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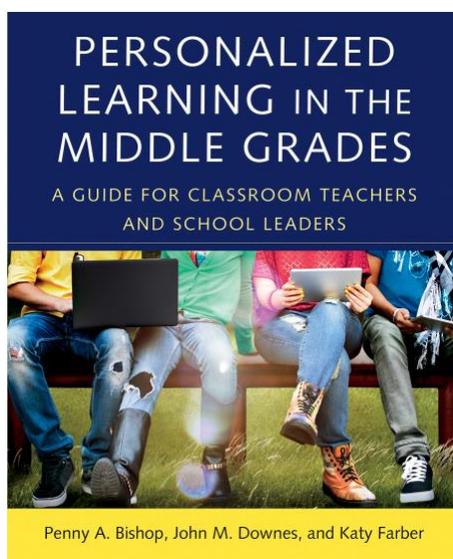
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Review of Personalized Learning in the Middle Grades: A Guide for Classroom Teachers and School Leaders

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Focusing instruction on students and their interests is not new or innovative. Veteran teacher folklore reminds us that the dominant interests and initiatives (power-laden, top-down mandates from federal and state education agencies) in education swing like a pendulum back and forth, seemingly between an emphasis on testing and an emphasis on learning. Committing fully to the ever-changing trends in policy leaves some teachers worn out, pleading: *Just tell me what to do*. Other teachers, though, look elsewhere for their purpose, identifying in themselves, their students, and their communities what it is that matters most in their teaching. Contemporarily, thinkers like George Couros (2015) and organized movements like Project Based Learning from the Buck Institute for Education seem to present student-centered teaching in a fresh way that is appealing to the K-12 community, reigniting an interest in student-centered learning (albeit sometimes still as a means to higher test scores). This shift away from the dominant thinking about schools and learning of the past few decades precipitates a reexamination of “traditional notions of the time, space, and roles of schooling” (Bishop, Downes, & Farber, 2019, p. 11). For middle grade teachers and school leaders interested in disrupting some of the foundational structures and practices of K-12 schooling, *Personalized Learning in the Middle Grades* by Penny A. Bishop, John M. Downes, and Katy Farber is a primer on student-centered alternatives.

In a style that is more illustrative than prescriptive, the authors prompt the reader to think deeply about their own practices as well as their theoretical stances and personal beliefs about teaching and learning. As such, teachers searching for a step-by-step guide to personalized learning should keep looking and, perhaps, should consider whether such a book could truly prepare anyone for the messy work of student-centered learning. Recognizing the paradigmatic nature of this shift, Bishop, Downes,

and Farber take care to attend to the theoretical foundations of their work by providing the reader with justifications for the practices they endorse (each chapter begins with a section subtitled “Building Your Rationale”). Theory is wedded to practice with multiple “Personalization in Practice” subsections throughout each chapter, from samples of students’ work to templates for team planning to examples of school schedules that support personalized learning. Reading these theoretical frameworks and practical suggestions together should reveal a path forward as the reader begins to transform their teaching.

Why personalized learning and why middle school? Contextually speaking, the authors’ hands-on work with middle schools featured in the book responds to legislative changes in Vermont that require schools to provide alternative pathways to high school graduation. Also, citing the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), Bishop et al. provide a helpful reminder that middle school is a time ripe for identity exploration, challenging learning experiences, and increased ownership in the learning process. Personalized learning in the authors’ contexts, then, blends the state-sanctioned alternative learning pathways and the developmental needs of students in middle grades. The result, the authors argue, is “a fundamentally reshaped system to know students better” that “draws educational stakeholders together” (p. 22).

