



PERSONALIZED LEARNING AND EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This qualitative research study will focus on personalized learning as an instructional model and its influence on educators' perceptions of student agency and empowerment in the school setting. The purpose of this study is to better understand the ways personalized learning takes place in schools and how this relates to student agency and student empowerment. This case study will be conducted in an overall affluent school district that has a socioeconomically diverse student population that is known to support the concept of personalized learning for students. Participants will be drawn at random from educators in this district, who express an interest in participating in the study. The qualitative data collection will be based on semi-structured interviews, followed by a coding analysis of the transcribed interviews using open/axial coding strategies, which will be expanded for the development of theme creation. This will support an emergence of new knowledge and understanding between the concepts of personalized learning, student agency, and student empowerment.

Rationale

When learning is personalized:

- Customized learning paths are developed for students that give meaningful choice in the learning process.
- Students are allowed to learn based on individual strengths, motivations, interests, and goals.
- Personalized learning creates opportunities for multiple instructional modes to be scaffolded into each student's learning experiences (Twyman & Redding, 2015).

This research study is an **exploratory study** of personalized learning and student engagement. More specifically, this study looks to develop an understanding of the aspects of how a personalized learning environment cultivates a culture of empowerment and agency within students.

Statement of the Problem

In 2014, the Council of Chief State School Officers prioritized the implementation of the practical application of personalized learning concepts by teachers throughout the district (Twyman & Redding, 2015).

Personalized learning is a newer trend in education, and does not have a great deal of literature to support its effectiveness as an educational model. However, there is a good deal of interest and belief in the importance of providing students with choice options and ways for them to express their desires. Therefore, if educational institutions across the country are going to implement instructional models based upon personalized learning philosophies, additional research must be expanded to illuminate the ways that teachers believe this can be a practical and important instructional approach.

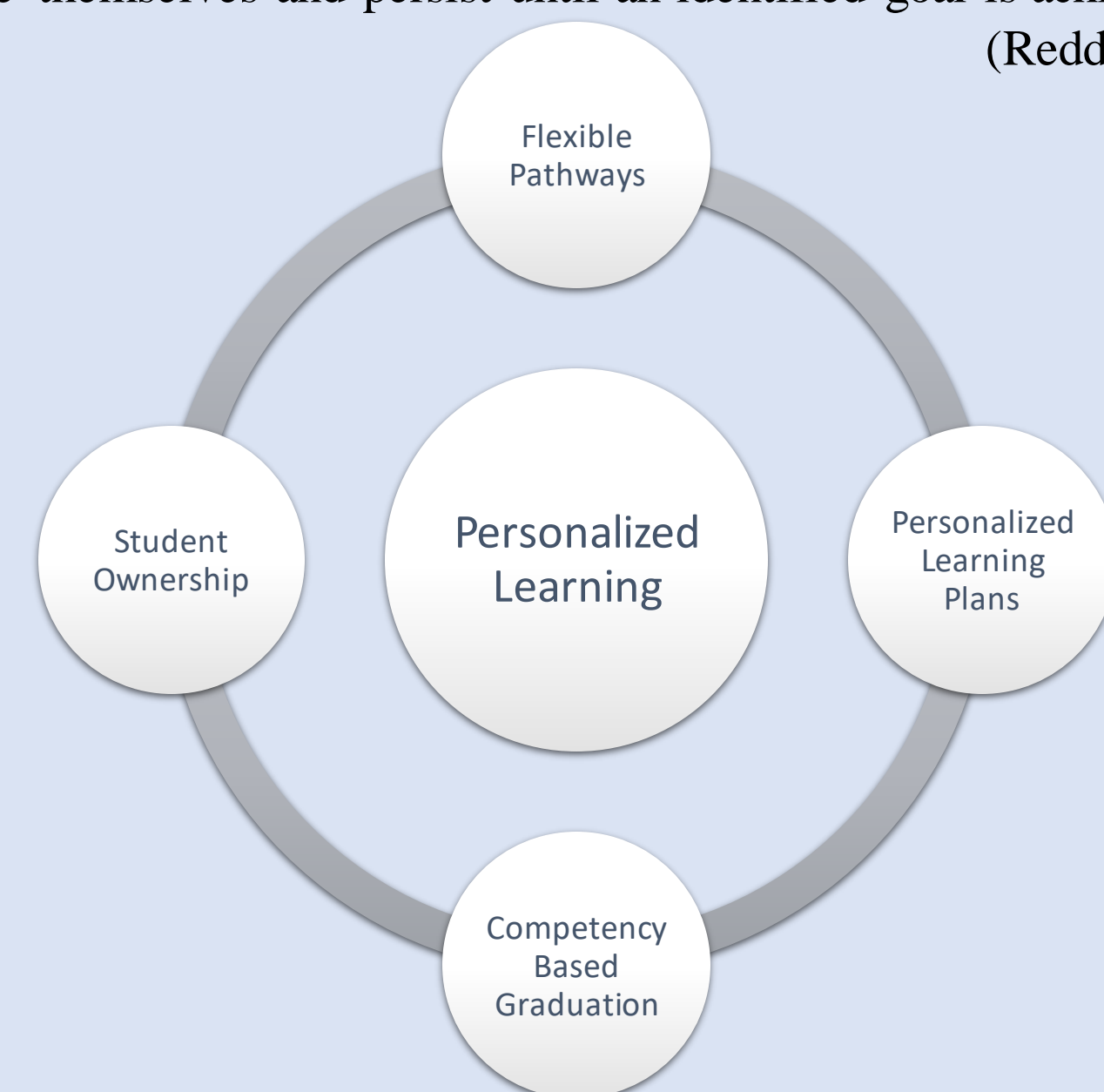
The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative study will be to discover:

- how teaching models for personalized learning create the environment for educators to support students' abilities to feel empowered to gain mastery of their individual learning needs
- how personalized learning allows educators to create learning environments where students have the opportunities to have agency in the learning process
- more about the training and education teachers' have experienced in order to provide personalized learning for their students.

