# Perceptions of Leading and Supporting School and District Leaders Through a Personalized Learning Initiative in the Southeastern United States

**ACCEPTANCE**

This dissertation, PERCEPTIONS OF LEADING AND SUPPORTING SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS THROUGH A PERSONALIZAED LEARNING INIITATIVE IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES, by CHRISTIAN S. L. PADGETT, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

_____
Nicholas J. Sauers, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

_____
James Kahrs, Ed.D.
Committee Member

_____
Susan Ogletree, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Date

_____
Jennifer Esposito, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Department of Educational Policy Studies

_____
Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.
Dean
College of Education & Human Development

## AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

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Christian Stephen Leonard Padgett
Department of Educational Policy Studies
College of Education & Human Development
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA 30303

The director of this dissertation is:

Nicholas J. Sauers, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Policy Studies
College of Education and Human Development
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA 30303

# CURRICULUM VITAE

Christian S. L. Padgett

ADDRESS: 2151 Cumberland Parkway SE
Apt. 214
Atlanta, GA 30339

EDUCATION:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Ed.D. | 2021 | Georgia State University<br>Educational Policy Studies |
| Ed.S. | 2017 | Georgia State University<br>Educational Policy Studies |
| M.Ed. | 2015 | Georgia State University<br>Elementary Education |
| B.S.Ed. | 2012 | Georgia State University<br>Early Childhood Education |

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

| | |
|---|---|
| 2019-Present | Assistant Principal<br>Atlanta Public Schools |
| 2017-2019 | School Improvement Coach-Mathematics<br>Fulton County Schools |
| 2015-2017 | Instructional Technology Co-Teach/Coach/STEM<br>Fulton County Schools |
| 2012-2015 | Teacher<br>Fulton County Schools |

# PERCEPTIONS OF LEADING AND SUPPORTING SCHOOL AND DISTRICT LEADERS THROUGH A PERSONALIZAED LEARNING INIITIATIVE IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

by

CHRISTIAN S. L. PADGETT

Under the Direction of Nicholas J. Sauers, Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

*Background:* Student achievement through standardized assessments have measured how students are performing in school. According to sources of data, there is an achievement gap that occurs with many subgroups including students of color, with disabilities, as well as socioeconomic status. As a result, personalized learning was conceptualized to help meet students' individual needs and interests to increase student achievement outcomes.

*Purpose:* The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain a greater understanding of personalized learning implementation based on the perspectives of those who have been involved in the process.

*Literature Review:* The literature review is a synthesis of the history and politics of student achievement in the K-12 public educational setting, provides an overview of personalized learning, examines the theoretical framework of instructional leadership as well as leading personalized learning.

*Research Design:* To help address the essence of personalized learning and to gain a deeper understanding of this qualitative research study, a case study was utilized.

*Data Collection and Analysis:* Semi-structured interviews with 9 participants and an analysis of the themes was used to gain a greater understanding of the effects of implementation of personalized learning.

*Results:* Based on the interviews with teachers, district leaders, and school leaders, several themes emerged after analyzing the data gathered. The three themes were identified as: implementation impacted outcomes; monitoring influenced implementation and outcomes; and prioritization of personalized learning varied.

*Conclusion:* As school and district leaders consider adopting personalized learning, or even other instructional initiatives, creating a level of uniformity with implementation and defining how the initiative will be monitored are recommendations that should be considered. Additionally, future research is needed to help school and district leaders understand the successes and challenges of implementing personalized learning.

INDEX WORDS: Personalized learning, Student achievement, Instructional leadership, Technology, Instruction, Needs, Interests, Accountability

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CHRISTIAN S. L. PADGETT

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education and Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2021

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the educators who strive each day to operate in their passion and calling. This is for the educator who is not just talking about the great things they do; but, truly embodies what it means to serve others, who makes sure quality instruction is met at the forefront of everything they do. Most importantly, this body of work is dedicated to those who make sure students learn to the rigor of standards and expectations. To these educators, I thank you!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are a few people I have to acknowledge. Completing this dissertation has been nothing short of a process. The first people I must thank are the participants of this study. Your voices have been heard. Thank you for being willing to speak about your journey with the readers of this dissertation. Moreover, thank you for the hard work you do each day to ensure students learn.

Another important group I need to thank includes my dissertation committee. Thank you for your patience and feedback. Special recognition goes to Dr. Sauers for working with me on this process since the first semester of the doctoral program. You helped me refine my ideas consistently, provided insight based on my comprehensive exams, and, more importantly, encouraged me to finish this process. I can truly see the light at the end of the tunnel. Also, shout out to the members of Cohort VII as we have started this journey together! We have endured so much professionally and personally, and we have all become a support system for one another.

Deanna, Chanel, Zack, Staci, Chris, Chanel, Earleana, Iris, Myrna, my "Delegation," and Andrew, thank each of you for your support in this process. You have been with me through revisions, listening to my rants about my frustrations, getting me to relax, and most importantly, just being awesome friends. I also need to acknowledge my old co-workers of Brookview Elementary as they were with me when I started this journey. As an instructional coach, they did as I always asked and made my job enjoyable, which took stress off my plate. I broke one of the "rules" of the program and started a new job as an assistant principal. To the staff of Benteen Elementary, thank you for your constant embrace as a new member of the family. This incredible group of teachers and staff helped ensure that my transition to the school was smooth and honestly made each day coming in worth it. To see a majority of staff members excited to work and do right by children warms my heart. A special shout-out goes to Aiesha, Gerard, Lorraine, Lenice, Chanel F., Princess, and Samuel for truly making my job worthwhile each day and being a support system in the building as well as outside of it.

