Centralizing Learning

By Megan McAlister

I have participated in the Student Growth Goal Pilot program for two years now because I heard and understood it as a change from quantity to quality. With the original student growth goals, I felt like a data collector. Don't get me wrong, data is important, however, I wasn't sure what that data was to be used for, and if the data showed poor or little growth, I wasn't really sure where to go with it. With the new rubrics I was looking at the quality of my students' work and how *I* implemented it vs. the sum of their many assessments. At first I thought that meant I would just be talking about what's going on before, during, and after the unit, but I would soon find there would be more to it.

Another difference that I found to be a relief was that this looked at just one focused unit, not a large overarching theme. In my original SGG's, I was focusing on multiplication- specifically, can my students multiply 1-10 by March. Keep in mind, we started multiplication in October, so that was a lot of data to watch and gather and make sense of. With these new goal rubrics, I decided to only focus on Area. Which was a three-week long unit for my students, therefore it was more focused. I was exceptionally excited because my team had already revamped the unit the year before during virtual learning and I was already trying to reflect on what changes would need to be made to do it in person.

Piloting a Build Kit

I was the only person in my school to do the Student Growth Goals Pilot program the first year it was offered, and that followed right after the year of teaching online. I decided that doing that newly modified unit my team had already put a lot of work into would be a great place to start. After reading the rubric for the new student growth goals, I considered what I would need to change, and when I was working with my team during PLC time, I brought up my questions, workshopped my ideas and made modifications that most of the team also ended up using in the unit that year.

The main focus of our modifications was how to turn the unit from something that was solely centered on academic standards to a focus that was a combination of our class community entwined with the standards. Because my team had been part of a Culturally Responsive Residency through OSPI with Dr. Adeyemi Stembridge we were able to apply our new learning from that experience to this work. Dr. Stembridge taught us to focus on the students themselves and the community that they were in. Our starting place was to not just work from the end of the unit, but to jump forwards in time, through a Dream Exercise, with the following questions:

Three to five years from now...

What do you want students to know?

What do you want students to be able to do?

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What do you want students to find value in?

With these questions in mind, we were able to create a stronger hook for our unit learning that was connected more to our students and more individualized based on our classes and school community. We thought of ways to get the parents involved and were sure to include a student reflection piece at the end.

Three new questions

During my first meeting with my principal about the pilot program, I was told I needed to make a new student growth goal. This goal was not about numbers and was more about my class and the unit itself. For my pilot goal, I was asking myself three simple questions: Who? What? and How?

Who were *my* students? Each year, the groups were slightly different, therefore, each year, my who would slightly change. **What** was I teaching them? What was the core standard and the supplemental standards that I wanted my dream exercise questions to answer? Did they only focus on math? Was there reading, social studies, SEL, or other subjects being used in this unit? And **HOW** was I going to teach it. **How** did I want to bring value to the standards so that students could grasp it years from now?

I set to work with my original road map from virtual learning as my foundation. One of the things we had done was make it a project that would be added to during the unit because it allowed students to build on as they learned more. We held tight to this idea because we wanted to have something that students could easily go back to and not overload students with many online resources. In person, by centralizing our students' work into one project that they just need to add too, I could see what they had done, what they needed to work on, and what they needed to do to move forward, all in one place.

This was part of my first conversation with my principal when planning out my goal and what I wanted to focus on for this unit. One of the things she brought up was how to make it culturally relevant to my "who" (my students) and how to get the community, or more specifically, their parents involved with their learning.

From there, I worked with my team. We were lucky during virtual learning to get a volunteer who was an engineer to visit and help us lay the groundwork for what we wanted to achieve. We then asked students what they wanted to do when they grew up and used their responses to help them create a building blueprint for that job. But now that we were back in the building, having that kind of hook would not work, especially with the covid restrictions in place. Plus, we wanted to make it more relevant to our students and their experience. So, we added a reading resource to our arsenal by reading a book about community- *My Papi Rides a Motorbike* and then had our students use google maps to explore their own community. We asked our students to think, *what is something that we can add to our community. What could the community use*? I also had students brainstorm their dream job (which is what the virtual

learning project had been), so that they could choose if their project tie into a blueprint for their future job or, if it was something they want their community to have.

