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# Building a Culture for Learner Voice and Choice Through Inquiry

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**H**ow will student learning be different when every student has a computer? Will teaching and learning be changed for the better and be more effective?

Faced with the district’s 2017 major 1:1 technology initiative, these were questions asked by Norman Public School (NPS) leaders. Having just completed installation of the “intelligent classroom,” which focused on teacher-led technology in each of the district’s 1,100-plus classrooms, it was time to focus on student technology. NPS leaders knew that technology could transform learning, but that technology alone is not transformative.

In tandem with the implementation of the teacher-led technology initiative, the director of libraries and instructional technology began investigating research-based instructional models that would transform learning in the classroom. The model found best suited to NPS was guided inquiry design (GID). Adopting GID early on allowed NPS to begin the transformative process of changing classroom culture to a more targeted focus on student voice and choice. GID is “a fluid, flexible process of learning from a variety of sources of information to prepare [students] for successful learning and living in the information age” (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2012, p. xii). Through the GID implementation process, the new technology introduced to NPS students in 2016 became the tool that would enhance learning rather than the technology becoming the focus of the learning.

## IMPLEMENTATION

To begin the process of learning about GID, teacher librarians across the district read *Guided Inquiry Design: A Framework for Inquiry in Your School* (Kuhlthau et al., 2012). They studied each of the eight phases of GID and gave presentations to one another. Encouraged by their new learning, they began to teach GID units at their schools. They were amazed by the students’ curiosity, engagement, and eagerness to learn deeply. Feeling like they were onto something big, they presented their work to the district’s principals in February 2015.

NPS principals knew that instruction was going to need an overhaul with 1:1 technology on the horizon. With that understanding, NPS leaders invited Leslie Maniotes to give a 1-day presentation for the principals in June 2015.

NPS leaders then sent learning teams from each school, including teacher librarians and teachers, to a 3-day GID institute. The first day



they learned about the Information search process (Kuhlthau, 2004), the foundation of GID. This research indicates that intentionally designating time in the beginning of the learning sequence will consistently support students to generate more informed questions (Kuhlthau et al., 2012). Once the educators understood the research, the GID process was introduced.

Voice and choice play a central role in GID, as inquiry is driven by the students' own interests. On day one, educators developed their own rationale for inquiry-based learning. Prioritizing standards with a conceptual lens and understanding the role of third space (Maniotes, 2005) expands teachers' thinking about how to engage students to access and discover their own interests within a standards-based unit of study (Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2015). During the second day of the institute, an example of GID with embedded technology, inquiry tools, and learning strategies was explored. The educators worked in school-based teams to design their own units throughout the 3 days. On the third day, each team presented its newly designed unit to the group, received feedback from peers, and had time to make

revisions based on feedback. Finally, the third day closed with the research-based factors for success, so the teams were armed knowing the pitfalls of this new format of teaching and learning. This way, they could avoid some common obstacles to successful implementation while highlighting how to make a positive impact, such as strong collaborative team teaching.

Between fall 2015 and spring 2016, NPS has held nine 3-day institutes and 1 staff day with Maniotes at the helm. Seeking a self-sustaining model for this instructional change, Maniotes encouraged a district GID training of trainers in spring 2016. The selection of trainers was based on the district's desire to have both teachers and librarians as trainers to emphasize the teacher librarian coteaching aspect of the process. These trainers have undergone extensive training and coaching with Maniotes. The two teams of in-district trainers—one focused on elementary educators and one on secondary—have now each taught two institutes at each level with Maniotes's guidance.

After 3 years and training more than 400 teachers in GID, teachers are talking about the changes in their classrooms. In surveys conducted by the

district's Educational Services Department in 2017, educators shared their thoughts. The survey respondents were anonymous. Here is one middle school teacher's response:

Guided inquiry has inspired me to advocate for student choice. I never would have believed that student-led questioning would lead to the deep, authentic learning I've seen in my class over the last 2 years, but even when I'm not teaching a guided inquiry unit, I'm thinking of ways to increase student agency in the classroom.

Remarks like this are common throughout Norman schools today; however, widespread change requires leadership, professional learning, and perseverance through disequilibrium.

Institutes are planned through summer 2018 and will be ongoing each school year. The district is in its first full year of implementing a new district strategic plan that includes goals and projects for innovative instructional strategies, personalized learning, and increased student voice and choice. Guided inquiry is a vehicle for addressing all of these goals. As inquiry continues to grow in its role as part of the district's culture, the GID process will soon be ubiquitous throughout the district.

Once teachers and librarians began implementing GID in their classrooms, their "talk" about learning began to change. Commenting on the deeper learning that was occurring in their classrooms, one teacher said,

I have learned to let go and let students explore a topic. I have also learned that students will go through challenging phases and will

***Guided inquiry leads to natural differentiation. It provides gifted students the opportunity to not be constrained by content they already know, and it levels the playing field for students who struggle—everyone has a question, not just them. They learn something different than everyone else, and they get to be the expert—something that might not happen for them in traditional units. (NPS educator)***

learn more through the challenges than what they would from just basic research questions.