To one person that has been with me for the majority of this journey, thank you. You have dealt with late nights, early mornings, long days, the joys, and the challenges that arose during this process. You have shown me how this is not that bad, helped me understand different perspectives, and even have made several phone calls to help me with the IRB process. You have been selfless as I have had to take time away to focus on this part of the journey. Know that I appreciate you, and despite what life may bring our way, my gratitude is great for you.

Lastly, to the most important person in my life, my mother. If you know me, I often call her "Nancy." She asks why I call her by her name, and I tell her because "That's what Margie and Napoleon named you." But in all seriousness, you are indeed the most selfless person I know. You have made so many sacrifices for me, and even as an adult, you still do, and I do not even know them to this day. I will never be a mother, but you are the essence of what it means to be one. Know there are not enough words to describe my love for you

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

A common goal for a school and school district is to continuously improve their instructional practices to help ensure all students can learn (Tomlinson, 2017). According to the Center on Reinventing Public Education (DeArmond & Maas, 2018), many stakeholders pay attention to quantitative measures to ensure students are successful. This comes from looking at data sources ranging from school report cards to standardized test results. Based on the results from the aforementioned items, school districts began to implement personalized learning to impact student achievement. According to one assistant principal in Chicago, the purpose of this was to help ensure all students, regardless of academic, socioeconomic, or racial backgrounds, can learn and achieve (Hatoum, 2019). While the district and school leaders' intended to ensure the academic success of all students, this study aims to examine the perceptions and outcomes of personalized learning implementation from various perspectives from school leaders.

## Statement of the Problem

In Georgia, high school graduation rates have shown a steady increase from year to year since 2012. For example, in 2012, Georgia's average graduation rate was 69.7 percent (Georgia Department of Education, 2018). By September 2018, the State Department of Education had a reported graduation rate of 81.6 percent. While the amount of students who graduate continues to increase, there are still at least 18 percent of students who have not graduated on time. Even though there are over 500,000 students enrolled in high school across the state, more than 90,000 do not graduate in four years. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), the current dropout rate is estimated to be 5.4 percent. The rate has nearly doubled for American

Indians, 10.1 percent. For Blacks and Hispanics, the rate is slightly higher than the national average of 6.5 and 8.2 percent, respectively.

Because there were so many students who did not graduate, leaders began to question what strategies could be implemented to ensure students the success of these students. This became more important when considering the subgroups that have been historically marginalized due to race, socioeconomics, or disability (Theoharis, 2007). For many educators and stakeholders, people began to question instructional practices to ensure all students could be successful (NCLB, 2001; Race to the Top, 2009).

Some schools and districts began to implement personalized learning to help address this (Georgia's Governor Office of Student Achievement, 2016; Haoum, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This approach was designed to meet the student's academic needs and interests, to help increase motivation (Grant & Basye, 2014), which ultimately was meant to have an indirect improvement on student achievement (ESSA, 2015).

**Research Questions**

The following research questions will be used to guide this study:

1. What challenges and successes were perceived in the implementation of personalized learning?
2. What instructional leadership behaviors helped or hindered the implementation of personalized learning?

**Purpose**

Through continuous improvement of instructional practices, student achievement should increase (Rigby et al., 2017). Rigby et al. (2017) also noted the importance of coherence in instructional programming could produce greater gains for student achievement as well as a

common instructional framework. Legislation has helped increase the focus for continuous improvement through The Improving America's Education Act (1994), No Child Left Behind (2001), Race to the Top (2009), as well as the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). As a result, personalized learning was implemented by school districts in order to ensure all students can learn and to improve student achievement (The National Education Technology Plan, 2017). Patrick et al. (2016) described the impact of personalized learning through accountability measures such as grade level proficiency and graduation rates.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight based on the perspectives of a personalized learning initiative through the lens of school and district leaders from the southeastern United States. The goal is to understand the range of perspectives from district leaders to school leaders and public school teachers who are on the frontline, providing the delivery of personalized learning. From this study, common themes were identified from interviews with school and district leaders and teachers. With the information from this study, one implication is to provide schools and districts more information about personalized learning, including a common definition, and provide more information about the implementation process. Furthermore, this study aimed to ensure more research is provided to help improve instructional practices for student learning from a leadership and teacher perspective.

**Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study was to provide more research in a field that has limited work on personalized learning, particularly, for leaders to help develop and sustain initiatives in the K-12 setting (Lokey-Vega & Stephens, 2019). Additionally, this study aided in the research by defining a clear and concise definition of personalized learning. Based on the research of Bingham et al. (2018), the U.S. Department of Education (2017), and Lokey-Vega & Stephens

(2019), there are a variety of inconsistent definitions; thus creating an unclear understanding of how to best define personalized learning. For example, John Spencer, a professor at George Fox University, worked with several districts that implemented Genius Hour, a program that promoted personalized learning (2019). Another example includes Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, California, where they defined personalized learning through student engagement (Ferlazzo, 2019).

**Assumptions and Limitations**

This study was a qualitative case study. As a result, some assumptions can be made about this case. One assumption includes a focus on process. Additionally, another assumption includes the researcher as the main instrument for data collection and data analysis (Atieno, 2009). A case study is also descriptive in process, meaning, and understanding from words and pictures (Atieno, 2009). Atieno (2009) also noted that setting influences human behavior. This is important as the research that should be conducted within the setting of the study.

Additionally, Atieno (2009) noted several limitations of qualitative research. One of the major disadvantages of qualitative research includes the finding cannot be the assumption of the overall population. Typically, the sample size in a qualitative study is not representative of the population size. Another limitation of qualitative research is the ambiguities within human language (Atieno, 2009). Queiros, Faria, & Almeida (2017) mention that it is also "difficult to establish a cause-effect connection to reach conclusions." A final limitation that Queiros et al. (2017) mention is that interviews can be time-consuming.

