No Two Are Quite Alike
Theodore R. Sizer

We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well. At its heart, personalized learning requires profound shifts in our thinking about education and schooling.

People differ. Thank goodness they do. How boring the world would be if we were all the same—clones, predictable in our progression through life. Much of the progress of humankind has come because of the restlessness of persons who have stepped beyond the predictable mold. The differences among us have provided the pepper upon which modern society depends.

Those of us who have made our careers in secondary education are daily confronted with a cacophony of difference. Yesterday's little, dutiful William is today's sprawling, sloppy Billy-Boy. The noisy kid over there used to be a quiet cherub. The shy, intense girl over here used to be fascinated with science but today seems fascinated with nothing at all. The distracted, tough-talking kid in the corner used to be a bouncy little boy endlessly looking for attention. Hormones cause sprouting of all sorts, the sprouts changing not only how an adolescent looks, but also how that adolescent perceives himself or herself. The dutiful in October become the rude in April. The gigglers of September become the sirens of May.

So has it always been. The load is heavy on each young person to decide which mask to wear for which audience, which ideals to care about, what to believe in and whom to believe, what to aspire for, or even whether to "aspire" at all. No one wants to be a clone. We have our role models, but each of us wants to be someone special. We insist upon our difference, and it is right that we do so. Without difference, our culture and our economy would shrivel. Without citizens who feel that each has something special to offer, we would have a culture without vitality.

A Rigid System
Ironically, for a century, secondary schools in the United States have been built on the assumption that all children should, save those at the carefully defined "special" margins, be treated more or less alike.

Students are catagorized by their ages. You were born in June 1985, you are 14 now, so you are a 9th grader. If you were born in December, you are an 8th grader, still in middle school. That is, unless you are in a school district with different cut-off dates.

Grade level counts, socially and academically. There is 9th grade social studies and 10th grade history. There is honors history, but you have to be a 10th grader to get into it. Yes, a few 10th graders take AP classes along with 11th and 12th graders, exceptions that prove the rule. Age relentlessly counts. Anything special beyond that is a matter of exceptional negotiation.

If you are a 10th grader in Massachusetts, you take the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) tests. If you had been born but a few months earlier, you took that test last year. The MCAS is administered in a rigorously consistent way to all students of a certain grade, this in the name of fairness. Of course, one student may feel ill on examination day. Another might be intellectually adept but less able to express that power in a timed, carefully channeled testing routine than in another sort of setting. Yet another glories in the orchestrated, hushed pressure that the testing site reflects, a seriousness often lacking in class discussions. However, such differences make no dent in the testing "instrument." One size fits all; one score makes or breaks one's reputation.
The hold of age grading on the consciousness of the education system is ferocious. The metaphor of steps on a ladder dominates: Learning is always to be a sequential act, block building on block. One must travel up those stairs. There must be no "social promotion."

There is, of course, logic in some of this. You cannot do well at calculus without algebra. It is unlikely that you will create a persuasive 10-page essay unless you can craft a persuasive paragraph. However, such sequencing does not always hold in every field, most obviously in the arts. And sometimes people leapfrog, seemingly serendipitously—a student "gets" a connection among characters in a play, a proof in mathematics, a sophisticated legal argument arising from a historical incident. Such a student doesn't fit in.

The traditional high school confines itself in other ways, including pigeonholing the members of its staff. All of us have specialties. I am a teacher of mathematics. I am a counselor. I am a Dean of Students. I teach physical education and coach lacrosse. I teach art. No one of us, save the students and the librarian, is to express and be held accountable for a general education—even as a "general education" is the ultimate goal for the students. As a science teacher, I do not have to show any interest, much less competence, in the arts; indeed, I can be audibly contemptuous of them.