Each chapter of the book presents a different feature or component of their model of personalized learning. Throughout the text, the authors paint valuable portrayals of highly professional teachers thinking deeply about their craft, engaging in the iterative process of creating meaningful learning experiences for and with their students. This text challenges teachers to wonder what we might gain by deconstructing well-worn, but often fruitless pedagogies and building new ones that center

students. The authors take care to point out that such a move forward does not require abandoning old practices outright, but it certainly calls for revising them. The vision of personalized learning shared in this text rests on three “pillars”: (1) development and implementation of a personalized learning plan (PLP), (2) providing flexible pathways for students to learn, and (3) employing proficiency-based assessment. While no one of these ideas is particularly unique or innovative on its own, they are brought together in concert in *Personalized Learning in the Middle Grades*. Below, I will summarize and evaluate the relevant chapters for each pillar. Key ideas from chapters one and three (“Personalized Learning for Young Adolescents: Defining Personalized Learning” and “Laying the Groundwork for Personalized Learning,” respectively) have been addressed in the introduction and will be raised throughout the review. Chapter nine (“Sustaining Innovation in Your Classroom, Team, or School”) rounds out the book in an inspiring and supportive way, but it is excluded in the review only because it serves that unique purpose. It is important to note that separating the pillars is only useful analytically—the way they work together and are described in the text is a harmonious blend.

Profiles and Plans: Laying the Foundation

The personalized learning plan (PLP) anchors the personalized learning experiences described in the book. In chapter 2, “Personalized Learning Plans: Purposes and Opportunities,” Bishop et al. develop a convincing rationale for PLPs and also provide some helpful guardrails, articulating “potential pitfalls” of implementing PLPs (p. 69). The PLPs they describe operate as ever-evolving portfolios, communicating student learning and growth through an “appreciative lens” (p. 61). As students engage in personalized learning, they catalogue evidence of

their growth against predetermined goals or targets by filing it away in the plan (usually managed electronically). Rejecting the traditional, one-size-fits-all path toward mastery of common goals, PLPs fundamentally shift what counts as school learning. In one example, a class works together to change a school rule that gave only sixth graders the privilege of building forts at recess. As they engage in meaningful reading, writing, and speaking on this issue, they connect their work to areas they had identified for growth in the PLP. As a more humanizing form of assessment, the PLP provides information that standardized tests alone cannot, helping teachers “establish a continuous narrative about each student’s learning experience” (p. 55). Most importantly in this section, the authors remind us that planning for meaningful learning often begins somewhere other than standards, ideally with students and their interests and questions. It echoes James Beane’s vision of curriculum integration, where curriculum “is based on themes that are found at the intersection of personal concerns of young people and larger world concerns” (Beane, 1997, p. 48).

The authors are transparent about the implementation of PLPs, acknowledging some missteps that can turn PLPs into the compliance-oriented structures they are meant to supplant. For example, the authors argue that a top-down mandate requiring PLPs to be uniform across grades or classes can be limiting, leaving the plans devoid of opportunities for creativity and divergent thinking. Bishop et al. also warn that an overemphasis on reductive standards and externally generated objectives jeopardizes the PLP’s role as a tool for empowering meaningful learning. These warnings about what is *not* central to personalized learning are as powerful as the preceding explanations of PLPs for constructing a vision of what *is* central.

A primary component of the PLP is the learner profile, detailed in chapter 4, “Launching PLPs with the Learner Profile”. This learner profile is both a process and a product; a way for students to reflect on who they are becoming and also to represent themselves in creative ways. Ideally, teachers then use the information in this profile to “base curriculum on the compelling questions they ask about [students’] rapidly changing selves and [students’] emerging sense of their futures” (p. 134). The chapter is replete with suggestions for and examples of meaningful, multimodal literacy experiences like digital storytelling, poetry, photography, and movies. Such activities require students to make themselves the subject of their learning, the most intimate version of personalized learning. Middle grade literacy teachers may already be familiar with asking students to develop poems modeled off of George Ella Lyons’s “Where I’m From,” which is included as a suggestion in chapter four, too. Importantly, the authors’ ideas about preteen identity represent it as ever-changing and complex. With the learner profile, identity work is central to the curriculum and exploration of one’s self influences the pathways to growth within the PLP.