Theoretical Framework

Personalized learning tailors the learning experience to the preferences, interests, and aspirations of the individual student. The instructional model creates a learning environment where students are enlivened and engaged (Murphy, 2016). "By intentionally building students' personal competencies and learning habits, teachers contribute to the students' ability to learn. The personal competencies are malleable, and they are enhanced most effectively when given focus in the curriculum, school culture, and instructional practices." (Redding, 2014, p.3). When achieving mastery in a personal learning framework, students employ cognitive, metacognitive, motivational, and social/emotional competencies to challenge themselves and persist until an identified goal is achieved.

(Redding, 2014)



- Student agency is a pedagogical stance that values student choice and voice in the learning process (Bron, Emerson, & Kakonyi, 2018; Williams, 2017)
- "Students with agency are powerful learners who are prepared to engage with the world with sustained, courageous curiosity" (Williams, 2017 p.10)
- Honoring student agency means that educators' task is not to tell students what to think but to help students reveal their thinking by observing, noticing, and naming their acts of problem solving. (Bron, Emerson, & Kakonyi, 2018; Williams, 2017)
- Empowerment Theory links individual well being with the larger social and political environment. (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995)
- "Empowerment is both a value orientation for working in the community and a theoretical model for understanding the process and consequences of efforts to exert control and influence over the decisions that effect one's life, organizational functioning, and the quality of community life". (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 43)

Benefits of Research

The researcher will use the data to develop an emergence of new knowledge and understanding between the concepts of personalized learning, student agency, and student empowerment. The results of this study will help add to the literature and build further understanding of the constructs of personalized learning, student agency, and student empowerment.

Methodology

- The primary focus of this qualitative study is to understand the ways in which personalized learning experiences in schools are provided to students and what educators believed these experiences bring to the students.
- Of particular interest is the way that personalized learning connects to student agency and empowerment. As such, case study design will be used to better understand how this phenomena is addressed in one high school in the North East.
- While the case is the high school, a large range of voices and perspectives will be sought to increase the validity of this study.

Methodology: Participants

- Teachers ($n = 7$)
- Customized School District High School
- Given the expectation of personalized learning in the Customized School District the ability to participate in the study requires that one be a teacher in the high school and volunteer to participate in the study.

Research Questions

To fully understand the ways in which personalized learning impacts student agency and empowerment, the following research questions will be utilized:

- In what ways is student agency implemented in schools?
- What are educators' perceptions of the role of agency and empowerment in supporting a personalized learning environment for students?
- In what ways does the implementation of a personalized learning environment support student agency?
- In what ways does the implementation of a personalized learning environment support student empowerment?

Research Design

The primary focus of this qualitative study is to understand the ways in which personalized learning experiences in schools are provided to students and what educators believe these experiences bring to the students. "We conduct qualitative research when we want to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study." (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Of particular interest is the way that personalized learning connects to student agency and empowerment. As such, case study design will be used to better understand how this phenomena is addressed in one high school in the North East. As Yin points out, case study is appropriate to learn about "a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18).

Limitations

- A limitation of this study is that participants are all practicing certified educators at one high school in Connecticut.
- This study takes place during the Covid-19 Pandemic and participation may be limited
- That the study will take place virtually, as opposed to in-person could create some unforeseen limitations
- The nature of teaching during a time of collective trauma with the pandemic may alter the ways that teachers understand the topic under study.

Dissertation Timeline

Date	Action
Fall 2020	Defend Proposal and apply to IRB for permission to conduct study.
December 2020 – January 2021	Identify and confirm participants in study
December 2020 – May 2021	Write Chapter 1, 2, and 3 of dissertation
Spring 2021	Data collection
Spring 2021/Summer 2021	Data Analysis
Summer/Fall 2021	Write Chapter 4 and 5
Spring 2022	Defend Dissertation

Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015)
- Coding of the transcribed interviews using open/axial coding strategies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015)
- Data analyzed through qualitative coding using data analysis software (NVivo).
- Constant Comparative method (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014)
- Existing Documents & Research Journal coded in the same manner.

Key Terms

Key Term	Definition
Empowerment	"Empowerment has been defined as a process by which people gain mastery over issues of concern to them. In schools, this process occurs as disempowered students gain the power needed to meet their individual needs (e.g., learning, social relationships, diploma) and work with others (e.g., students, teachers, administrators) to achieve collective goals." (Kirk et al, 2016, p. 589)
Personalized Learning	"Personalization refers to a teacher's relationships with students and their families and the use of multiple instructional modes to scaffold each student's learning and enhance the student's personal competencies. Personalized learning varies the time, place, and pace of learning for each student, enlists the student in the creation of learning pathways, and utilizes technology to manage and document the learning process and access rich sources of information." (Twyman & Redding, 2015, p. 3)
Student Agency	"A pedagogical stance that actively seeks and values student choice and voice fans the embers of student agency through building a sense of efficacy. The choices we open to students must be authentic choices through which students can see that their opinions and, most importantly, their actions can have a real impact on themselves and the world around them. Both integrity and efficacy come together to build a sense of agency in which students own a strong perception that they are the key agents of their learning." (Williams, 2017, p. 10)