MICROSCHOOLS

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Introduction

Over the last decade, enrollment in virtual education options for k-12 schools has grown exponentially. More specifically, enrollment size for virtual schools with blended learning models have risen. Researchers and educators remain optimistic that blending learning models are effective and working across various school districts and programs. The successful outcomes in the delivery of blended learning classrooms are recognized by teachers/mentors/ educational advisors for the benefits of its integrated learning experience that correlates to student's learning modalities. (Molnar et al., 2019). Blended learning models offer individualized online instruction, learning innovation and autonomous learning for students (Smith, 2014). There are five types of blended learning programs: rotational, flex, a la carte, enriched virtual and full online model (Smith, 2014.).

Virtual blended learning schools are structured and governed in an array of ways. This includes structure through traditional public education systems, charter, and private schools. Virtual blended learning schools has pioneered a movement, allowing teachers to swiftly adopt an innovative blended model, creating new student options for different learning modalities while giving teachers more opportunity to experience a personalized competency-based environment. (Molnar et al., 2019). Microschools are just one of many virtual schools that seek to create innovative, competency-based, cost-effective learning for k-12 students utilizing small classrooms and personalization (this is what makes the microschool model unique form other virtual schools); a scalable learning model, encompassing non-traditional teaching methodologies to enrich the learning environment for all learning styles/modalities.

Microschools: the history

Microschool origins can be traced back to the United Kingdom, where over the past decade, the term 'micro-schools' is coined as small independent and privately funded schools that meet at most two days a week. In the United States, the catalyst for the formation of microschools was the discontentment with the schooling options. With more home-schooling opportunities for families, creating flexible options for the adults and socialization for the children, the influx of micro-schools offers a formal flexible model approach, allowing for small classrooms; a flexible learning environment, creating a personalized pathway for every student (Horn 2015).

Microschools: student to teacher composition (the small classroom)

Microschools vary in size, cost, education philosophies and operating models. Microschoools are comprised of a mixed-grade classroom with a population of 15 students or less; school enrollment consists of a minimum of 150 students. The student to teacher ratio is generally comprised of 1:5 or less. This small class structure and personalized learning plans for students is what makes the microschool model unique; it provides teachers with a wealth of data used to evaluate and assess student progress. And helps teachers to realistically evaluate and account for the number of students they work with (Robinson, 2016).

The rise of micro-schools upstages the traditional private school learning schematics, offering personalization in conjunction with technology, customizing the curriculum to meet each learner's needs. Mentors/teachers/academic advisors function as facilitators, not lecturers, and students learn through projects, not memorization. When the classroom becomes too large,

the school administration will expand the micro-school network with more schools versus raising the threshold of the classroom size. (Robinson, 2016).

Microschools: the unique, blended (personalized) learning framework.

Microschools utilize various blending learning programs, the flex model, rotational model, enriched virtual and/or partial/full online model. Virtual private/charter schools, like micro-schools adopt the "one room schoolhouse" concept, melding blending learning and home schooling into a private school institution (Robinson, 2016). Like many blended learning schools, microschools blend classes combining asynchronous online components with real-time, face-to-face instruction**.** The personalized, scalable learning framework, focusing on small classrooms makes the microschool blended learning model distinct from other virtual k-12 schools.

Microschools give credence to the benefits of personalized, modernized instruction – tending to the student's individual learning needs——shifting away from a deteriorating education system that forces teachers to teach "to the middle" or "to the test" (Robinson, 2016). Vancourek, notes, "Blended schools are also experimenting with adaptive systems that "learn" how best to teach individual students based on their accumulated knowledge, content and skills gaps, learning styles, and interests—and adapt their approach based on this information. These systems allow for competency-based pathways to learning that better measure student success" (Vancourek, 2011, pp.14). Micro-schools invoke adaptive systems that teach students based on their interests and learning styles. The software or online learning platform and plans help teachers to measure the student progress and success. This concept is cultivated by sharing the curriculum plans across the schools' online network. Students complete their respective learning tasks, cherry-picked from these pools of networks, adapted to the learning strategies that are

suitable for their learning style, allowing for self-paced study (Horn, 2015). The essence of the microschool framework –small class sizes empowers teachers to customize lesson plans for students. The fundamental brilliance of micro-schools of the future are girded on well-designed software to help adults (parents and teachers) to evaluate where each child is learning with individuality and connectiveness in the classroom at the helm (Horn, 2015).

