Research paper

Balancing freedom and limitations: A case study of choice provision in a personalized learning class

Steven Netcoh, Ph.D.

The University of Vermont, 85 South Prospect Street, Waterman Building, Burlington, VT 05405, USA

HIGHLIGHTS

- Students and teachers struggled over the bounds of student choice.
- The profusion of choice was demotivating for some students.
- Teachers struggled to balance student choice and academic rigor.
- Teachers struggled giving students control over learning targets and goals.
- Teachers may benefit from foregrounding personalized learning as a partnership.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explored how middle school teachers and students experienced and perceived choice within a newly implemented personalized learning class. It found that teachers and students had different values, expectations, and interests related to student choice, which contributed to struggles for power and control within the personalized learning class. Findings suggest teachers may benefit from foregrounding personalized learning as a partnership in which students and teachers bring their voices into conversation while framing choice as a means toward collaboratively developed learning targets as opposed to an end in and of itself.

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1. Introduction

Countries around the world have moved toward standardization in education through standards-based reforms and high-stakes accountability policies (Hargreaves, Fullan, Lieberman, & Hopkins, 2010). The United States has epitomized this movement with the high-stakes accountability legacy of No Child Left Behind and its continued push for standardization through the Common Core State Standards (Rothman, 2011). Standards-based reforms have led to an overall "narrowing of the curriculum" (Au, 2007) and contributed to teachers' use of more controlling instructional approaches with their students (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, & Legault, 2002). Research also suggests that students' motivation, engagement, and learning suffer when their teachers adopt more controlling instructional styles and are provided

limited opportunities for choice and autonomy in the classroom (Reeve, 2009). In these ways, standards-based reforms have been associated with less choice and autonomy for teachers and students and contributed to lower levels of student motivation, engagement, and learning in school.

In response to these trends, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners have sought to develop curricular and instructional practices that offer greater choice in the classroom and are responsive to students' unique interests, needs, and abilities as learners. Some of the most common approaches used to tailor curriculum and instruction to students' diverse needs and abilities are differentiation (Tomlinson, 2014), Universal Design for Learning (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014), and learner-centered instruction (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). In recent years, "personalization" has become the new buzzword for teaching practices that attempt to respond to the unique characteristics of each learner in the classroom (Bingham, Pane, Steiner, & Hamilton, 2016). Efforts to provide students more

personalized learning experiences have been incentivized and supported by the U.S. Department of Education (Sykes, Decker, Verbrugge, & Ryan, 2014) and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Pane, Steiner, Baird, & Hamilton, 2015) in the United States, the Bendigo Education Plan in Australia (Waldrip et al., 2014), and the Ministry of Education in New Zealand (Bolstad et al., 2012).

Although personalized learning is defined and operationalized in diverse ways, efforts have been made to distinguish it from related teaching practices such as differentiation and individualization. Some of the most useful distinctions are offered by Clarke (2013) and Bray and McClaskey (2015) who suggest the primary difference between personalized learning and differentiated and individualized instruction is the extent of student choice in and control over their learning. Clarke (2013) contends, "The difference between individualization and personalization lies in control. We can individualize education by imposing it, but students choose to personalize their own learning. Their volition drives their inquiry" (pp. 6–7). For Clarke, personalization occurs only when students are actively involved in choosing the topics they investigate, how they develop new knowledge and skills, and how they demonstrate their learning. Similarly, Bray and McClaskey (2015) assert that "Encouraging learner voice and choice" is the primary aspect of personalized learning that distinguishes it from differentiation and individualization (p. 13). For these authors, student choice in and control over their learning distinguish personalization from differentiation and individualization.