This past year in the student growth goal pilot, I took it a step further. My school is a Kids at Hope school, meaning we push for our students to dream about their future and figure out what goals they have in each of four categories or "destinations"; Home and Family, Education and Career, Hobbies and Recreation, and Community and Service. I had them time travel and use the four destinations, thinking about their future 10 years from now. Could they dream about what they wanted in each destination? Many students wanted to add a soccer field to their community, another wanted to be like her mom and be a waitress at Denny's, one other student wanted to be a stay-at-home dad. That, added to our reading, allowed students many options and ways to decide what blueprint they wanted to focus on and supported making the learning their own.

In the first year of the pilot program, I gave a differentiated approach. Some students needed simpler plans, while others needed more of a challenge. The following year, I extended the learning for all by adding a Minecraft build to the end. Once they had a 2D blueprint, they were to create their building in Minecraft. That continued to hold their interest, especially with this last group who were truly obsessed with Minecraft and was a motivator for them to complete the 2D model.

The Whole Point of this New Model

Bringing all of this to my student growth goal meetings with my principal was easy. I could bring the manilla folder that their project was in or my laptop and show her what I noticed and wondered as we talked about the goal. I could tell her exactly what struggles I saw, if I was able to make changes to correct it, or what I wanted to do next time. This past year, one of the struggles I had was with two students whose foundation in math was so limited at the timemultiplication was near impossible for them. For most of the steps in the project, we had to do things one on one so that I could be there to help them count or draw out the multiplication strategy before they could do it. Because that took so long to do, they did not complete all the rooms for their blueprints. The positives were that I could hear their ideas, and see what they wanted, even when the math itself was difficult for them to implement alone.

The discussion my principal and I had was easy. She would ask me how I felt it went and we walked through it. I had many proud moments sharing student work. There was a student who I was surprised had done all the work correctly and mostly by herself or with discussion from a partner. I had not needed to step in to guide her, she had taken ownership. All my students were proud of their bonus project on Minecraft, and I was impressed to see how well they transferred their 2D model to a 3D one, something that as a Minecraft novice (and a really bad one at that), I could only give a general explanation for.

At the end of the day, the goal of these new student growth goals is about the reflection. I feel confident in what I did and did not do right. I can share examples if I want, or just speak candidly about my student's responses. If there was something specific from the rubric my principal wanted to know about, she would ask and I was able to tell her about it. My principal was essentially there as a guide.

She also was able to knock out a lot of my CEL 5D requirements as we talked because she was able to see my teaching and learning through this process. For example, up until that meeting, she had not seen specific examples of my differentiation or my work with my team and families, but by discussing my adjustments with my small group, brainstorming the family letter, and discussing what things I used and modified with my team, she was able to get the evidence she needed for my other evaluation components. We were also able to talk and reflect around the piece of my goal I am still working on the most, family involvement.

Getting families involved. That has been the hardest part. I had tried to have students bring a letter and grid paper home for parents to share what their workspace looked like to give students ideas on top of the teacher models they saw in class for the last two years and have had little success. For whatever reason, I have only gotten 1-2 parent responses back per year. I am continuing to brainstorm how best to include and engage the parents. Overall, that has been the biggest reflection for me, the one piece I am still working out. But everything else has been a breath of fresh air as it reinforces that teachers are not perfect, and that is okay. Perfection is not what we should be striving for, growth is. The only way to grow is to reflect, do what works, change what needs to, and take the initiative to grow.

Questions for reflection and discussion of vignettes

1. Where in the above vignette do you see the teacher using knowledge of students to inform the teaching and learning?
2. Where do you see (or not see) evidence of the critical attributes of:
   a. Cognitive and/or emotional engagement?
   b. Student engagement in assessment?
   c. Formative and summative assessment?
   d. Feedback from students on their experience of the learning?
3. What else might the teacher have considered or done?
4. What are the ways in which this teacher could convey his work to his evaluator?
5. Where do you see connections between the teacher's practice and components/indicators in your district's instructional framework?
6. What ideas are you taking away from this vignette?

Megan McAlister is currently an elementary teacher in the Kent school district where she participated in the pilot of the revised Student Growth Goals.