Personalized Learning for Social Justice: From Theory to Practice

James F. Nagle
Saint Michael's College, jnagle2@smcvt.edu

Penny Bishop
University of Maine, pbishop@uvm.edu

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Editorial Remarks

James F. Nagle, *Saint Michael's College*

Penny A. Bishop, *University of Maine*

Educational policy in the United States has long emphasized school accountability as key to improving student educational achievement (e.g., *A Nation at Risk*, 1983; *No Child Left Behind,* 2002). Such measures constrained curriculum development by narrowing the focus of what is taught to what is tested, particularly in terms of common core literacy and numeracy (Welner & Mathias, 2016). When the rush for accountability did not reduce the educational opportunity gaps between middle income white students and students in under-resourced schools or students of the global majority, U.S. policy took a slightly different path with the passage of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* [ESSA], (2015). ESSA offered accountability measures that widened the criteria used to measure student academic success. It allowed states to adopt practices and policies that provided a greater variety of indicators for comprehensive school improvement while allowing for more authentic measures of academic achievement for all students. These changes in national educational policy opened the door for many states to enact more personalized learning environments in their schools, with only seven states in the US having no policy to implement personalized learning (Patrick et al., 2016).

Middle grades scholars have noted the potential for personalized learning to engage young adolescents in learning while allowing them to address important societal issues, as "schools and districts across the United States are increasingly turning to personalized learning as a way to meet the diverse interests, needs, abilities, and aspirations of their students and view it as a promising mechanism for raising academic achievement (Nagle et al., 2019, p. 123).

In its finest iteration, personalizing learning enables students to delve deeply into matters of personal and social significance, issues that young adolescents hold dear. Personalized learning for social justice relies on the intersection of two conceptions of teaching and learning: 1) personalized learning as articulated through the three pillars of personalized learning plans (PLPs), flexible learning opportunities, and proficiency-based assessment (Bishop et al., 2017); and 2) teaching for social justice with its three components of curriculum, pedagogy, and social action (Dover, 2009), following the concepts of justice as articulated by Cochran-Smith and colleagues (2009) and Sleeter (2015). In this version of teaching for social justice, curriculum represents students' identities and interests; pedagogy fosters community, collaborative learning, inquiry and critical thinking; and social action affords students opportunities to take a stand against inequality or injustice (Dover).

While much of the academic literature on personalized learning has been theoretical (Nagle et al., 2018), the essays and practitioner perspectives in this issue move from theory to practice by depicting applications of personalized learning for social justice by practitioners in their schools. This special issue of *Middle Grades Review* highlights educational practices that enact an educational paradigm shift from teacher-driven learning of discrete disciplines to student-driven personalized learning, integrating disciplines to address issues of social justice, environmental sustainability, and democratic education. Such practices have been recommended by the Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) of the American Education Research Association. Specifically, this issue addresses key questions brought up by the MLER SIG research agenda (Mertens et al., 2016):

1. What is the impact of a personalized learning approach on middle school student engagement? (p. 17)

2. How do middle grades teachers use technology to personalize learning in the middle grades? (p. 24)
3. In what ways is personalized learning being used to integrate curriculum in the middle grades? (p. 17)

Many of the practitioner perspectives describe teaching and learning in Vermont middle schools and there is a reason for this: Of the states with comprehensive, statewide policies coordinated to support personalized learning, Vermont's policy approach to personalized learning is one of the most comprehensive in that it integrates multiple policies – personalized learning plans (PLPs), flexible pathways, and proficiency-based assessment – into a coordinated system (Patrick et al., 2016).

This issue highlights the work of teachers and students who are practicing personalized learning, not only to improve academic achievement, but also to explore and pursue teaching and learning for social justice. Our issue starts with an essay by Kesson who provides a critical perspective of personalized learning within the historical and philosophical context of John Dewey. In John Dewey's educational framework, the process and product are inseparable; achieving democratic ends cannot result from undemocratic means. For him, the full humanization of people depended not upon externally imposed curriculum and management systems, but rather on responding to the intrinsic needs, interests, and powers of individual students. Kesson asserts that personalized learning is one of the most important developments in educational reform toward a more socially just, egalitarian society with the potential to engage students fully in their learning and in their communities. However, Kesson warns that there are pitfalls along the road to implementation, from the problem of stagnant mindsets and mental models to corporate hijacking of the discourses around personalization. Her essay highlights ways that we might best avoid these snares, so that the full power of personalized learning might be realized.