Although many teachers believe providing students choice in the classroom increases their motivation, engagement, and performance (Flowerday & Schraw, 2000), research suggests students are rarely provided opportunities to have choice in their learning (Bozack, Vega, McCaslin, & Good, 2008; Williams, Wallace, & Sung, 2016). Given the infrequency of opportunities for choice in the classroom, many teachers and students in schools adopting personalized learning have limited experience with student choice. Research suggests students and teachers may initially struggle with choice provision after spending the majority of their time in schools in predominantly teacher-directed learning environments (Morrison, 2008). To date, little empirical research has examined provision of choice in real classroom settings, particularly personalized learning environments (Williams et al., 2016). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how middle grades students and teachers experienced and perceived provision of choice within a newly developed personalized learning class.

2. Literature review

2.1. Personalized learning

2.1.1. Varying definitions of personalization

There is significant variety in how teachers and schools define and apply personalized learning in practice. Some approaches to personalization rely heavily on technology, using computer programs to tailor curriculum sequencing, pacing, and presentation to students' unique needs, interests, and abilities as learners (Chen, 2008; Lin, Yeh, Hung, & Chang, 2013). Other approaches place primary responsibility on teachers for tailoring curriculum and instruction to students' individual needs and interests as learners (U.S. DOE, 2010). Teachers remain largely in control within these approaches, using their knowledge of students' capabilities and curiosities to determine the pace, style, and content of curriculum for each individual student. These applications of personalized learning share many similarities with the practices of individualized and differentiated instruction (U.S. DOE, 2010).

Other definitions distinguish personalization from individualized and differentiated instruction by suggesting it requires students to have increased voice and choice in the design, execution, and management of their learning. Bray and McClaskey (2015) define a "personalized learning environment" as one in which students "have a voice in what they are learning based on how they learn best" and "have a choice in how they demonstrate what they know and provide evidence of their learning. In a learner-centered environment, learners own and co-design their learning" (p. 14). Whereas differentiation and individualization place primary responsibility on teachers, Bray and McClaskey assert personalization entails students taking increased ownership of their education by partnering with teachers to design learning experiences that suit their individual interests, skills, and aspirations. Clarke (2013) also contends that personalized learning is "organized so students learn to answer questions they see as important to their lives," suggesting students have choice and volition in the questions they pursue within personalized learning environments (p. 7).

For these authors, student choice and autonomy are central to the practice of personalized learning. They argue students must have volition and an internal perceived locus of causality (deCharms, 1968; Ryan & Deci, 2000) for their learning to feel personal. With the dearth of empirical research on personalized learning, however, little is known about how student choice and autonomy support are enacted in personalized learning environments or how teachers and students experience their provision. Therefore, it is instructive to consider some of the research on the provision of choice in general classroom settings to understand the potential effects of offering students choice in personalized learning environments.

2.2. Student choice

2.2.1. Student choice in the middle grades

The idea of giving students choice in their learning has been a key component of the middle school movement during the past thirty years. Scholars and reform advocates have expressed concern about the mismatch between young adolescents' desire to exercise control and decision-making and the limited opportunities for student choice and autonomy in the traditional junior high school environment (Eccles et al., 1993; Jackson & Davis, 2000). In response to this mismatch, middle grades reformers have called for teachers who were "not only open to the possibility of authentic student choice but who understood and valued the power of learning driven by strong personal interests" (Stevenson & Bishop, 2012, p. 35). To meet these calls for authentic student choice, some educators (e.g., Brodhagen, 1995) have used Beane's (1993) framework for a middle school curriculum that actively involves students in choosing the topics and themes they would explore within a unit of study. The Montessori method, which offers substantial student choice and autonomy in learning, has also been shown to contribute to higher motivation and more positive quality of experience in the middle grades although its use in middle schools remains relatively limited (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005).

2.2.2. Dimensions of student choice

Scholars have identified various ways teachers might give students choices in the classroom. Stefanou, Perencevich, DiCintio, and Turner (2004) have suggested teachers may give students organizational choice (i.e., choice in learning environment through co-creation of classroom rules and due dates), procedural choice (i.e., choice in how learning is presented), and cognitive choice (i.e., freedom for students to argue their own points and choice in how they solve problems). Similarly, Williams et al. (2016) identified five dimensions of choice provision in their study of six highly effective teachers' classrooms. These dimensions were choice in strategy