Flexible Pathways: Beyond Differentiation

In what I consider to be the strongest section of the book, chapters five (“Designing Flexible Learning Pathways for Young Adolescents”) and six (“Scaffolding for Equitable, Deeper Learning”) provide principles, tools, and examples for developing curriculum that centers students and for enacting pedagogies that honor their budding identities as represented in their learner profiles. Though they are presented as separate chapters in the text, they both speak to the kind of instruction that personalized learning requires, so I will address them together. The authors position “flexible learning pathways” as a step beyond differentiation,

which typically values student compliance with teacher expectations through differentiated means or ends. Instead, Bishop et al. advocate for a change in the relationship and power dynamic between student and teacher, considering them to be “partnering as designers of learning” (p. 177). Empowering the student in this way requires a shift in the role of the teacher, from purveyor of knowledge to adoption of a variety of roles every day including “empowerer, scout, scaffolder, assessor, and community builder” for different students at different times throughout a single school day (p. 37). For example, a teacher in one case embodies the role of empowerer when she supports her sixth-grade student’s participation in an online college calculus course during the school day. Teachers in another school act as “scouts” when they connect students with community experts for input and advice as they start a chicken coop on campus to provide fresh, local eggs for school lunches. In order to adopt a personalized learning agenda, teachers need to be comfortable with relinquishing the knowledge power traditionally bestowed upon them.

Refreshingly, the authors are adamant throughout the entire book that personalized learning “does not render the teacher obsolete” (p. 43). Specifically, teachers taking on the roles of empowerer, scout, and scaffolder design personalized learning experiences using their content knowledge, knowledge of students, and teaching expertise. Literacy teachers familiar with reading and writing workshop understand their personalized nature, honing in on individual students’ growth and guiding students to use their interests in authentic literacy experiences. Yet, as Bishop et al. point out, the workshop model “developed and flourished in otherwise traditional classroom environments,” environments that tend to center the teacher’s intentions despite a wealth of opportunities for student voice and choice (p. 187). With due respect to and appreciation for pedagogies like workshop,

project based learning, and collaborative group work, Bishop et al. advocate for a revision of well-known structures for teaching and learning to match the purposes of personalized learning. Integral to the authors' conception of personalized curriculum and instruction, then, are the concepts of inquiry, flexibility, creativity, purpose, and authenticity.

Proficiency-Based Assessment: Wrestling with External Pressures

While the learning plans and flexible pathways presented by Bishop et al. might very well constitute a shift in thinking, it is the proficiency-based assessment pillar of their model that most aligns itself to the dominant, means-ends rationality of the current paradigm. In chapter seven ("PLPs and Proficiency-Based Assessment"), the authors advocate for proficiency-based assessment (also considered "mastery learning" and sometimes formally enacted as "standards-based grading") which names small learning goals, say, writing an introductory sentence, and assesses students based on their performance against a simplified rubric. This system for communicating student growth provides more targeted information than "ambiguous grades" (p. 208) which often consist of an amalgam of students' content knowledge, skills, work habits, and compliance. The authors assert that proficiency-based assessment both empowers students and gives purpose to their learning, giving the student in the opening vignette a specific approach to a new project based on science skills she had not yet mastered. Necessary for personalized learning via flexible pathways, proficiency-based assessment does, in fact, allow for learning to happen on the student's timeline, not necessarily in lockstep with the teacher's plan book as traditional schooling requires. Students submit appropriate evidence of their learning as they "take on authentic and inherently messy challenges" (p. 211). Ellis & Bond (2016) survey major research from

