

## **Empowering the learner:**

### *Embracing choice, joy, and creativity through blended learning*

What would you think if I told you that five year olds, in a large urban school district, can manage their own learning? That actually, when provided a significant learning environment, they will grow leaps and bounds in a model that provides choice and inquiry through blended learning. I want to inspire all K-8 educators to implement blended learning in their learning environments to personalize, accelerate and bring joy and creativity to the learning process for children.

Let me take you back to 2016, when I was just two years into utilizing “blended learning” in my urban kindergarten classroom, as a result of receiving one-to-one iPad devices for my scholars through the connectED grant. Toward the end of the school year, we had evolved from a very basic station rotation model, where students spent twenty minutes on individual learning pathways, twice a day, as one of the daily stations to a full blown flexible and personalized blended learning classroom that transformed what learning looked like. Students had a daily menu of “must do” items, but within each of these items there were elements of choice and differentiation. Students moved freely around the classroom, sometimes on their own and sometimes collaborating with peers. They could choose to work on a variety of activities intentionally planned to spark inquiry and creativity through a combination of plugged and unplugged activities. Everything was captured with the power of iPad through photo, video, line draw animation, and voice recordings. We used BookCreator before the times when Apple Pages was updated for digital journals. We utilized SeeSaw digital portfolios to capture

and document all work and this provided myself as the teacher a window into each child's thought process. Students created videos, used green screen technology, engaged with plugged and unplugged coding, recorded fluency readings, played learning games, and captured it all to submit to me. This was the game changer! The power of capturing thought process, connecting with home, and a place to provide feedforward to learners, both text and audio recordings. Gone are the days of busy work and lack of accountability for independent work. Every moment can now be accounted for. This authentic formative information is used to analyze misconceptions or misperceptions and provide timely meaningful intervention to accelerate and personalize the learning process for every scholar in my class! The proof was in the nationally normed standardized test results that my scholars took. The average student growth percentile for NWEA Map growth tests were 93%ile for reading and 94%ile for math that year. The highest of my entire teaching career! The year I finally stepped completed away from teacher role and committed to 100% guide on the side, the magic happened. The kids experienced productive struggle, adventure, choice, collaboration, and joy. The heavy lifting was on the learners.

As an educator, this may seem scary and uneasy, but I can assure you, it is possible! The planning process is vital to making this type of blended learning environment a success. The second piece to this puzzle, is implementing clear expectations and procedures in the environment so the young children can move about safely and with intention. For me, this looked like clear stations for a station rotation model to start. At the beginning of the year, clear expectations for the work at each station, voice level, collaboration vs. individual, and accountability were established and

practiced daily. A few months into the school year, once all of the stations were running like a well oiled machine, the learning menu was introduced. Having the established procedures and expectations from the station rotation model made the transition to the menu seamless. The students appeared happy to have this freedom and choice to learn what they wanted, when they wanted, and with whom they wanted. At times, I found myself wondering, “Am I even teaching? What if my principal walks in and sees me just starring at my computer?”. All day long I was at my computer or meeting with individual learners. SeeSaw digital portfolio application, on my computer, is where I reviewed work submissions, and was able to provide feedforward to scholars or even call them over individually and work with them on misconceptions or misperceptions.

Well, it happened one day! I looked up, and there were six central office staff members along with the building principal in my classroom. I jumped up from my table to say hello and greet them, as my little scholars continued to work and were not at all concerned with more people in our learning space. One of the central office visitors was my area superintendent. We discussed how I was using technology as the vehicle to provide choice of path, pace, time, and place while still holding the children accountable and ensuring all students were meeting the grade level expectations. At the end of our conversation my superintendent looked up at the clock and then at me and said, “We have been talking for forty-five minutes, and all of the children are still on task and working. Wow!” It was true, I didn’t really even need to be there for the students to learn anymore. I had set up an environment that cultivated curiosity, choice, voice, executive functioning, and joy that they were thriving in. Not a day was wasted when I was out sick or at a conference because the substitute would just need to be in the room to

supervise, but I was able to review work and provide feedforward and instructional videos to my scholars to intervene when needed. The learning environment had become their own. They organized it. They kept it clean. They knew what to do and how to function in the space. They were free to try new things, collaborate for help, and even utilize technology as a tool for guidance and troubleshooting.

With our post-pandemic climate in education, where one-to-one technology is more prominent than ever before, we need to seize this opportunity to provide blended learning for all of our learners to have choice over path, place, pace, and time, and give educators the superpower of capturing learner thought process to accelerate and personalize learning (Horn, Staker. 2015). The pandemic may have set our scholars back a little, but technology, when used intentionally to create exceptional learning environments can close the gaps. I like to think about it like this. Our current educational system is failing way too many of our children. If we want to make learning better for our children, then we need to take a chance on something different. Blended learning can open up new possibilities in our learning environments. I like to say, "You'll never win the lottery if you don't buy a ticket." Utilizing blended learning, with our youngest scholars, allowed them to strengthen executive functioning skills through choice and self-regulation as well as opened the door for accelerated learning and joy in the process. I learned that intentional peer collaboration was imperative to keep students accountable and on track with learning goals. If we never try, then we will never know what is possible! Take a chance for our kids. I am currently rolling out blended learning in my school district and intend to collect quantitative data throughout the implementation process in first grade classrooms next year. I hope to learn how

blended learning, when implemented with intention, will impact the achievement narrative, especially for urban children, in grades K-8.

### **References:**

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