It is important to note that this study occurred during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, multiple participants worked from home or worked in environments that caused them to be isolated from others. For safety reasons, interviews took place virtually instead

of in person. This thus posed another limitation to this study. According to Creswell (2013), non-face-to-face interviews do not always provide nonverbal or informal communication that occurs when speaking to someone in person (p. 164).

**Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain insight based on the perspectives of a personalized learning initiative through the lens of school and district leaders from the southeastern United States. First, definitions of some commonly referenced terms will be defined. Then a review of the literature, chapter 2, focuses on the history and politics of student achievement in the United States, personalized learning, and instructional leadership. Chapter 3 focuses on the theoretical framework of instructional leadership, the participants, the settings in which they work, the data collection process, as well as the data analysis process. Chapter 4 describes in detail the findings of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion, implications, and conclusion to the study.

**Definitions**

The following terms are defined to give more context to this study:

***Personalized learning*** refers to an instructional model in which a student's needs and interests are met academically based on instructional strategies and learning environments. This definition is based on the National Education Technology Plan (2017) as well as Grant and Basye (2014).

***Curriculum*** refers to what content a learner is being taught and how it is being taught (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995). Curriculum furthermore can include resources that help support what content a learner is being taught.

***District leaders*** refer to the leaders of a school district whose positions are not at the school level. These positons include assistant superintendent, content coordinator or specialist,

or content director, whose job is to help lead instructional practices across the district. These positions are also “at-will” and not defined by a contract.

***Instruction*** refers to the method in which content that is taught (Wiles et al., 2002).

***School leaders*** refer to include principals and assistant principals. This also includes curriculum content specialists, such as an instructional coach or a curriculum support coordinator for a school. School leaders support or manage only one school. Instructional coaches serve one school. While the duties and responsibilities can vary from school to school, these individuals still serve only one school.

# Chapter 2

## Introduction

Student achievement has been the focal point for many educators and stakeholders. For many school and district leaders, this has been an indicator of job performance (Witziers et al., 2003). Many stakeholders measure student achievement through graduation rates and standardized test scores (Bastian & Henry, 2014). Due to programs, such as Race to the Top (2009), student achievement is still measured by standardized test results. However, because of Race to the Top (2009) and now Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), many school districts created innovative practices and solutions to increase student proficiency and boost graduation rates (Tagami, 2016). For some districts, this became the rationale for personalized learning models. Student achievement has always been a clear initiative for many schools for decades. Laws such as No Child Left Behind (2001), Race to the Top (2009), Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), as well as other legislation, often use proficiency on standardized exams in core content areas of English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. To help raise proficiency and student academic growth on accountability measures, school districts started to examine instructional practices on student learning (DeArmond & Maas, 2018).

The National Education Technology Plan Update (2017) characterized personalized learning as a way to provide equity in education for learners based on instructional needs and access. There are several definitions for personalized learning. According, to the National Education Technology Plan Update, it defined personalized learning as the "pace of learning and the instructional approach are optimized for the needs of the learners," (2017, p. 9). The plan also described personalized learning as "learning activities are meaningful and relevant to learners, driven by their interests, and often self-initiated," (p. 9). Bingham, Pane, Steiner, and Hamilton

(2016, p. 459) defined personalized learning as “learning paths” where “goals, mastery, flexible learning environment” occur. Finally, personalized learning has been defined as a modality in which students drive their own learning experiences and become self-directed as well as independent learners. The ultimate goal is for students to own their learning and to be intrinsically motivated (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). Some common trends among the literature include the idea of learning experiences, interests, and, more importantly, the inconsistent definition of personalized learning. For example, Education Elements defined personalized learning as students’ learning styles, skills, and personal attitudes are taken into consideration for learning (Kim, 2015). While there was a commonality in the definition, there were still variations from multiple authors (Bray & McClaskey, 2017; Lokey-Vega & Stephens, 2019; Sota & Mahon, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). For this study, personalized learning was defined as an instructional model where students’ needs and interests are met academically based on instructional strategies and learning environments.

This literature review will focus on several themes based on research. The themes include History and Policies that Influence Student Achievement; Innovative Practice: Personalized Learning; Instructional Leadership; and Leading Personalized Learning.

**History and Policies That Influence Student Achievement in the United States**

There are certain rights states have as a result of the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (U.S. Const. amend. X). The United States Constitution is the document that explicitly states how the United States Federal Government should be organized and managed. While the Federal Government does have responsibility for collecting taxes and protecting free speech under the U.S. Constitution, education is not a responsibility listed by the Constitution. As a result, states control education. This is one of the reasons many states have varying

curriculum and standards compared to one another (Common Core State Standards, 2019). As stated previously, education is a state's right as determined by the Constitution; however, due to events over the past 60 years, the federal government has taken a more active role in influencing states' decisions, actions, and policies in regards to public education.

By the 1950s, the Soviet Union launched the first satellite. This then created paranoia and created a space race between the United and the Soviet Union (History.com Editors, 2019). As a result, the federal government began playing a more active role in education. One way included the development of the National Defense Education Act (Maher, 2016). One of the provisions of the act was a focus on core content, including mathematics and science. The intention was to prepare students to become prepared to gain skills necessary to compete with the Soviet Union in an arms and space war (Jolly, 2009).

As the years progressed towards the twenty-first century, more information began to surface about schools. In 1981, President Ronald Regan hired a commission to evaluate schools as well as factors that might affect education (Good, 2010). From this, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) was published. This document hyperbolized the decline in American Education. This is caused the legislators and other stakeholders to challenge public education (Good, 2010). The goal was to help America become a nation that would outperform other nations academically.