The school routines through which the student passes reflect this confinement. Little has much to do with anything else. Success at high school is measured by an accretion of scores in subjects taught largely in isolation from one another. A student can have a personal style or a consuming interest as long as it fits the prescribed pattern, but there is precious little room for the student who might harbor interests not reflected by a particular school's division of faculty labor. Again, in many schools, exceptions are made. They remain exceptions, however. Unless an aggressive student or his or her parents or an influential teacher pushes for an exception, nothing happens. There is little incentive for intellectual idiosyncrasy or social idiosyncrasy.

**Authentic Options**

Does this sound familiar? There are explanations for each piece of the enormously complicated comprehensive high school. Ironically, one reason for the complexity is to accommodate "individual differences"—to make various curricular paths (however age graded and compartmentalized) available for students to match with their likely destinations in life. The school decides the worthy options to be available for all students and then counsels each one (usually advisors who carry loads of 100 to 300 students do this) to take what appears to be the most sensible path. Each path is carefully demarcated and usually age graded (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985).

Something for everybody is the ideal of the U.S. high school. But options are different from personalization, from taking each young person where he or she is and imaginatively using that understanding. Personalization requires knowing each young person well. If we can achieve that goal, then flexible options among programs make sense. However, options offered without knowing the students well are not authentic options at all.

We all understand this poignantly when we fall ill. If our physician does not know our condition well, how can he or she prescribe a proper treatment? By the same token, if our counselor does not know our minds and dispositions well, how can he or she prescribe a likely regimen?

Facing up to the rigidities of high school is fiercely difficult work. It is not that most educators do not know that “whole school change,” especially at the secondary level, is compellingly needed. It is because everything important in a school affects everything else that may be important. When one tries to refashion one part of a school, most other parts unravel. As a result, most reform efforts avoid that prospect and settle for tinkering, often very imaginatively, at the margins—a revised course here, an alternative program there, great gobs of professional development.
However, such tinkering never gets to the heart of the matter, especially if the goal is to know each student well and to use that knowledge in shaping and directioning that young person's education.

**Realistic Student Loads**

I cannot teach students well if I do not know them well. Each of my adolescent students is in the midst of a growth spurt and the struggle for independence that characterizes every person's route from childhood to adulthood. Each is a complex and evolving human being. Each learns in a somewhat different way; there are discrete "styles" and "intelligences," Robert Sternberg (1997; 1999), Howard Gardner (1983; 1999), and others tell us; their research squares with our experience in classrooms.

How many young people can I know and serve well at once? Assume that I meet with my students in groups each day, this absorbing the majority of my school-time hours. How many minutes a week, either sandwiched amid regular obligations into the school day or spent after school and at home, do I need to read and comment on each student's work and, periodically, to meet with him or her one-on-one? What would happen if I, on average, set aside 10 minutes a week for each student for this personal attention? That works out to an hour a week for every six students. If I have 120 students, that's 20 hours. Impossible.

If I have 50 students, that's a bit more than eight hours a week. Let's say that I, on average, see each student and his or her work every other week. That brings the load down to between four and five hours a week, assigning an hour (in snippets of time, at school or at home) each day to "personalization." Given my other obligations, that is a stretch, but, if I am reasonably experienced, an acceptable one.

But, I think, that is impossible! I then look at the number of students in my (typical) high school for each full-time equivalent professional staff person. It is 14:1. Given that ratio, I conclude, 50:1 for each teacher is possible, at least arithmetically. However, everyone at school is now working flat out. Something has to give. The only recourse is to simplify the school; to narrow its options; streamline its routines; and increase the number, authority, and responsibility of classroom teachers. But won't these narrowed options decrease the possibility of "personalization"? They will only if we do not define "personalization" as access to a set of free-standing separate programs.

A choice clearly emerges. "Personalization" can be a student's choice among a variety of special programs, but that forces most teachers to carry loads in excess of 100 students. Or "personalization" can start with loads half that size in a school where we can accommodate adaptations to individual needs within a simple, common program.

A Hobson's choice? Not necessarily. Paradoxically, simple, focused schools can provide more opportunities for individual students than can the more typical comprehensive high school.

