

Microschools for the 21st Century Learner

In an era where we are still utilizing an outdated system for educating our youth, could small-scale schools be the panacea that could refine learning as we know it? These teeny-tiny schools are often called “microschools” or “learning pods”. Facilitators of these microschools are frequently certified teachers with a passion for helping our learners grow but are tired of the obstacles and pitfalls occurring in the traditional school model. Imagine a school that is free from the constraints of overcrowded classrooms, micromanaging administrators, fluff work, and standardized testing. This can all be yours in a microschool, where you are your own administrator and can make the decisions that you know will benefit your students.

Microschools usually enroll anywhere from 10 to 15 students but have the potential to enroll many more. However, the goal of these learning facilities is to focus on smaller groups so that the teacher can give more one-on-one attention. The teacher can also set their own terms such as curriculum, schedules, teaching strategies, etc. Facilitators have the flexibility to open up shop in just about any location they see fit. Many microschools are housed in rented-out spaces, houses of worship, and even personal homes.

Learning can take on new heights when given the opportunity to really focus on what your students need in order to fill the gaps that traditional schools are not able to fill due to time constraints and pressure to stay on a strict timeline due to testing. Many microschools operate on a part-time basis with virtual lessons in between using Zoom, Google Meets, and other hybrid learning platforms. This is one of the many reasons that teachers and parents alike are drawn to microschooling. The flexibility allows teachers to have time to plan authentic lessons that are focused on the science of learning instead of rushing together a quick lesson involving the use of a ton of worksheets or the famous thousand-dollar pencil known as the laptop. Likewise, families are less stressed with the hustle and bustle of traditional models.

Authentic Learning and Flexibility

With a much smaller group of learners, teachers are able to conduct a much more meaningful and authentic Project Based Learning environment than in the traditional classroom. They have the ability to take trips to retirement centers, wildlife sanctuaries, banks, community centers and so much more. Students have the freedom and flexibility to take part and make a difference in their community so much more than being confined inside a school building. Just think of the endless possibilities and meaningful experiences teachers could give their students. For example, I am a fourth-grade math and science teacher. We are covering measurement and I can only imagine all of the possibilities microschooled would give my students if I could bake cakes or cookies with them. We would be able to truly make measurements and conversions stick in ways that are just not possible in the classroom. Robert Schank makes a compelling argument in his article, *Teaching Minds: How Cognitive Science Can Save Our Schools*. He states that, “Academic subjects are irrelevant to real learning. They are not irrelevant to the education of academics of course. But, how many people really want to need to become experts in the academic fields?” (*Teaching Minds: How Cognitive Science Can Save Our Schools* | Roger Schank, 2020). This is precisely the argument that I have made in my years of teaching. We are not equipping our students with the knowledge that they will need for success in the real-world. We need to be teaching and mentoring them on the cognitive processes. If you look closely these processes are almost backward in comparison to how we teach in traditional schooling. However, that is what the students need. They need to be able to “diagnose” problems first and then think or learn about the facts and theories later (Education Futures LLC, 2011). However, this type of learning can only be done through a one-on-one type of setting. Microschools would be the perfect fit for this.

Helping Future Generations

As a public school teacher, when I first received a child that was “homeschooled” they were below grade level when they enrolled back into public school. I found this to be surprising because I always assumed children who were homeschooled would be able to learn so much more in little time due to the one-on-one instruction. I assumed wrong. Looking more into the topic of homeschooling and the state requirements in Texas I learned that there is none. Many parents who decide to homeschool do not have a teaching background and while it may sound

like an easy job, they quickly learn that they are in over their heads. Teaching is hard and even more so when the student is your child. Children test the boundaries more when they are dealing with their parents, so while you want the best education for your child, it becomes hard to manage.

Microschooling allows for these parents to still give their child that “homeschool” type instruction but allows someone who is usually well-versed and sometimes even certified in teaching to take over the instruction. Microschooling also benefits children even more by giving them exposure to social situations that they would otherwise not get in traditional homeschooling. While they may only have 3 or 4 students in their group, they would be able to make close friendships without the extra stress of “mean girl” or “bully” type behaviors. These behaviors are the reason many parents choose to take their children out of public school in the first place. While homeschooling can be great, humans are social beings and children need exposure to other children to learn how to properly interact and be good adult citizens. Without this exposure, kids can be awkward when put into social situations in the future. They also risk becoming lonely and depressed.

Could Microschools Be the Answer?

Again, I pose the question, could microschools be the remedy that will transform learning as we know it? Well, according to the millions of learners, parents, and teachers who are already taking part in microschooling that answer is yes. According to Thomas Arnett, “The real transformative impact of a disruptive innovation comes not just from technology, but from the new organizational models that technologies enable” as he posted in his blog on The Christensen Institute. We are always looking for the newest technologies to improve the education and instruction we give our students, however, we need to look at the learning first and how technology has enabled us to transform that learning and instruction. Technology has allowed educators to give our students more flexibility, authentic learning, meaningful connections, and much more. Now we just need the ability to utilize the technology to the fullest extent possible and that will never be possible in traditional schools.

References

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