President William J. Clinton signed The Improving America's Schools Act about a decade later (1994). This put many of the action steps from *A Nation at Risk* (1983) in place. There were some key components in this legislation, one of which included rigorous standards for all students. Title I of the legislation provided guidance around equity and ensured all students had access to learn. According to Le Tendre (1996), this law focused on teaching and learning, created a focal point for standards, as well as statewide testing systems. Schools and

districts also had new performance-based accountability measures (Le Tendre, 1996). These focal points were made for all students. As a result of The Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, implications for future legislation were made.

By 2000, a political shift occurred. After a decade of neo-liberalism, a conservative shift entered the United States. In 2001, President George W. Bush was elected president. He helped establish, along with Congress, bipartisan legislation to bring major reform to education based on past legislation. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was created to promote student achievement for the disadvantaged, high-quality teacher preparation, and provide more accountability on schools and districts. One of the most important aspects of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was Adequate Yearly Progress. According to Levitt (2017), Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) had to be met by schools, which included students performing at an expected growth mark, including subgroups. Furthermore, it provided harsher "penalties on those schools that failed to achieve AYP in raising low-scoring students to proficiency" (p.3).

If schools failed to meet AYP for two consecutive years, students could to transfer to other higher-performing schools in the district in which they lived. However, the federal government tried to support schools by having them use Title I funding for remediation. If schools failed to continue meeting AYP consecutively, harsher consequences occurred (Mitani, 2018). For example, if schools did not meet AYP, then Title I defunding would occur. This limited the resources that could be used. If AYP was not achieved in five years, schools had to be restructured (NCLB, 2001). This created some unintentional and intentional consequences.

One of the impacts that No Child Left Behind created was the impending fear of what could happen if schools failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress expectations. Multiple superintendents in Texas reported not having adequate funding to support the mandates AYP

made for their students (Ruiz, Kelsey, & Slate, 2009). Ruiz et al. (2009) also discovered that many superintendents felt NCLB was not addressing students' needs. Due to the amount of pressure placed on leaders and educators, loss of employment and providing for their families became a reality (Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2017). Additionally, state educational agencies and charter schools could take over schools that were not meeting AYP, thus adding to the impending fear of unemployment (Childs & Russell, 2016).

Moreover, for students, this did not positively affect their educational experiences (Levitt, 2017;Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2017). Due to the rewards and consequences of the system and even bonuses attached to performance, many educators began to "teach to the test." This meant teachers only taught content and material students would be tested on (Saultz, Murphy, & Aronson, 2016). This point is also noted by Levitt (2017). As a result, schools and districts purchased a wealth of commercialized products and programs to use with students to help ensure student success on the state exams (Levitt, 2017). One of the major flaws that Levitt (2017) noted was the diversity of learners was not taken into consideration when creating or purchasing curriculum resources for instruction.

As stated previously, one of the main flaws with No Child Left Behind was funding (Ruiz et al., 2009). It did not provide adequate funding to schools where students struggled to achieve. To help in this endeavor, the United States Department of Education created a grant to be available to states to help achieve the measures of No Child Left Behind (Childs &Russell, 2016). This grant is better known as Race to the Top (2009).

Race to the Top (2009) had several goals, including improving low-performing schools. Those goals of Race to the Top (2009) can be seen listed in Table 1:

Table 1

*Goals of Race to the Top (2009)*

- Recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective staff
- Helped educators inform their instructional decisions through the implementation of data systems
- Adopt standards and assessments that align with colleges and careers
- To help students compete in a global economy.

This grant also helped to see an increase in schools as well as districts going beyond the cultural norm of teaching to the test. This grant helped to create opportunities for new students. For example, Childs and Russell (2016) noted that innovative practices could be done to help create pipelines to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM, fields.

While Race to the Top helped create funding for schools to meet the demands of AYP, there became some fear of how implementation would occur. Wieczorek and Theoharis (2016) noted in their study how teachers felt fearful of changes in evaluations as well as the implementation of Common Core State Standards. Wieczorek and Theoharis' (2016) study proved that while there were concerns, leaders made sure to balance teachers' concerns with policies mandates. As a result, they saw performance increase on standardized exams.

Even though performance increased, there still were consequences because of policies and laws enacted during this period. The federal government began to realize the effects No Child Left Behind had taken on schools, districts, communities, educators, and most importantly, students. By 2013, the United States Department of Education granted thirty-four states waivers from No Child Left Behind. This plan allowed for states to help improve student learning and the quality of instruction.

During the NCLB era, schools, districts, and states saw the importance of student learning as well as the quality of instruction. Seeing the need for reform, President Barack Obama signed into law The Every Student Succeed Act in 2015 (ESSA), which brought new requirements. Some requirements included all students being taught to the same academic standards as well as administered statewide assessments that would be used to help inform educators. This became different than the previous law in which sanctions were placed on schools or districts for not meeting AYP (Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2017; Ruiz et al., 2017). ESSA (2015) also highlighted student motivation as a factor to help ensure students learning. Motivation will be described in more detail in the personalized learning section of this literature review. It is important to note that student motivation is a driving force behind personalized learning (Keller et al., 2014).

ESSA (2015) also helped with meeting college and career readiness (Malin, Braff, & Hackmann, 2017). Malin et al. (2017) showed how college and career readiness also relate to the seven survival skills needed to order for students to compete globally (Wagner, 2008). One of the goals of Race to the Top (2009) and ESSA (2015) is for students to be able to compete globally with their peers.