**Time and Scale**

So I have my 50 students. I see them daily in groups, usually in classes of 15 to 25. My homeroom is largely drawn from this same group. I know these young people. They are not quick studies before me, two-dimensional characters. I hope to know their minds and dispositions well, so well that I can sense a change in mood, from engaged to disengaged, or from loneliness to joining in with friends—or whatever—when such appears to emerge.

"Knowing" young people this well results (perhaps paradoxically) in the realization that I never know them well enough: They are too complicated and changeable for that. To help me get the fuller picture, I need, at the least, the counsel of teachers who share these same kids. That means time to talk with those teachers and time to coordinate approaches to help each of the students and their families.
Impossible? It is possible if the design of the school is simple—and thus flexible—and common to all. Time for "talk about our kids" needs to be part of the schedule. If it is not, such talk will rarely happen.

**The Authority to Act**

All this "personalization" will come to naught if I and my colleagues who share students do not have the authority to act upon our conclusions about an individual or a group of students. Within the basic course of study (one kept sufficiently flexible to allow individual variations), we have to control our time and that of the students. Our decisions have to stick.

If we must always ask for permission or refer every change to higher authorities, there is no "personalization." The people providing the permission are those who, in fact, know the affected students the least. Higher authorities can monitor us (that is, surely, part of their job), and they can help us when we need help (also a part of their job). However, if we cannot control our own piece of turf within our school, we cannot readily act upon judgments arising from "personalization."

**Complexity Within Simplicity**

Few Americans would disagree with the proposition that each child should be exposed to the worlds of language, science, mathematics, the arts, and history. Within each discipline are a plethora of topics to study. A number of equally engaging topics cut across the disciplines. There is much to learn, far more than time to learn it. Further, we forget most of what we "cover" in school, retaining only that which we use or fragments that appeal to us. The important residue is an understanding of how a discipline works and habits in its use.

Understanding something—and being able to use it in unfamiliar situations—takes time. Engendering the habit of its use requires enough engagement with a discipline, on one's own terms, to be so persuaded of its efficacy that its use becomes almost second nature. Beyond the rudiments, what, in particular, one studies is less important than that it sparks legitimate interest in each learner. Without such interest, most adolescent students will not engage (and do not deeply engage, even as they may appear dutiful and as they may churn out "work" that gives evidence of immediate, limited engagement but not understanding).

My task as a teacher is to cajole each learner into an essential discipline both on the terms of that discipline and on the student's terms. I must interest the student in something that the society deeply believes is important and that the individual adolescent also senses—or can be persuaded to sense—is important. I must ram what is essential down the kid's throat and at the same time pander to his or her immediate interests.

To be successful at this, I must settle on some crucial common knowledge—reading *Romeo and Juliet*, watching *West Side Story*, and studying mid-20th century south Asia and the late 20th century Balkans, for example—as a way of addressing human conflict. Concurrently, I must find any and all means to gather into each student's consciousness and conscience a conflict that may deeply move that child, asking him or her to write about it, argue about it, understand it. If such a ploy works, it is an easy step, for example, to the reasons for and the design of democratic governments, including bills of rights. There are crucial connections here within history and the humanities. With different material, there are analogous ones in every domain. From the connections that I the teacher push forth and those that may energize a student can come serious learning.

Such activity takes time, more time than allotted in most high schools, where coverage is king. Grotesque coverage—Cleopatra to Clinton by April 1, three Shakespeare plays in six weeks, evolution as one of 36 chapters in an eight-pound biology textbook—is a recipe for teacher frustration, academic trivialization, and student detachment. Yes, we all "covered the material."
We passed the test at the end. But, if such were ever given, we could not pass that test 18 months from now, and we could not explain what the purpose of the time we had earlier spent together might be. For most—all save those engaged by the standardized lesson—the time would have been largely wasted.

Give me the smallest defensible number of the absolutely most critical matters, disciplines, and skills that I should teach. Give me time, autonomy, supportive colleagues, and few enough students so that I can understand each one well enough to tailor some of my teaching to him or her—and I will show you students who perform well, today and tomorrow.

