

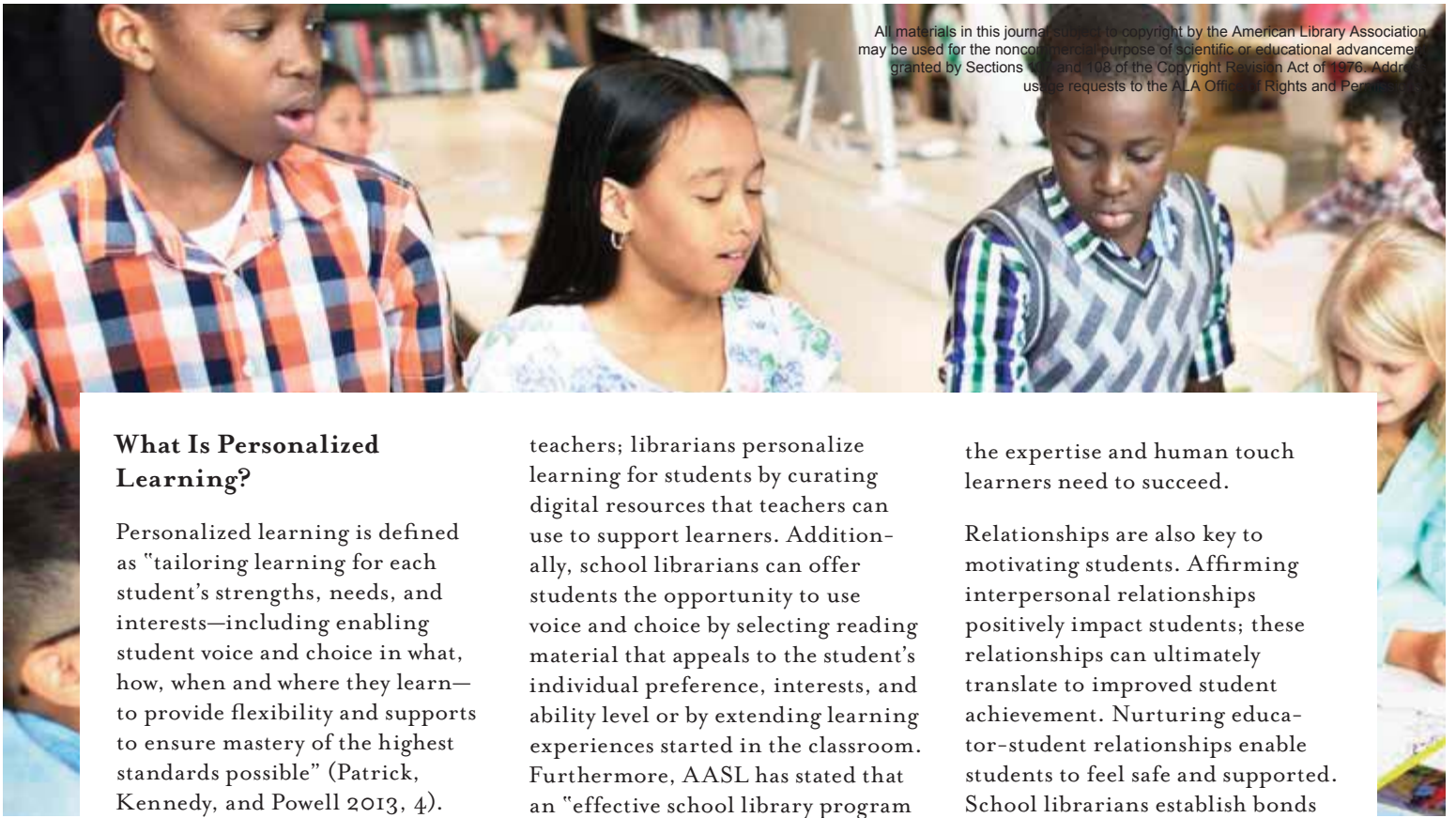
FEATURE



# Personalized Learning Environments and Effective School Library Programs

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Personalized learning offers school librarians a way to maximize learner achievement by meeting students where they are and allowing students to engage in experiences that support their learning.