The seven skills needed to survive globally are critical thinking and problem-solving; collaboration across networks and leading by influence; agility and adaptability; initiative and entrepreneurialism; effective oral and written communication; accessing and analyzing information; and curiosity and imagination (Wagner, 2008). Based on Levitt (2017), this could not occur with the era of No Child Left Behind. Levitt (2017) noted that a key component of learning was based on interests and motivation. As stated previously, if an educator taught only to the test, then the room for those seven skills needed to survive in a global society occur

minimally. Furthermore, some of these components are built in the assessment systems for Common Core State Standards (Zhang & Kang, 2017).

To help meet students' needs and to perform, many schools had to think about how they were going to do things differently to ensure all students had a chance at academic success. For this reason, many schools started to implement competency-based learning with a focus on personalized learning at the core (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). As stated previously, personalized learning was a practice many schools started to implement so every student, in particular those who historically have been marginalized, could have a chance to be successful academically (U.S. Department of Education, 2017; DeArmond & Maas, 2018).

**Innovative Practice: Personalized Learning**

According to the United States Department of Education (2018), personalized learning can be defined as the pace of learning customized for each student. The National Education Technology Plan Update (2017) stated that students' needs and interests are considered when implementing personalized learning. For this literature review, personalized learning will be defined as instructional models where students' needs and interests are met academically based on instructional strategies and learning environments.

Personalized learning includes a variety of instructional models. Instruction is often referred to as how content is taught (Wiles et al., 2002). Personalized learning focuses on how instruction will be delivered. While groups and articles have it as part of educational technology, it is still focused on instructional practices (Lokey-Vega & Stephens, 2019). The National Education Technology Plan Update (2017) has personalized learning listed in the "Learning" section. This also goes against the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2016)

definition of personalized learning. In their brief, they focused on personalized learning as technology-driven instead of instructional-driven.

The literature has also indicated there is great confusion between personalization, individualization, and differentiation. Bray and McClaskey (2017) noted some of the differences. First, differentiation and individualization start with the teacher, while the student drives personalization. Another major difference included focusing on the individual child, which is a major aspect of individualization and personalization. This differs from differentiation which focuses on a group of learners. Another key component of personalized learning includes a demonstration of mastery from a competency-based framework.

In their book Personalized Learning, Grant and Basye (2014) discussed the difference between differentiation versus personalized learning. They too defined differentiation as a way to meet groups of learners' needs. Also, they noted that personalized learning was based on students' interests, abilities, and modalities. Finally, the idea of students producing a product based on their learning is a concept discussed by Grant and Byse (2014) and not included in Bray and McClaskey (2017).

Based on the information presented, there are multiple views of personalized learning. As mentioned previously, some use the term synonymously with differentiation (Grant & Basye, 2014; Bray & McClaskey, 2017). Some also use the term interchangeably with individualization (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). Lokey-Vega and Stephens (2019) note the work of Watson and Watson (2016), who view personalizing learning as a student-centered instructional strategy. Bingham et al. (2018) and the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement see technology as a key component of personalized learning.

Depending on the framework used, one component of personalized learning is direct instruction. Chase and Klahr (2017) described the importance of direct instruction and its effect on student learning. With constructivism, students gain an understanding without explicit instruction in STEM related content areas. Because of the implications of No Child Left Behind, many schools began to focus on curriculum and instruction. Instruction was primarily delivered through direct instruction. Thompson (2006) examined schools that used this model and saw it significantly increased student performance. This further enhances the work that was noted by Chase and Klahr (2017). Additionally, Thompson helps to provide a clearer definition of direct instruction. He describes it as "programs that are highly structured, require specific student responses," and "are teacher-directed," (Thompson, 2006, p. 7). One might question how direct instruction influences personalized learning. Direct instruction answers the first part of the definition of personalized learning; meeting a student's academic needs.

Direct instruction is one aspect of personalization. However, there are other components of it as well. Another component of personalized learning is choice and voice. Both Bray and McClaskey (2017) and Grant and Basye (2014) noted this in their description of personalized learning. Sota and Mahon (2016) stated that one important aspect of choice and voice includes students understanding the established goals. Ironically, Sota and Mahon (2016) also noted that choice and voice has an impact on student motivation; but no direct impact on student achievement.

As stated before, No Child Left Behind (2001) focused on standards, and Race to the Top (2009) further enhanced this concept. While standards should be taught, personalized learning has a focus on competencies (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). Traditionally, schools utilize Carnegie

units for credits for students (Ryan & Cox, 2017). This forced students to learn content in a set amount of time.

The United States Department of Education (2011) released information about the positive benefits of competency-based learning. Because personalized learning is rooted in competency, it provides flexibility towards learning needs for students to master certain content (National Center on Time & Learning, 2011). This contradicts the way students have been taught in the past (Ryan & Cox, 2017). Traditionally, schools and districts have all students learning the same content at the same time. Based on Bray & McClaskey (2017), it is known that students have different instructional needs. Providing students the flexible pacing to learn content allows them to learn information that may be more difficult or challenging at an appropriate rate for them to master. It also allows students to move faster for concepts that are easier or more natural to them.

Although competency-based learning and personalized learning have different definitions, the terms have been used interchangeably. Because personalized learning has its roots in competency-based learning, it was essential to review its literature (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). For example, Ryan and Cox (2017) gave a detailed description of the core principles of competency-based learning and how they have evolved. Steele et al. (2014) listed three ideals for competency-based learning, including flexible pacing, personalized learning, and demonstration of mastery-based competencies. Eventually, those three components became four (Sturgis, 2016). Those four principles of competency-based learning included the demonstration of learning based on measurable learning objectives; personalized learning with support and a chance to engage in learning; multiple opportunities of and for assessments; and development of skills and dispositions needed to be successful to own their learning experiences (Sturgis, 2016).