Teachers began to see the inherent differentiation of the learning for all students:

I felt as though all of my subgroups were able to benefit from the process. For gifted students, there was no limit to what they could do. For struggling students, a natural scaffold fell into place. I believe it is so beneficial for all students because of the individualized nature, and the fact that the impetus is on the student for decision making.

The comments about differentiation are echoed again and again: “The beauty of this process is it self-differentiates in process, product, and content. It helps all students start where they are and move to where they need to be.” The surveys, conducted at the end of each school year, show teachers overwhelmingly reporting that GUID is appropriate for their gifted, special needs, and English language learner students. As one teacher stated, “Guided inquiry serves as an equalizer for all students.”

Because the GUID process challenges the status quo and the teach-test-remediate-reteach methods of the accountability era of the past 15 years, district leaders believed that annual feedback from teachers was important for planning continued professional learning.

Each spring, teachers across the district were anonymously surveyed to determine their participation in the GUID process, as well as their perceptions of the effectiveness of the GUID process. The findings were impressive. The data from one year mirror that of the next. The comments teachers and librarians share are overwhelmingly positive and powerful. Because GUID planning begins with identifying the standards for the unit, the teacher survey confirms that GUID is a standards-based approach, as opposed to only thematic or interest-based. On average, 95% of teachers report that the guided inquiry unit met the standards for their unit of study. Nearly 100% of teachers report that their GUID units were beneficial to student learning.

Students are learning in new ways at deeper levels. Students are being challenged. Learners are sharing their products and reflecting on both product and process. As one teacher reported through the survey,

Students struggled with the idea of formulating their own questions. With guidance, they came up with great questions but became frustrated and tried to give up when they realized they had to formulate their own answer and wouldn’t find it on the front of a web page. This is wonderful. They are actually learning to think for themselves and understand everything in life isn’t a multiple-choice question. It was re-

ally hard for them, but I believe it will get easier. They will learn to question and find their own answers. I am so excited to see kids actually getting to find out the answers to the things in class that are often brushed aside because everyone is expected to do the same thing.

As students have ready access to technology, teachers are also being challenged with how to teach in ways that prevent students from simply Googling their answers. Interestingly, it has been some of the students identified as gifted learners who have struggled the most with this process. Many are compliant students who want to find the “right” answer. GUID is forcing them to utilize their potential and gain a comfort level with asking and finding answers to more complex questions.

## **GID AND ALIGNMENT WITH AASL STANDARDS**

With the release of *National School Library Standards for Learners, School Librarians, and School Libraries* (AASL, 2018), NPS has found that the work of the district dovetails perfectly with the new shared foundations, key commitments, competencies, and alignments outlined in the standards. During professional development about the new standards, NPS librarians clearly saw strong correlations to what they are already doing. The shared foundations of inquire, include, collaborate, curate, explore, and engage (AASL, 2018) align with the district’s focus on the GUID process. Because of intensive and ongoing work with GUID, the NPS librarians actually see themselves in the standards. The new standards focus

*The school librarian champions learner-led questioning, promotes exploration, and advocates for creation and sharing of new knowledge, while supporting learners' reflection on both product and process.*  
(AASL, 2018, p. 71)

on learners becoming adept in developing their own voices, making their own choices, collaborating, innovating, problem-solving, asking their own questions, and thinking deeply.

The role of the school librarian in NPS is monumental and leads to powerful instructional partnerships that truly transform learning (and teaching) in the classroom and beyond. The views of teachers support this important role, as evidenced by this teacher's survey comments: "The guided inquiry model has changed my teaching in a few ways. I collaborate with our school librarian more. Projects require a bit more planning, but students are developing information literacy and social skills." Simply put, educators are saying they are doing more coteaching. The district's ongoing emphasis using this research-based inquiry model supports the viability of and commitment to the implementation of the AASL (2018) standards.

Now with more than 400 teachers trained through the 3-day institutes, NPS is looking forward to reaping the benefits of an evolving educational landscape in the district, one where learners thrive and flourish in an atmosphere where student voice and choice become the norm, where school librarians and teachers work together to transform teaching and learning for *all* learners, and where innovation, scholarship, integrity, and perseverance are part of every student's educational experience.

The following quote from Dr. Scott Beck, Norman High School principal, aptly relates the success of GUID in NPS:

Guided inquiry has given our teachers a way to build cross-curricular and more importantly, relevant lessons for our students. Pushing students deeper and empowering them to drive their learning through research is timely and is preparing them for the world we are arming them to change for the better (personal communication, February 16, 2016).

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