A simple program allows complex learning. A simple program makes possible the adaptations in teaching that arise from authentic personalization.

It is inconvenient that students learn in different ways and that they are attached to differing enthusiasms. But, unless we face up to that inconvenience, we will not teach well.

**Progress by Performance**

If strict age grading flies in the face of the commonsense experience of teachers and researchers, what is to replace grade levels? The only alternative is progress by performance. It means an individual educational plan for each student, not just the "handicapped" or the "precocious."

This approach is as difficult to accomplish as it is easy to embrace. Its practice demands that the school be clear on the shape, standards, and character of the "performance" and on the basis upon which such performance will be judged. Being clear on this is very hard and very unfamiliar work for teachers. We are more used to "U.S. History up to the Civil War" in the 10th grade or "Physics" in the 12th grade. The state frameworks or district curriculums are usually an amalgamation of "content" and "skills" to cover over a defined period of time. They rarely address—beyond necessarily constricted standardized paper-and-pencil tests—how the student expresses mastery or uses that mastery over time.

Further, few schools insist on the regular "cross grading" of papers by staff. In most schools, each teacher is assessment king in his or her classroom. "Cross grading"—the collective assessment of pieces of work by a variety of teachers, students, and parents—is very rare. So if a B does not mean the same to Ms. Schmidt as it does to Mr. Saginaw, what does a B at their school really mean? If Ms. Schmidt and Mr. Saginaw don't take the time to tune their standards, inequitable fuzziness will be the rule.

There must be agreement on what a student puts forth for consideration of the quality of his or her "performance," agreement that participants and outsiders constantly monitor. For obvious reasons, the students and their guardians must also understand the criteria for this performance. When "What is good enough?" is a question on the table, all sorts of issues emerge. Is what is appropriately good enough for Jose precisely the same as what is good enough for William? If not, how can the same ultimate standard be applied to different expressions of that standard (for example, Jose depending heavily on written work and William using oral and artistic devices)?

Personalization—meaning fundamental fairness arising from the differences among students—requires the expression of common, general "standards" in a variety of forms. Creating such standards is difficult work, far more difficult than saying that "high standards" are to be assessed by one "instrument" in one way and at one time. Time has to be made for it—the same sort of time that each of us prays happens among our physicians when they caucus to decide on a treatment for our disease.

**Leadership to Personalize Learning**

A school or school system that resolutely accepts the lively but annoying diversity among its students must break away from many deeply ingrained notions about the keeping of school,
from One Best Curriculum to One Best Test to One Best Schedule. Something far more complex and more fluid must take their places. Schools must adapt to the legitimate differences among students; these adaptations will themselves be in constant flux.

Idiosyncrasy is an obvious fact: Those of us who are parents of at least two children and who thereby see daily the variety of energies and enthusiasms emerging from the same gene pool and kitchen table are keenly aware of that. But accommodating those realities within a school system designed to be universal in its routines is intellectually very demanding and politically very dangerous work.

Some will find the implications of "personalization" so unsettling as to be far-fetched. Nothing can come of it, they will say. But today something is coming of it, most usually in small schools at the edges of big systems or in autonomous small-schools-within-big-buildings. Nothing that I have suggested is not being tried somewhere. And where the trying has gone on long enough, the results are beginning to show where it counts—on what is happening to the graduates of schools that have "personalized" (Meier, 1995).

Those of us who are struggling with personalization will be the first to say that the work is as difficult as it is unfamiliar and that the trade-offs necessary to get the time to do the job well are nerve-racking. At its heart, "personalization" implies a profoundly different way of defining formal education. What is here is not the delivery of standard instructional services. Rather, it is the insistent coaxing out of each child on his or her best terms of profoundly important intellectual habits and tools for enriching a democratic society, habits and tools that provide each individual with the substance and skills to survive well in a rapidly changing culture and economy.

It can be done. It is being done, however against the traditional grain. *

References


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