

Are We at Risk of Creating a One-Size-Fits-All Approach to Personalization?

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Personalized learning is all about meeting the needs of the individual learner—and new research suggests that means more than students learning on their own.

Popular education literature suggests that personalized learning often includes providing students with a customized learning plan and access to technology to enable them to learn independently and progress at their own pace. This approach to personalization addresses multiple aspects of student's learning needs, but too often emphasizes individual learning which, may limit students' opportunities to learn with others.

We are social creatures, so it's not surprising that learning scientists have found that our ability to learn has a strong social dimension. In fact, for many students, learning on their own in social isolation may not be an effective strategy for helping them learn. By equating personalized learning with individual learning, the field could be running the risk of adopting a one-size-fits-all approach to personalization that does not meet the needs of each individual learner for social support, exchange and feedback from peers.

Our new study—"Learning With Others: A Study Exploring the Relationship Between Collaboration, Personalization, and Equity"—examined the social dimension of personalized learning at four high schools that explicitly focused on personalization, offered regular opportunities for collaboration, and served a diverse student body.

The study found that opportunities for high-quality collaboration were strongly and positively related to students' perceptions of the classroom environment, particularly personalization. In other words, students with more opportunities for high-quality collaboration were more likely to report that their individual learning needs were being met.

What Do We Mean by High-Quality Collaboration?

The study identified a set of structural and dynamic elements associated with high-quality collaboration. Structural quality refers to those aspects of collaborative opportunities that are planned in advance by educators, such as the design of activities or the intentional composition of collaborative groups. Dynamic quality refers to those aspects of collaborative opportunities that are realized in real time as students engage in a collaborative task, interact with their peers, and respond to teacher facilitation strategies.

The study found that structural and dynamic features of high-quality collaboration were highly interrelated, and that students' reports of experiences with these features were associated with a range of positive benefits.

Elements of High-Quality Collaboration

Structural Quality Elements

- Student-centered, culturally responsive activities
- Activity requires group interdependence
- Balanced group composition
- Group norms and task clarity

Dynamic Quality Elements

- Responsive, respectful, and inclusive interactions
- Constructive exchange
- Shared leadership and decisionmaking

Collaboration: A Key Ingredient in Personalizing Learning

Although many educators might view personalization and collaboration as mutually exclusive approaches, our study's results point to the critical links between collaboration and students' perceptions of personalization. When we examined the relationships between these factors, we found that not only was high-quality collaboration strongly and positively associated with perceptions of personalization, but students' perceptions of personalization were associated with positive mindsets and dispositions such as higher engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy. Students' mindsets and dispositions were positively associated with grades. In other words, collaboration, personalization, and mindsets and dispositions were closely connected to one another, creating a bridge to positive outcomes for students.

As more educators leap onto the personalization bandwagon, it is important to remember that personalized learning means more than simply students learning on their own. For some students, having the opportunity to learn with others is a key ingredient to experiencing true personalization. Schools and educators interested in meeting the personalized learning needs of students should adopt a definition of personalization that includes social learning opportunities—and recognize that opportunities for collaboration are strongly linked to students' mindsets and dispositions, such as engagement, intrinsic motivation, and self-efficacy.