the 1980s that supports the authors' conclusions that proficiency-based assessment increases students' beliefs about their own competence. At the same time, Ellis and Bond suggest that such reductive approaches to teaching and learning are most efficient at raising test scores, supporting an essentialist philosophy, one that I believe is contradictory to the purpose for personalized learning set out by the authors earlier in the text. The authors do attend to some of these concerns in part of the "pitfalls" section of chapter two, noting that "some schools become so mired in developing fine-grained targets, scales, and tasks for subject area proficiencies that they risk losing sight of what it looks like for students to engage deeply in real-world problems of personal relevance" (p. 71). Nevertheless, they go on to argue for an integral relationship between personalized learning and proficiency-based assessment. However, the way they write about it in chapter seven reads like a concession to the dominant accountability system in return for the freedom to enact more empowering pedagogy. The learning described by the authors in chapter seven is linear and sequential, and measured against standards imposed by districts or developed by teachers, tracked online using checklists and graphs. Can learning be personalized if the criteria for mastery are standardized? To the extent that proficiency-based assessment measures student learning against standards imposed in a top-down manner, personalized learning suddenly becomes about mastering someone else's standards, no matter how personal, purposeful, or authentic the work students are engaged in happens to be.

In chapter eight ("PLPs, Goal-Setting, and Student-Led Conferences"), the authors discuss how to bolster the familiar practice of middle grade student-led conferences by incorporating all aspects of personalized learning (the personalized learning plan, the learner profile, assessment information, work samples) to communicate student growth and

learning with families and other stakeholders. They provide helpful templates, guides, and examples for either implementing student-directed conferences or adapting the conference to include these components. The student-led conference provides an authentic audience for the PLP as well as a means of accountability, “placing the PLP in a social context” (p. 247). In schools where personalized learning is the norm, regular interactions—informal and formal—between teacher, student, school staff, family members, and community members are opportunities to engage students in meaningful conversations about their learning. The end of the chapter provides suggestions for guiding goal setting and helpful guidelines for helping students develop manageable and meaningful goals.

Issues and Conclusions

For all of its strength as a means for prompting teachers to fundamentally reinvent their practice, a critical reading of the book does leave a little to be desired. The authors make claims throughout the text that personalized learning can address issues of equity “by attending to students who face additional learning barriers” (p. 22) and that research validates personalized learning as “a promising way to increase equitable outcomes, especially for African American, Latinx, low-income students, and English language learners” (p. 181-182). The majority of the book, however, lacks a deeper exploration of sociocultural instructional issues like how knowledge is represented within PLPs, whose knowledge counts, and just where the boundaries might be for what types of personally relevant learnings are acceptable. A surface-level exploration of race (under the banner of “civil rights”) is used as an example in an opening vignette to chapter two, but could students’ interrogation into the racial or gender equitability of local school disciplinary rates or the state’s LGBTQ anti-discrimination laws (or lack thereof) operate as personalized learning

experiences? In addition, the “identity work” described in the learner profile and beyond may not equitably accessible. Teachers implementing personalized learning should be aware of the difficult circumstances they may place students in, for instance, by presenting a well-meaning opportunity for “authentic” identity exploration and sharing, but in doing so, ignoring the sociocultural environment in which the learning is taking place that might have students stop just shy of meaningful breakthroughs about their identity. Can children whose identities are in conflict with the dominant discourse of school (whose ability, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, immigration status, or language use are not acknowledged or valued) feel safe and supported in engaging in honest self-discovery? Of course, such an exploration may be outside the purview of the text, but it must be considered when teachers implement personalized learning in contexts that are more socioculturally diverse than Vermont.

In essence, *Personalized Learning in the Middle Grades* places the onus of transformative learning squarely where it belongs: on the teachers who know their students better than any curriculum guide or bureaucratic body does. Accordingly, this text gives those looking to make learning more meaningful and relevant for their students some foundational ideas to wrestle with as they attempt the urgent task of teaching in the twenty-first century, namely breaking down the time-honored but problematic routines and structures of the institution of school in search of more humanizing, holistic, and purposeful learning. The authors nudge teachers toward a more purpose-driven way of doing school, though still subordinate to larger institutional pressures and powers. As educators harness the vision Bishop et al. lay out in the book, they will likely be inspired by the invigorating and rewarding work of learning *with* students.

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