As stated previously, personalized learning has been described as an instructional model where students' needs and interests are met academically based on instructional strategies and learning environments. Due to the research that has been presented, personalized learning has been used interchangeably with competency-based learning. Based on multiple definitions of Steele et al. (2014), Sturgis (2016), and the National Center on Time and Learning (2011), competency-based learning has been defined as flexibility in pacing and personalized learning as a component. The fundamental difference between personalized learning and competency-based learning is student interest (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). This does not occur within competency-based learning; whereas this is a core construct of personalized learning. Ultimately, the purpose of this distinction between competency-based learning and personalized learning helps address what personalized learning is and how it looks.

Another important theme that emerged from the literature was competency. According to Merriam-Webster (2019), the term competency is related to a set of skills or qualities needed to complete a task. However, as mentioned multiple times, because of programs like No Child Left Behind (2001), Race to the Top (2009), and The Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), standards became one of the main driving forces behind the learning that must occur. However, competencies seem to be a driving force within personalized learning (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). To help meet the needs of mastering standards, many schools, districts, and curriculum leaders began to focus on skills, or competencies, to help students meet the standards (McIntosh & Milam, 2016).

Personalized learning is a multi-faceted instructional approach. There are many components to it. One of the major aspects of personalized learning is having the student as the driver of their learning (United States Department of Education, 2017). It is also meeting the

students' needs and interests (Bray & McClaskey, 2017). To effectively meet the ideas of personalized learning, there are several big approaches. First, with direct instruction, the student's academic needs are met using explicit instructional strategies (Chase & Klahr, 2017). Another major aspect of personalized learning is offering students choice and voice. With choice and voice, students are given capacity and agency about how they wish to learn and even demonstrate their learning (Grant & Basye, 2014). Finally, the idea of personalized learning means students have flexibility in which the pace of instruction is adjusted.

Furthermore, the pace of learning can meet them at their specific academic levels (Ryan & Cox, 2017). The idea of competency-based learning develops. Based on Sturgis (2016), competency-based learning has its roots embedded in personalized learning and vice versa. Based on these ideas of personalized learning, while student achievement data may not always directly correlate, student motivation is impacted, thus creating a better and more productive student (Sota & Mahon, 2016).

**Instructional Leadership**

The position of the principal is vital to the function of a school, and they serve in many capacities, including the manager, political figure, human resources management, and most importantly, instructional leader (Hallinger, 2003). As mentioned previously, laws like No Child Left Behind (2001) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), as well as grants like Race to the Top (2009), have created a demand for instruction to occur at optimal levels for schools to be successful. There are several attributes for school and district leaders, in particular principals, to be effective in the role of an instructional leader (Bellibas & Liu, 2016; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Furthermore, the pace of learning can meet them at their specific academic levels (Ryan & Cox, 2017). The idea of competency-based learning develops. Based on Sturgis (2016),

competency-based learning has its roots embedded in personalized learning and vice versa. Based on these ideas of personalized learning, while student achievement data may not always directly correlate, student motivation is impacted, thus creating a better and more productive student (Sota & Mahon, 2016).

According to Bellibas & Liu (2016), instructional leadership is related to the alignment of a leader's work to the academic mission of the school. To be more specific, instructional leaders observe in classrooms consistently to provide supervision and feedback. They also work on instructional programming, provide professional development based on needs and interests, as well as collaboratively solve instructional problems. The same ideas from Bellibas & Liu (2016) can also be noted through the work of Paul Bambrick-Santoyo. In his book, *Leverage Leadership* (2012), he provided four pillars that will move instruction and, ultimately, student achievement in a building. Bambrick-Santoyo (2012, p. 10) highlights the following for leaders as methods for improved performance: data-driven instruction; observation and feedback; instructional planning; and professional development.

Based on the four ideas that Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) acknowledged as items instructional leaders do, observation and feedback have the most impact on teacher performance. Kraft and Gilmour (2016) note the strength of the observation and feedback cycle. They stated how it could help with providing a framework for classroom instruction, help develop teachers' practices, and provide teachers with actionable feedback. Before 2010, many studies have shown that instructional leadership was not focused on many principals (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). In one study, it was discovered that principals spent less than six percent of their time observing and providing effective feedback to teachers to grow their instructional practices, as well as "only

seven percent developing and delivering instructional programming," (Hornig, Klasik, & Loeb, 2010).

Neumerski (2012) notes the various roles instructional leaders can take. These roles can vary from the principal to instructional coaches and even teacher leaders. Neumerski also used Hallinger's research from the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (1982, 1990) to note the significant components of principals as instructional leaders. These include "defining the school's mission," managing the instructional program," and "promoting in a positive school learning climate," (p. 319). Furthermore, she defined teacher leadership as a position in which a person takes on school-based instructional leadership roles who are not supervisory. Neumerski even describes the role of the instructional coach from the instructional leadership lens, which includes planning, observation, modeling, and debriefing.

To add to the body of research on instructional leadership, Hallinger and Murphy (1985) conducted a study with elementary principals from one school district. In this study, three dimensions of instructional management were defined as well as attributes relating to the dimensions like Neumerski (2012):

Table 2

*Hallinger and Murphy's Dimensions of Instructional Leadership*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Define the Mission** | • Framing school goals<br>• Communicating school goals |
| **Manages Instructional Program** | • Supervising and evaluating instruction<br>• Coordinating curriculum<br>• Monitoring student progress |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Promotes School Climate** | • Protecting instructional time<br>• Promoting professional development<br>• Maintaining high visibility<br>• Providing incentives for teachers<br>• Enforcing academic standards<br>• Providing incentives for students. |

The dimensions of instructional management defined by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) are related to the literature provided by Bellibas & Liu (2016) regarding school mission and managing instructional programming. Based on Bambrick-Santoyo's (2012) work, there is a connection between his pillars and the constructs of instructional programming and school climate within Hallinger and Murphy (1985).