## What Is Personalized Learning?

Personalized learning is defined as “tailoring learning for each student’s strengths, needs, and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible” (Patrick, Kennedy, and Powell 2013, 4). Bearing this definition in mind, a personalized learning environment should encourage learners to manage and be responsible for their own learning. Personalized learning enables students to “have agency to set their own goals for learning, create a reflective process during their journey to attain those goals, and be flexible enough to take their learning outside the confines of the traditional classroom” (Patrick, Kennedy, and Powell 2013, 4).

Personalized learning offers school librarians a way to maximize learner achievement by meeting students where they are and allowing students to engage in experiences that support their learning. The classroom teacher is important in creating an environment that supports personalized learning, but an effective school library program is critical to sustaining this type of environment. School librarians, in many instances, work with all students in the school, from every class and grade level. School librarians are uniquely positioned to support

teachers; librarians personalize learning for students by curating digital resources that teachers can use to support learners. Additionally, school librarians can offer students the opportunity to use voice and choice by selecting reading material that appeals to the student’s individual preference, interests, and ability level or by extending learning experiences started in the classroom. Furthermore, AASL has stated that an “effective school library program has a certified school librarian at the helm, provides personalized learning environments, and offers equitable access to resources to ensure a well-rounded education for every student” (AASL 2016).

The seven principles of personalized learning as followed in Fulton County (GA) Schools are: varied strategies, just-in-time direct instruction, choice and voice, mastery-based assessment, choice for demonstrating learning, flexible pacing, and co-planning learning (see figure 1).

Some educators believe personalized learning requires the use of technology, but, while technology does make the job of personalization easier in various instances, technology is not required to personalize learning. It is true, though, that adaptive software uses a series of algorithms and modifies what information is presented based on how students perform in the software. Such software can play an important role in personalized learning. However, teachers, school librarians, and other instructional staff provide

the expertise and human touch learners need to succeed.

Relationships are also key to motivating students. Affirming interpersonal relationships positively impact students; these relationships can ultimately translate to improved student achievement. Nurturing educator-student relationships enable students to feel safe and supported. School librarians establish bonds and create supportive spaces where all learners are valued, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, or ethnicity. School librarians are generally the only staff members who interact with every student in every grade level. In some instances school librarians maintain positive relationships with students over the students’ entire tenure at a school.

Scott Johns has identified four core elements of personalized learning: 1) integrated digital content, 2) student reflection and ownership, 3) data-driven decisions, and 4) targeted instruction (2016). School librarians are perfectly poised to facilitate the integration of digital content by curating digital resources that are aligned to standards and meet the needs of individual learners.

## School Librarians’ Roles in Personalized Learning

### *Expanding Traditional Roles*

In years past, school librarians have collaborated with teachers about a particular instructional unit, pulled physical books, and placed





Figure 1. Principles of personalized learning. (Fulton County Schools n.d.) Reprinted with permission.

them on carts. Students would then visit the space, the school library, to use the resources, or the cart might be rolled down the hall to the classroom. Fast-forward to today's personalized learning environment in which students aren't bound by time or space; they no longer have to come into the library to find resources to support their learning. Information can be accessed on their mobile devices from anywhere at any time.

Today each student might have a different topic of study; as a result, the expertise of the school librarian is needed now more than ever. Personalized learning environments need curated digital resources, not only to support research projects but also to serve as integrated digital content. School

librarians are particularly skilled at evaluating resources. This skill can be extended to the evaluation of digital content that supports learners beyond electronic books and databases. School librarians can assist teachers and other instructional staff by selecting resources in various content areas and reviewing adaptive software, productivity tools, virtual simulations, and other digital resources. School librarians can help locate and vet digital resources that enable learners to meet learning standards.

### *Supporting Choice and Voice*

An essential part of personalized learning is learner voice, and research has shown that learner voice contributes to learner agency. Eric Toshalis and Michael J. Nakkula

created their own spectrum (see figure 2) that illustrates a range of student-voice activities that can move from expression, consultation, participation, partnership, activism, to leadership. "Moving from left to right [in the spectrum], increasing levels of self-determination give rise to greater integration of the students' own sense of purpose and desire with what may be required of them by outside forces" (2012, 10). As a learner shifts from expression to leadership, the learner has a voice to effect real change and take on decision-making roles (Toshalis and Nakkula 2012).

