

Common Ideas to Improve Education Outcomes

Personalized Education

Personalized learning has multiple interpretations. The first interpretation is that of a student self-directing their own education. One student may want to study more computer science, another more about ancient history. Schools of all levels respond to the demand for self-directed learning with electives. Students may choose from a limited set of approved courses which allow students to pursue their interests. In practice, this flexibility in course selection comes at a cost. Counselors are required to review selections, students get confused, and then if students make mistakes in signing up for courses, they may have problems graduating on time.

The second way we can interpret personalized learning is a learning experience that is specifically tailored to the unique needs of the students. In this case, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) may be developed for just that student. Obviously the administration of IEPs adds a significant layer of administration onto any educational organization. Managing all those individual plans is far more complex than just assigning all students "Freshmen English."

Another interpretation of personalized learning is to teach specifically to a student's learning gaps. Learning gaps are assessed with various tests, identified, and remedied. It is clearly important to address learning gaps when trying to progress as a student to the next level.

And yet another interpretation of personalized learning is the learning styles idea. The idea is that students learn very differently from one another, some are audio learners, some visual learners, some hands-on, and so on. In this interpretation of personalized learning, the curricula must be adapted in style to how each student learns. In practice, how exactly are teachers supposed to switch between learning styles in the classroom? It's just not really very easy to achieve. There is also the counter-argument that students who are not proficient at one style of learning, should in fact get better at this learning method. No one really believes students can not grow and develop, so this idea of teaching to a specific learning style has the unintended consequence of locking students into a dominant method of learning, without developing other methods, it seems counter-productive.

Mastery-Based Education

Mastery-based education is an approach where students have to demonstrate a high level of proficiency in each topical area. This idea is a reaction to students being moved from one grade level to the next, approaching more difficult information, without having mastered the fundamentals required.

Implementing Mastery-based education is a beneficial approach which is highly likely to improve poor education outcomes, since it would be very unlikely that a student who failed Algebra 1 is

ready for Algebra 2.

Project Based Learning

In project-based learning methodologies, students work together in groups on a project.

Proponents contend that students working on a project together will integrate ideas and concepts and learn valuable social skills when working in a group.

Traditionally speaking, the original project-based learning method was the lab report. Students worked in groups to do the lab, but they each did their own lab report. The lab report integrated the ideas and concepts in the lessons. Lab reports are still great ways to practice collaboration and integration ideas and concepts.

The lab report aside, project-based learning is mostly wasted time. In practice, one student will pull the rest along, and contribution is rarely evenly distributed.

Social-Emotional Learning

Shorted to the abbreviation of SEL, this idea is probably the newest approach proposed to improve outcomes. Great teachers are supposed to weave SEL into their classrooms. In addition to teaching math and science, teachers who implement SEL are supposed to teach students how to manage their own feelings and emotions, and to increase a student's emotional intelligence. While there could be nothing wrong teachers helping students deal with their anxiety, is a teacher equipped for these goals? In a classroom of 30 kids, how much SEL is really going to take place, and is it feasible to rely on SEL being properly implemented in the classroom to improve academic outcomes?

The Best and Worst of These Ideas

All of these ideas have some merit or reason why many view them as beneficial to academic outcomes. It would be wonderful for teachers to establish a connection of mentorship with students in an environment of lower anxiety, which would no doubt help students concentrate on their lessons. However, asking a professional teacher to now become almost a therapist sounds like difficult to achieve. While most project-based learning assignments are a waste of time, lab reports are terrific at integrating concepts. Of course, it is ridiculous to keep moving students along if they failed lower level courses, so mastery-based learning is an important component of success. Mastery-based education does have its challenges, we can't just keep failing students in grade levels when they don't come up to the mark as the social pressure becomes destructive and works against student progression. Regarding personalization, it is very important to address individual learning gaps, as every student has a unique set of knowledge they bring with them to each course. However, trying to adapt to a student's strengths in learning styles seems counter productive when the goal is to make the student stronger in all areas.

Considering the best and worst of these common approached to improve education outcomes, Sequential Adapted Learning is a common-sense method to achieve outstanding academic performance from students.