As the literature proves, leaders who carry out the core principles of instructional leadership have better teacher performance, and indirectly, student achievement. Historically, student achievement has been measured through state testing on content standards (Levitt, 2017). This has become one of the main justifications for school leaders to embody the tenants of instructional leadership (Bellibas & Liu, 2016). The idea of principals and other school leaders providing consistent observations and feedback based on instructional practices is new for many principals (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016). School leaders must look at various student achievement data and make instructional decisions (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). However, one major factor that can hinder instructional leaders is the ability to give feedback to content outside their expertise (Kraft & Gilmour, 2016).

Instructional leaders embody several characteristics. They evaluate and supervise instruction, define goals and mission for academic performance, provide professional development, and make instructional practices a part of the school climate (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Bellibas & Liu, 2016; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Neumerski, 2012). As stated previously, instructional leaders employ the characteristics that improve teacher performance and student achievement. Sebastian et al.(2019) described how leaders in Chicago Public Schools were rated using surveys with teachers, students, and school leaders (p. 597). The surveys measured instructional leadership behaviors as well as organizational management behaviors. The data from the surveys were compared to the achievement on the state's standardized exam. As a result of the study, school leaders who were perceived to have employed instructional leadership characteristics did yield higher gains on the state standardized exams (p. 602).

Another example of instructional leaders that increased student achievement occurred with a sample of high schools in Colorado. Xu and Liu (2016) provided an electronic questionnaire to principals who saw their ACT scores increase (p. 122). The questionnaire asked for details that principals used to increase student achievement. Monitoring student progress was one dimension of instructional leadership used (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). The principals implemented training programs, including getting students to take practice exams and reviewing the data (p. 123). Principals in this study also discussed the use of instructional strategies that would improve ACT scores with staff members. They even had staff members analyze the data from the results of practice and actual exams to determine the next steps for instructional practices (p. 123-124). Finally, the schools communicated with stakeholders about the ACT and its implications on students' futures. As a result, for three years, schools continued to see the ACT performance increase.

As the literature has highlighted, multiple studies have shown that instructional leadership has produced higher student achievement results. Another example of this occurred in the western United States (Shatzer et al., 2014). Thirty-seven elementary schools and 590 teachers completed questionnaires about their principals' leadership styles according to the dimensions of instructional leadership and transformational leadership (p. 450). These results were then compared to the state's criterion-referenced tests through the use of statistical analysis. As a result of the study, instructional leadership behaviors were found to have a stronger effect on student achievement than transformational leadership behaviors (p. 454).

For these reason, school and district leaders must understand the constructs of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). By spending time on these aspects of instructional leadership, student achievement can be impacted in a positive manner (DeArmond& Maas, 2018). DeArmond & Maas (2018) also shared the successes and challenges with implementing personalized learning. Some of the behaviors noted from leaders in DeArmond & Maas (2018 p. 3) align with the Hallinger and Murphy framework (1985). This also helps provide a framework to help approach personalized learning since various modalities of instruction are a tenant of personalized learning (United States Department of Education, 2017).

**Leading Personalized Learning**

The implementation of personalized learning has presented some challenges and successes. These challenges and successes can thus help school and district leaders understand how to implement personalized learning or any other instructional initiatives and the implications that may arise based on the implications. The following studies help provide school and district leaders insight into the implementation of personalized learning as it has been observed in a

variety of public school settings. In this section of the literature review, the importance of setting consistent expectations, the role of distributive leadership, and the question of technology's usage in personalized learning and student ownership of learning will be discussed. Moreover, a connection between instructional leadership and implementing personalized learning will be made.

DeArmond and Maas (2018) detailed two schools journeys for implementation of personalized learning. These two schools were elementary schools in various parts of the country. Discovery Elementary spent at least six months developing its mission and vision for personalized learning (p. 5). Additionally, they developed clear learning targets and used instructional coaches to create a look-for document (p.5). Finally, they used professional growth plans to help build teachers' understanding (p. 6). Another school, Enterprise Elementary, followed similar steps as Discovery Elementary; however, exemplar teachers of personalized learning were models for others (p. 7). They also enforced academic standards through project-based learning and station rotations (p. 7). These schools used some of the dimensions of instructional leadership defined by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). First, both schools defined the mission through their goals and vision. Instructional coaches also supervised and evaluated instructional practices. Lastly, both schools focused on professional development for their teachers to ensure the implementation was carried through with fidelity.

The idea of professional development became a common theme among studies where schools implemented personalized learning. In one school, a principal, Ms. Perez, used professional learning communities to enhance teachers' pedagogical knowledge of personalized learning (Grant & Basye, 2014, p. 81). Ms. Perez also continuously highlighted teachers who implemented personalized learning well in their classrooms (p. 85). To ensure personalized

learning was implemented with fidelity in one Midwestern school district, Ottawa Area Intermediate School District was very systematic with professional development. Elementary teachers had to commit to 60 hours of professional development throughout the year, while secondary educators had to commit to 120 hours (Pasatta, Hamilton, & DeDoes, 2017). The series of professional development used was immersive that focused on project-based learning and design thinking and even allowed teachers to reflect and plan for implementation.