The goal of school library programs should be to foster instructional experiences that encourage learner-voice activities on the leadership end of the spectrum. These types

of activities allow learners to serve as leaders and to identify and solve real-world problems both in and out of school.

The opportunity for learners to participate in the activities on the right side of the spectrum is necessary and should be viewed as invaluable. Learners' ability to express themselves is important, particularly in a personalized learning environment. If learners are writing and publishing their own work and creating webpages, the students are growing. Extended opportunities to conduct research on a problem a student deems as important, gather community input, and lead and direct action on the issue move the student to the right end of the spectrum. School librarians facilitate these types of instructional activities regularly and should continue to do so to remain viable in personalized learning environments.

Choice and voice allow learners to take an active role in their learning. Learners are empowered to decide how and what they learn.

For example, some learners may appreciate learning about a topic through video or visual representations as opposed to reading text. School librarians have been and are experts at curating video content. They can empower teachers by assisting them in incorporating and building pathways for learners to choose information resources based on learners' own learning preferences. Providing content in various formats and empowering teachers to provide this choice to students is what powers personalized learning. Ultimately, this personalization positively influences academic achievement because learners feel more engaged in the learning process. One example of a content provider school librarians might consider in support of personalized learning is Discovery Education, a company that offers virtual labs, interactive games, and multimedia resources aligned to standards. Safari Montage offers videos that will help learners. Additionally, Gale offers e-books and articles presented at various Lexile levels to meet the varied needs of learners.

Barbary Bray and Kathleen McClaskey developed the Continuum of Choice, which presents a continuum on which learners move from teacher-centered on the left end of the continuum to learner-driven on the right. Learners develop agency through choice, going from participant, codesigner, designer, and advocate to, ultimately, entrepreneur. On the entrepreneurial end of the continuum a learner "self-regulates, adjusts, and determines learning based on what they want to do with their lives. They take their ideas and passion to pursue an idea and possibly to create a business" (Bray and McClaskey 2015). School librarians can support learners at any point on this continuum by providing resources such as multimedia content, making connections with experts outside of school for internships, and providing research strategies and access to information that enables all learners to move freely along the Continuum of Choice.

## The spectrum of voice oriented activity

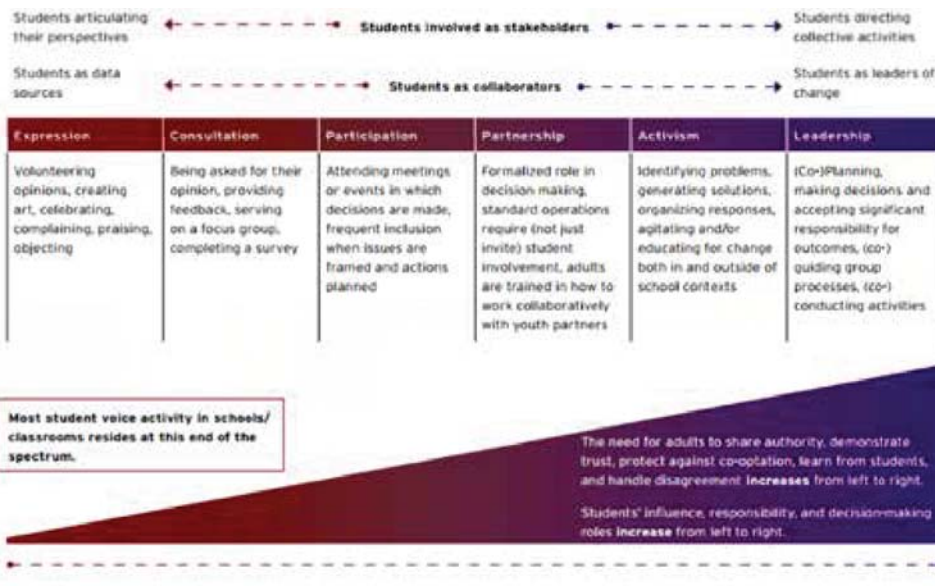


Figure 2. Toshalis and Nakkula's spectrum of student voice-related activities. (2012) Reprinted with permission.



Further supporting choice and voice are school librarians' efforts to impact the new digital divide: "the disparity between students who use technology to create, design, build, explore and collaborate and those who use technology to consume media passively (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 2016, 18). Promoting choice and presenting options for learners to actively use technology should be evident in effective school library programs. Coding, immersive simulation, media production, interaction with experts, global connections, designing, and peer collaborations are all activities that can be provided as choices for self-directed learners (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 2016). Many school library programs already offer several of these types of instructional experiences, from student-produced news programs to afterschool coding and Skype visits with authors from around the world.