The prevalent use of blending learning microschools, utilizing dimensional learning processes, focusing on learner personalization and learner modality in small k-12 schools has proven to be an important innovative strategy. Wicks notes that, "Blended learning is utilized successfully for an array of purposes. Blended learning provides a range of uses of online learning to include: expanding the range of courses available to students, especially in small, rural or inner-city schools, beyond what a single school can offer, providing highly qualified teachers in subjects where qualified teachers are unavailable; providing flexibility to students facing providing credit recovery programs for students that have failed courses and/or dropped out of school, allowing them to get back on track to graduate"(Wicks, 2010, pp. 10). Microschools exemplify the successful examples of blended learning indicated by Wicks.

Microschools offer flexibility, from instituting an independent study model for some students, to creating a flex track for a high school student in need of help with credit recovery, or placing a student on an individual, customized plan with a fluid schedule against a learning modality to foster self-paced learning or facilitating learning predominately onsite at a brick-and-mortar school.

Microschools: the unique classroom structure, instruction, teacher, and student role/support/interaction

The amount of interaction in each course—between students to teachers, and students to students—varies by school. Student and teacher interaction in micro-schools occurs through a variety of methods. Student may attend classes in a learning facility, away from home or attend homeschooling courses by subject online. Learning is simulated through exploration in and outside the classroom from school trips, group activities or online activities utilizing a variety of technology (Robinson, 2016). While some microschools offer partial online learning from home or in the classroom, the element of self-paced learning and learner control over time is congruent across the learning framework (Horn, 2015). This begins with online learning and added physical support and connections from student to student, teacher to student and parent to teacher.

Microschools are purposefully created to encompass small, multi-age groupings in the classrooms. This is done to promote vigorous, sustainable relationships between teacher to student. Microschools agile ability to link the teacher to student and cultivate and authenticate community-connectedness, enable students to learn through collaborative thinking, solving critical and complex challenges that will remain with the student and their community of teachers. This creates learner investment in their communities evoking a sense of aptness to further one's education for the future (Robinson, 2016).

Microschools emphasize social- emotional learning, personalized education, competency based versus test-driven pedagogy. Vanourek, notes, "Instructional interaction from student to student and teacher to student combine the best aspects of online and classroom instruction to create a variety of blended learning experiences for the academic betterment of the student" (Vanourek, 2010 pp. 5). Vancourek's statement embodies the microschool blended learning

classroom culture, a blended, flexible learning environment offered by micro-schools is distinguished, personalized and empowering, ensuring for learning enrichment, academic excellence, and wellness.

Microschools create a blended learning structure, emphasizing personalized learning. This blended learning structure promotes creativity, aligned with each learner modality and student's learning path, connected to the integrated multi-age classroom environment. Some classrooms concepts in microschools adopt a framework that foster and cultivate inquisitive learning, combined with the K-12 core curriculum and a full day of academic support, sports, field trip activities and clubs (Horn, 2015). Classrooms at microschools are treated like stations, not designated areas for grade level learning.

Creativity is fostered in these classroom-like stations. The stations, better known as 'areas of learning', 'learning spaces' or 'learning havens' are filled with tools, not the typical desk and chair setup. Creative learning spaces in the classrooms are created for learners based on a learner's modality. These learning spaces may consist of art supplies for the student who thrives in painting and art; another station may be setup to foster a creative space for students that like to see how tornadoes are developed; or a more subdued, organized space is created for a learner that wants to learn quietly. In these classrooms, students rotate from room to room throughout the day set by the software algorithm applied to each student's learning style. (Horn, 2015).

Academic classrooms in microschools may meet once or twice a week or five-days a week for a full day or partial day of school. Students partake in face-to-face instruction and online learning. Some subjects are facilitated by teachers utilizing the place-based learning concept; learning crafted by subject (i.e., history, geography), corresponding to a learner's culture and heritage, provoking authentic, meaningful, learner engagement. Learning is also

centered around explorative activities based on ideas that provides out of class content such as videos, reading, problem sets, podcasts and other activities to ignite concepts for students to learn at their own pace—self-paced learning (Robinson, 2016). Implementing self-paced learning in the microschool classroom endears on discovering unique contributions students can individually make in their life journey; it emphasizes social construct and empathy in learning while focusing on personalization and connectiveness. (Robinson, 2016).

