symbols, ideas, tastes, and preferences that signify value in a culture.

READ MORE
Noah Dougherty, "Why Unpacking Biases is Critical When Personalizing Learning" Education Elements
Pirette McKamey, "What Anti-racist Teachers Do Differently" The Atlantic

EQUITY

EQUITY PROVIDES A POWERFUL REASON TO PERSONALIZE LEARNING FOR STUDENTS, AND IT REQUIRES US TO REIMAGINE THE SYSTEMS THAT ARE NOT SUPPORTING THE SUCCESS OF ALL STUDENTS.

WHAT IS EQUITY?

Equity is when every student is empowered to be successful and access the same opportunities.

HOW IS EQUITY DIFFERENT FROM EQUALITY?

Equality means that everyone gets the exact same thing. In school that might be the same assignments, time in class, or assessment. Equity is what everyone gets the support they need to be successful. In school this might be more teacher support in a class or a different kind of assessment.

- Equity provides a powerful reason for why educators personalize learning for students.

- Equity is not an inherent part of personalized learning.

- There are systems that were designed to be inequitable; these can and must be redesigned.

EQUITY PROVIDES A POWERFUL REASON FOR WHY EDUCATORS PERSONALIZE LEARNING FOR STUDENTS.

Providing every student with the support they need to be successful with grade-level content turns equity into a powerful purpose for personalizing learning. That purpose empowers the instructional tactics and classroom models teachers use to more personalize learning for students. If equity is the driving purpose, then a teacher may opt not to use a flipped classroom model because they recognize that all students cannot yet access digital information at home. The most powerful resource a teacher has is their time. Equity as a purpose calls on educators to distribute their time based on student need. Small group instruction becomes more than a tactic; it is the way teachers equitably distribute their time, by providing more individual support to the students who need it the most.

DISCUSSION ACTIVITY

Ask participants to identify if and how equity relates to why they personalize learning. Consider sharing these common reasons related to equity:

- Addressing student outcomes: Measurable outcomes show that students are not leaving a grade or school at the same level.

- Closing the opportunity gap: There are systemic issues, such as race, ZIP code, and family socioeconomic status, that create opportunities for some students and limit them for others.

- Dismantling structural oppression: There are systems, both historical and contemporary, that are designed to limit opportunities and advancement for certain groups of people.

- Honoring cultural capital: Schools and learning standards are often designed to value dominant white culture over that of minorities.

READ MORE:
TNTP, "The Opportunity Myth"
Teach for America, "Why We Say 'Opportunity Gap' Instead of 'Achievement Gap'"

SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

There are many reasons why educators personalize learning. Common reasons related to equity include:

- Addressing student outcomes: Measurable outcomes show that students are not leaving a grade or school at the same level.

- Closing the opportunity gap: There are systemic issues, such as race, ZIP code, and family socioeconomic status, that create opportunities for some students and limit them for others.

- Dismantling structural oppression: There are systems, both historical and contemporary, that are designed to limit opportunities and advancement for certain groups of people.

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EQUITY IS NOT AN INHERENT PART OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING.

Personalized learning and equity are not the same thing. While personalized learning can be a powerful tool when working for educational equity, equity is not an inherent part of personalized learning. Simply using a station-rotation model will not automatically lead to more equitable outcomes for students. If teachers better meet the needs of their highest-performing students without spending more time supporting their lowest-performing students, then schools increase the risk that the opportunity gap widens. When equity is the reason for personalized learning and informs a teacher's classroom practices, that risk not only diminishes but we also create an opportunity to better support the success of all students.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Design thinking is a problem-solving process that is used by many innovative companies, including Education Elements. The Stanford d.school took the idea of design thinking and intentionally added an equity focus. Check-out their approach here: Equity-Centered Design Framework.

THERE ARE SYSTEMS THAT WERE DESIGNED TO BE INEQUITABLE; THESE CAN AND MUST BE REDESIGNED.

Gaps in opportunity and learning are the result of systems that were designed to be inequitable. There are clear examples of systems that were designed to be inequitable from recent history, such as redlining, school segregation, and poll taxes. These systems were designed to provide less opportunity to and disempower communities of color, particularly Black communities.

Educational equity will not be achieved if we focus solely on the academic supports we provide students.

While it is easy to point to historical examples, it is harder to look critically at those systems in place today. It requires even more energy to redesign those systems, often because we are a part of them. A singular focus on the extra support schools provide certain students unfairly implies there is something wrong with them. It suggests that the only problem to solve is the "student problem" rather than the system that failed to support them. Equity requires educators to put more effort into redesigning the systems that were designed to the advantage of the dominant white culture. This means taking a hard look at policies such as grading, classroom management, discipline, curriculum, and staffing, just to name a few.

SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

How does our current state assessment system advantage some students over others?

- How does the local-funding structure of public education advantage wealthy communities over impoverished communities?

- How do discipline policies disadvantage certain students and families?

- How does the traditional "I do, we do, you do" model advantage some students but not others?

- How might we redesign these systems to be more equitable?

HELPING PEOPLE UNDERSTAND WHITE DOMINANT CULTURE

Power and privilege are often some of the most difficult conversations to facilitate. A term like "white dominant culture" can turn people off, leading them to disregard the entire message. Talking about race requires us to talk about whiteness, and the power and privilege associated with it. The National Museum of African American History and Culture has produced "Talking About Race," including a section on Whiteness. This section includes a variety of resources and helpful reflection pauses for the reader. This can be used as a shared reading or the basis of a presentation.