### *Providing Just-in-Time Instruction*

Just-in-time direct instruction requires providing instruction for the learner even in instances when the learner may not physically be present in school. School librarians can provide direct instruction to learners on a variety of subjects. Additionally, school librarians can support teachers who wish to build lessons for just-in-time instruction. This support may take the form of offering professional learning about various software applications that enable teachers to provide just-in-time instruction, such as Microsoft Sway, Office Mix, Screencast-O-Matic, Google Docs, Prezi, iMovie, PowerPoint, Keynote, or other presentation and video tools.

School librarians can also develop step-by-step tutorials for both learners and instructional staff. For example, these tutorials might cover how to search for information in the

school's databases or provide information on how to create a podcast. This instruction aligns with Section 2: Teaching with Technology in *Future Ready Learning: Reimagining the Role of Technology in Education*. "Educators will be supported by technology that connects them to people, data, content, resources, expertise, and learning experiences that can empower and inspire them to provide more effective teaching for all learners" (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 2016, 25). Just-in-time instruction provides opportunities for learners to actively construct new knowledge, a key element in personalized learning environments.

### *Building a Strong E-Collection*

The foundation of a school library program is its collection. Print and electronic books are the cornerstone of this collection. A crucial component of personalized learning is availability of resources anytime, anywhere. E-book platforms make this accessibility possible and empower the school library to offer a more-personalized experience for learners. This personalization may be accomplished by allowing learners to search for material by Lexile level, reading grade or interest level, keyword, author, topic, or genre. Many e-book platforms available in today's marketplace may fit this need. The Gale Virtual Reference Library, OverDrive, and MackinVIA are a few examples of comprehensive e-book platforms that provide choice in support of librarians' efforts to foster learners' passion for reading. This passion results in higher levels of academic achievement.

Access to a strong collection enables students to exercise choice and discover topics of interest to them, material on their reading level, and authors and subjects that appeal to them. Think about the various learning styles—some learners are auditory, while others are visual or kinesthetic learners. Learners now have the power to choose between print, audio, or electronic books, or books with embedded multimedia. The combined experience of listening and reading offers students who are reading below grade level a chance to interact with grade-level texts without concerns about fluency or decoding issues (Dalton 2014). This combined experience is a major benefit that e-books can provide struggling readers. Other e-book features offer an even more-personalized reading experience for learners, who can, for example, highlight and take notes within the e-book, and access embedded multimedia with graphics, animation, and video, plus pronunciation clips and/or language translation. This rich set of options ultimately supports learners as they build their vocabularies and strengthen their reading comprehension skills.

Personalized reading lists can be an important element in personalized learning. Software tools, such as Your Next 5 (YN5), allow readers to complete a web-based form that outlines their preferences and then provides the reader with a curated list of suggested titles for their next read (five additional titles). Librarians curate these lists based on the preferences and interests indicated by the reader (Bass 2014).

## **Just-in-time instruction provides opportunities for learners to actively construct new knowledge, a key element in personalized learning environments.**





1. SEATING



2. FLEXIBLE FURNISHINGS



3. INNOVATION SPACE/TIME



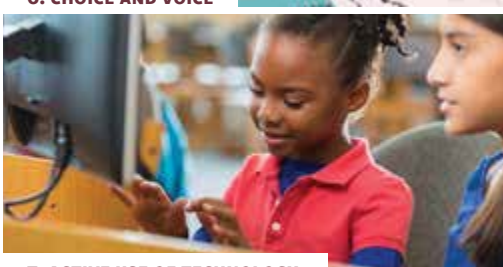
4. VIRTUAL COLLECTION



5. MOBILE DEVICES



6. CHOICE AND VOICE



7. ACTIVE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Though the YN5 readers' advisory service is offered as a public library program, it could have immense value if implemented in some fashion in a personalized learning school environment. Think of the power of taking a student's interest in a particular topic, genre, or author and then using the student's reading level to curate a list of recommended titles for the student. Certainly, logistical details would have to be addressed. Though most public school libraries do not have the luxury of a large staff, creative thinking may yield viable alternatives, such as enlisting volunteers, parents, and teachers to research titles. Another strategy could be to use the advanced search features in an online library database and interface such as Destiny to select titles on a student's targeted grade or Lexile level. These personalized reading lists support personalized learning and help improve students' reading skills.