Kesson contends that many educators and communities are coming to understand that our conventional way of educating students – discipline-based courses, textbooks, standardized tests, and Carnegie units – is not only inconsistent with what we now know about how people learn, it is an inadequate template

for preparing young adolescents for the complexity and indeterminacy of the 21st century. Kesson summarizes some of the changes needed to address the challenges of the 21st century and foreshadows the practices described in the following practitioner perspectives which include student self-direction and choice over both the content and processes of learning, a shift from standardized to authentic curriculum, individualized assessment, community-based educational experiences, and the changing role of educators from "teaching and telling" to "advising, coaching, and facilitating learning."

In the four practitioner perspectives that follow, educators describe the practices, policies, and structures they have implemented in their classrooms, at their schools and in their communities. These practitioner perspectives respond to critical questions that Kesson poses in her essay. In "Using a Social Justice Lens to Connect the Past with the Present," Chadburn and Gratton describe how they engage students in social justice work while maintaining a safe and respectful classroom culture. They discuss the philosophical and practical changes needed to support this type of pedagogy, and the challenges of implementing such curricula amid school policies that may not favor such work. Chadburn and Gratton assist students in exploring both the past and present through the lens of social justice. They co-construct with their students' thematic units on "Revolution," "Race in America," and "Societal Monsters" that analyze and reflect on the injustices of the past, as well as understand how those injustices in a different form may still exist today.

The next practitioner perspective emphasizes the process of personalized learning as a framework for student voice and democratic education. In "Student Agency through Negotiated Practice," O'Donnell applies James Beane's democratic approach and describes how her middle grades team supports students to choose topics within broad themes and learning pathways that suit their interests, skills, and needs as individuals. Using a series of instructional structures, the facilitators encourage students to engage in research, thoughtful discussions, courageous conversations, and carefully constructed writing processes, while also emphasizing curiosity, critical examination, relationship development, teamwork, and social action. Within a standards-based learning environment, O'Donnell walks the reader through a process

which allows students to generate the questions they want to investigate. Once students have generated their common questions, they review the Common Core State Standards and content standards to align with the social studies or science issues they wish to investigate. This process of democratic education has students taking the leadership role in planning curriculum and having teachers take on the role of facilitator. Ultimately, this article discusses how a democratic curriculum process can lead to student engagement, provide opportunities for reflection, and allow students to achieve academic and personal goals while addressing issues for social change.

In the next practitioner perspective Taylor and Pioli-Hunt describe how the model of Educate, Act, Connect, and Communicate can be utilized to address 21st century issues that concern middle grades students. The authors developed the model while using the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs) to address global and local issues at two different middle schools. At Main Street Middle School, where Taylor teaches, students work on the Green Team to delve deeply into the science and social impact of sustainability issues such as decreasing the school's waste footprint and developing a re-use, reduce, and recycle ethos at the school. At Pioli-Hunt's school, Williston Central School, students create a sustainability action project which is a multi-grade challenge that is project-based and addresses a local or global issue aligned to the UNSDGs. The authors compare the challenges and benefits of using the Educate, Act, Connect, and Communicate model to explore learning through the UNSDGs and make recommendations to other educators who are interested in moving toward a more integrative curriculum that highlights personalized learning, student voice, engagement and equity.

While the previous pieces are authored by teachers from what many consider to be "core" areas of English, social studies, math, and science, Lahana's practitioner perspective explores how makerspaces can promote personalized learning and self-expression so that student passions can take on social activism. Makerspaces have shown great potential to foster powerful learning outcomes for students, including the enhancement of creative problem-solving abilities, the nurturing of "soft skills" such leadership, as well as deep STEAM knowledge development (Barton & Tan, 2017;

Blikstein, 2013). Within the traditional school context, however, little attention has been given to how makerspaces can promote social activism. Lahana details the implementation of instructional practices used to promote personalized learning, namely the presentation and framing of social issues with students, the centrality of personal choice, the curation of resources to facilitate research, and the freedom to access tools and materials for product creation. Student learning outcomes are presented, including student-produced documentaries, songs, craftwork, and art pieces. The integration of makerspaces for social activism does not come without its challenges, which Lahana also describes. He concludes with practical suggestions for using makerspaces as sites for social activism.

Collectively, the articles in this issue on personalized learning for social change describe how personalized learning can be autonomous, collaborative, and authentic, while enabling young adolescents to address today's social, economic, and environmental issues. Each article addresses teaching and learning within the context of a standards-based learning environment and provides powerful examples of how educators and students can work together in addressing inequity and injustice. Ultimately, this special issue in personalized learning for social change can serve as a guide for current teachers, prospective teachers in education programs, and educational leaders who work in standards-based learning environments and aspire to address the compelling issues of our time.

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