DISCUSSION ADVICE

The idea that equity is not an inherent part of personalized learning may conflict with a person's existing notion. If this is the case, consider these questions to help breakdown that notion:

- What does equity look and sound like in the classroom? How is this similar to and different from how personalized learning looks and sounds?

- What do PL and equity have in common? How are they different?

- What is a PL practice you assumed promoted equity? Does it in fact provide different students with different amounts and forms of support? If not, how might you design it to?

INCLUSION

INCLUSION BUILDS TRUST AND UNDERSTANDING ACROSS THE STAKEHOLDERS NECESSARY TO SUCCESSFULLY PERSONALIZE LEARNING FOR EVERY STUDENT.

WHAT IS INCLUSION?

Inclusion is when all stakeholders feel a part of the community and are empowered to make decisions in its best interest. In schools, this means that stakeholders like students and families are not just informed of decisions but included in decision-making.

- Inclusive schools are better able to build relationships with every student and stakeholder.

- Classrooms that create a culture of belonging are more successful at personalizing learning.

- Inclusion requires representation in those circles of power that make the most important decisions affecting students.

INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS ARE BETTER ABLE TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH EVERY STUDENT AND STAKEHOLDER.

Schools that actively involve diverse stakeholders in decision-making are better positioned to successfully personalize learning. Moving from traditional teacher-led instructional models to ones that are more student-centered is a significant change. Students, staff, and families enter into this change from different places. Understanding the strengths, perspectives, and concerns of all stakeholders is a start, but empowering those stakeholders to lead is critical.

Stakeholders who know there is an advocate who shares their interests is more powerful than one who just understands those interests. Change requires trust, and trust comes from strong relationships. An inclusive school can more quickly and authentically develop relationships with all stakeholders. This trust is critical when families wonder how to support their child amidst instruction they are unfamiliar with. Veteran teachers will be more willing to try something new if they know someone who shares their background is advocating for their interests and concerns.

SHARING RESOURCES

Inclusive practices are powerful ways of engaging with stakeholders. The action of inclusion is often more enlightening than a conversation about inclusion. Here are two resources that may help your team be more inclusive:

Shadow a student challenge: An activity to better empathize with what students need.

Flamboyan Foundation: A major focus on their work is around effective family engagement. Their website has a range of resources that can promote more inclusive school engagement with families.

SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

- When have you felt included in a key decision at work and when have you felt left-out?

- What is it important to inform a stakeholder and when is it important to include them?

- Who do you listen to the most? Where do you get most of your information at school? Who do you hear from the least?

- Do you make assumptions about the needs and perspective of certain stakeholders, like students? How might you address that?

READ MORE:

Justin Toomer, "The NEW Team Habits: Fostering a Culture of Belonging Through Meeting Check-Ins" Education Elements

Justin Toomer, "The Giraffe Award: How a Small Celebration Can Change Your Team's Culture" Education Elements

Conor P. Williams, "Using Diversity to Build a Culture of Belonging" Edutopia

CLASSROOMS THAT CREATE A CULTURE OF BELONGING ARE MORE SUCCESSFUL AT PERSONALIZING LEARNING.

Classrooms that honor, celebrate, and understand every student create a culture of belonging that allows personalized learning to thrive. Personalized learning requires trust between students and the teacher; as the routines, procedures, and tools of class begin to change. Equally important, personalized learning requires trust between students. Work should become more collaborative and students need to trust one another to work well in a small group or on a project. Students need to trust that pursuing projects that reflect their interests and backgrounds will lead to celebration and not teasing or ostracization. Classrooms that intentionally foster a culture of belonging, one that makes every student feel included in the group, see the full benefits of personalized learning.

INCLUSION REQUIRES REPRESENTATION IN THOSE CIRCLES OF POWER THAT MAKE THE MOST IMPORTANT DECISIONS THAT IMPACT STUDENT LEARNING.

Representation is important because it empowers a variety of voices, perspectives, and opinions.

It is critical that variety has a say in how personalized learning is implemented and communicated.

A shift away from teacher-directed lessons is also a shift away from "the teacher knows best" attitude that is all too conspicuous in student and family interactions. It is a shift away from the top-down decisions that are all too often made by district leaders who do not reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. Intentional effort needs to be made to ensure that diverse stakeholders are not just informed or surveyed; but that representatives of those stakeholders are making the decisions that impact student learning.

SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

- Do the demographics of your students match those of school or district leadership teams?

- How might we shift away from a "teacher knows best" attitude that can diminish the role and value of families?

- When should we seek feedback vs. inclusion?

- At what point in a process might it be helpful to bring in other voices?

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

Your audience may find it helpful to consider inclusivity from another context. "Toward a Racially Just Workplace" discusses issues of diversity and inclusion in professional settings. While a different context from classrooms, many of the same themes apply. This is an especially useful article for school and district leaders.

"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Maya Angelou

Learning is most powerful when students feel valued, honored, and empowered.

The teachers who leave the greatest lasting impact on their students are the ones who see them for who they are, often before the students even see this themselves. These teachers uplift their students by developing their interests, celebrating their uniqueness, and challenging their assumptions about the world and themselves. Prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion when personalizing learning is one way to this, and it is not the only way. Culturally responsive education, transformative justice practices, and anti-racism are other critical components of this work.

In naming that diversity, equity, and inclusion are critical to personalizing learning, we are taking the stand that instructional tools and models are not enough to empower our students. We cannot focus simply on the "how" of instruction. We must address the systems that were designed to fail millions of mostly black and brown students. Prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion is one important way to redesign our educational systems to empower every student.

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