### *Creating a Supportive Physical and Virtual Library Space*

Creating spaces that support personalized learning is essential so that the physical library space strengthens this approach to learning. Fulton County Schools took on an ambitious project to transform all high school libraries to support personalized learning. Primary aspects of the renovations were decided by local school teams in collaboration with district personnel and an architectural firm. Several brainstorming sessions were held, and input was gathered from the schools' instructional staff, administrative team, parents, and students. The end results were astonishing as school libraries were transformed to incorporate flexible and mobile furnishings, collaborative group spaces, chairs and tables with integrated power for charging mobile devices, and a blending of

both print and digital library collections. The physical spaces promote learner agency as learners are now empowered to select how best to use the space to meet their learning needs.

Here are seven ways to adapt your school library to promote personalized learning.

- 1. Seating**—Provide multiple types of seating for learners, and then let them choose what works best for them. Provide couches, individual chairs, chairs in nooks, collaborative tables, and traditional table-and-chair sets. Allow learners to decide if they want to learn independently, sit next to a shelf of books, read a print book, or plug in a device and charge while reading an e-book or content in an online database.
- 2. Flexible furnishings**—Opt to use mobile and lightweight furnishings so they can be moved by anyone as the need arises. Do away with heavy wooden tables and select lightweight tables with wheels and integrated power outlets. Other good choices are chairs with integrated power outlets and tray tables that can accommodate left- or right-handed learners. In our renovated libraries power is supplied via outlets in the floor. If you are in an older space you may want to consider making power available from the ceiling. Multiple power options allow you to run electrical conduits across the ceiling and have power cables that can be lowered and retracted as needed. Set up areas with monitors that allow learners to plug their mobile devices into larger displays. This use of larger displays encourages learner collaboration.
- 3. Innovation space/time**—Provide all of the ingredi-

ents necessary for learners to innovate. This goal could be accomplished with a makerspace or STEM robotics lab. Additionally, allow learners the time to research or create whatever interests them. In 1731 Benjamin Franklin helped to establish the first lending library in the British colonies, and it was there that some of his first experiments with electricity were performed (Library Company of Philadelphia 2015). There is, after all, a history of combining innovation and libraries!

4. **Virtual collection**—Provide a diverse collection of e-books on a range of topics for various reading levels and across multiple genres. Additionally, provide learners with access to reliable online information such as the authoritative reference material found in the Gale in Context databases.
5. **Mobile devices**—Procure a variety of mobile devices, such as iPads and other tablets, Chromebooks, and laptops, and urge learners to use the device that best fits their personal need or the task at hand. Funding can be a roadblock, but don't let it stop you. Work to involve your local parent-teacher association, approach corporations in your community for sponsorship, or apply for grants.
6. **Choice and voice**—Allow students to identify topics that matter to them and encourage students to structure their own end-products. Help teachers create instructional experiences that move learners toward the leadership end of the learner-voice activities spectrum.
7. **Active use of technology**—Promote active—not just receptive—use of technology.

Provide opportunities for students to code, create, collaborate, produce media, connect with the global community, and design.

## Summing Up

Effective school library programs can propel personalized learning environments in schools. Programs that support choice and voice, and just-in-time instruction promote learner agency and empower not only students but teachers as well. Transformed library spaces, virtual collections featuring e-books and high-quality online databases, as well as curated multimedia and digital resources, promote learner agency and are essential to creating effective school library programs in personalized learning environments.



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of the Georgia Library Media Association. She serves as a member of the Southeast Regional Advisory Committee of the United States Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education and a member of the Georgia Department of Education's Education of the Whole Child Committee (ESSA implementation). Michelle has presented at the Redefining Learning Conference, AASL National Conference, Georgia Educational Technology Conference, and the Georgia Library Media Association Summer Institute. With Marie Yelvington, she coauthored the article "What's in a Name?" for the June 2015 issue of *Teacher Librarian* and hosted "The Power of eBooks in a Personalized Learning Environment" for *EdWeb* in May 2016.

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