The predominance of diversity is also cultivated in the microschool classroom Microschool students are from a variety of backgrounds and cultures; students have different gifts, talents, and abilities. Because of the diverse set of learners in the classroom, peer to peer interactions is heightened, students are encouraged to share their real-world experiences, and skills which is instrumental to the learning experience. (Vanderark, 2018). Learners observe their teacher modify his or her instructional approach from student to student and subject to subject. This is demonstrative of the varied approach to instruction and doing different things in the classroom. As a result, students develop an affinity and appreciation for student differences (Vanderark, 2018).

Microschools: learning management system (software) platform and purpose.

Microschools commonly utilize built-in integrated software platforms online to support a scalable learning model. The software emphasizes interaction, exploration, and introspection. Microschool learners are instructed by their teachers/learning advisors/ administrators to set daily goals, utilizing the online learning programs to master basic skills in subjects, such as: reading, writing, math and other core subjects (Robinson, 2016). The students utilize a plethora of online learning programs to build their competencies in these subjects. The software selected by the school helps to track student progress against their personal learning goals. Learners are

assigned to individual projects, where creativity is nurtured. Learners are also encouraged to work with other students. Online collaborative learning (OCL) is at the epicenter. Learning is reinforced through collaborative group projects, discussions, critical thinking, problem-solving and reasoning skills in core subject areas. The school software reinforces these learning activities by offering resources and a structured framework for their teachers/learning guides/mentors/parents. These tools are provided in abundance for both students and parents (Horn, 2015).

Microschools: small scale design, costs, administration, networks

Because of its small-scale space, microschools often require a miniscule layer of administration; and are teacher powered. This small-scale design helps to preserve the teacher powered or teacher-lead environment. Due to its small-scale design, schools with faculty oftentimes teach and function as administrators. Teachers are empowered to make decisions that correspond to the learner/student needs (Vanderark, 2018). Teachers make school-wide decisions, expressing their vision to meet the need of the students, parent/families. Because of the online software platforms created for the microschools, teachers, students and families benefit from the learning platforms, as these are shared services and tools for networking and communication. The small layer of administration and small-scale design allows for more flexibility from state regulations; hence, the creation of charter microschools. And, for even more flexibility, private schools as another institutional option. The private school institutions are more commonplace versus charter schools. Microschools also keep cost low or offer no cost tuition due to its small-scale design (Vanderark, 2018).

Microschools can be awarded policy and contract waivers for different curriculum, staff, school scheduling and calendar plans. They are not required to use district tools and/or resources.

Microschools are cost-effective; however, they are unable to support the normal cost of a full-scaled school (staffing) model (Vanderark, 2018). Hence, the small-scale sized model. This enables microschools with an enrollment size of 100 to 150 students to be operated by teachers without full-time administrators—teacher powered schools. Teacher-powered schools are a national network of schools with a significantly lower amount of administration than a normal, full-scaled model school (Vanderark, 2018).

Microschools are not tracked by the National Association of Independent Schools. These non-traditional private/charter schools are appearing in states/cities across the US, from Austin, Texas; New Orleans, LA; Silicon Valley, CA, Phoenix, AZ; and Washington, D.C. Because of its low cost and unique framework—personalized learning, educational experts predict an increase of microschools in the future for private and charter school institutions. Vancourek notes, "blended learning classrooms has sought to liberate the confinement of educational practices to better serve the individualized needs of students" (Vanourek, 2011). The small sized blended classroom –microschools is liberating the confined, rigid classroom—refining the learning structure to better serve the individual needs of students, allowing more flexibility for the student, parents, and teachers.

Conclusion

The emergence of microchools are on the rise, utilizing blending learning—at its core—individualized learning plans, high quality, instruction, and innovation—fostering and cultivating classroom diversity with multi-age, small classroom sizes, emphasizing social construct. Microschools scalable learning model, empowers students, teachers/ administrators/facilitators; it is dimensional and adaptive based, radicalizing twenty-first century teaching and learning. The successful implementation of the flexible, blended learning model in microschools creates new

set of opportunities utilizing online curriculum; it promotes an increase in autonomous learning and competency-based progression; versus learning in the traditional classroom settings. The microschool blended learning model seeks to accomplish one unique goal—academic excellence with a focus on small classrooms and learner personalization.

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