The review of literature is overwhelming in the research that highlights that instructional leaders focus on professional development. Hallinger & Murphy (1985) does this in the dimension of promoting school climate. In all the examples listed thus far, schools and districts were intentional about the knowledge development of personalized learning. Bellibas and Liu (2016) also shared how instructional leaders focus on professional development based on needs and interests. The same is also iterated with Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) as he discussed one of the ways for improved academic performance is through professional development.

Additionally, through the implementation of personalized learning, some lessons were noted by school and district leaders. One of the lessons learned include setting consistent expectations before allowing experimentation of personalized learning to occur (DeArmond& Maas, 2018). They described the importance of setting "nonnegotiable assignments" for classroom practice (p. 8). Gross and DeArmond (2018) also found that when leaders provided teacher autonomy to implement personalized learning without systems of checks and balances to ensure there is a level of consistency school and district leaders leave "academic rigor to chance" as well as "hindered schoolwide approaches" (p. 2). Gross and DeArmond also noted that leaders, including managers and support personnel, of personalized learning saw instructional practices change and focus more on students; this was not a consistent practice across classrooms

within the same school. For this purpose, how teachers and schools define personalized learning is essential. This corresponds to the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) dimensions of instructional leadership. One of the dimensions includes defining the mission. When leaders define the mission, they must frame the goal and communicate it. Washington and Bernacki (2020) expound on this topic in greater detail. In their research, defining what personalized learning looks like in an organization can help align the monitoring tool that will be used to assess if the initiative is working and even help others understand the direction of the organization.

While the information on leading personalized learning initiatives is limited, the concept of setting consistent expectations has been noted as a result of multiple studies. Kallioo and Halverson (2020) examined schools that implemented a distributive leadership model to implement personalized learning. Through the Spillane (2006) definition of distributed leadership, leaders create the conditions for teachers and students to engage in practices. Based on Kallioo and Halverson's (2020) findings, teachers and school leaders both developed capacity in ensuring the redesign of physical spaces were used, a variety of computer programming tools were used to create a technology classroom, and redesigned the instructional time to confer with students. Again, these practices support Gross and DeArmond's (2018) study in which strong support within schools saw improved instructional changes. However, this was not always a consistent practice.

There were a few more challenges discovered based on the review of the literature. Washington and Bernacki (2020) described some challenges of leading personalized learning. Some challenges include the role of technology and the extent to which choice, voice, and student ownership are implemented. The role of technology has been debated multiple times with the implementation of personalized learning (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Georgia Governor's

Office of Student Achievement, 2016). Previously, in the literature review, the idea of students' needs and interests was discussed. Halverson (2019) provided definitions for leaders to help them understand the student's needs and interests. Halverson (2019) defined student needs as educators determining the goal of learning. Halverson (2019) also described student interests as the student determining the goal of learning. This idea is also connected to the previous discussion of personalization versus individualization; personalized learning has the student as the driver of learning (Bray and McClaskey, 2017; Grant and Byse, 2014; U.S. Department of Education). This is also important as the extent to which students have choice and voice may hinder their academic needs from being met, which is the purpose behind implementing personalized learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

As mentioned previously, the successes and challenges with implementing personalized learning are important for school and district leaders. Based on the literature review, there are some next steps leaders need to consider when implementing personalized learning. Again, defining what personalized learning is and looks like to the organization is critical (Washington & Bernacki, 2020; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Additionally, Washington and Bernacki (2020) share the importance of collecting more classroom observational data when implementing personalized learning and comparing it to non-personalized instruction. This lends itself back to the instructional leadership frame of supervising and evaluating instruction (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; Numerski, 2012).

**Conclusion**

This review of the literature provided a historical context of federal policies that have influenced improvement in education, the implications of those policies, and the innovation of personalized learning to help see student achievement increase. Once the literature review of

personalized learning was discussed, instructional leadership was then examined and related to the research on personalized learning. Finally, a review of the literature on leading personalized learning was examined.

The literature on federal policies was extensive and helps provide clarity around how student achievement became a focal point for schools and districts across the United States. These policies include the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the Improving America Education Act of 1994, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Race to the Top Grant of 2009, and ESSA 2015. Each of these policies helps to produce the importance of student achievement through standards and eventually through assessments. These assessments showed that students, particularly those of various subgroups, were still not at the same achievement levels as their white or higher socioeconomic counterparts (Ruiz et al., 2017; Theoharis, 2007).

Due to the Race to the Top Grant (2009) and ESSA (2015) as well as the U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Technology Plan (2017), personalized learning was an innovative practice that schools and districts began to implement to ensure students were learning. Based on the review of the literature, the definition of personalized learning was explained from multiple lenses (Grant & Basye, 2014; Bray & McClaskey, 201; Lokey-Vega & Stephens, 2019). From the definitions of personalized learning, the concepts of choice, voice, direct instruction, and competency-based instruction were reviewed based on the existing literature.

The concept of personalized learning is an instructional initiative that allowed for a review of instructional leadership to be examined. Based on the research, there were some common practices instructional leaders exhibit: managing curriculum, providing professional development, supervising instruction, providing feedback, and using data to inform instructional

practices (Neumerski, 2012; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Kraft & Gilmour, 2016; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012). A connection was made between the literature on personalized learning and instructional leadership, as personalized learning was an instructional initiative implemented. Because personalized learning was an instructional initiative, the dimensions of instructional leadership must be exhibited by school and district leaders for successful implementation (DeArmond & Mass, 2018).

Lastly, the review of literature examined leading personalized learning. While the number of articles existing for leading personalized learning was limited, there was still vital information for school and district leaders. Based on the articles, the implications for school and district leaders' included having clear expectations of what personalized learning is and how it will look once implemented in schools and classrooms (DeArmond& Maas, 2018). The use of technology was described in detail in the review of the literature. Lastly, the use of data was described to help make instructional decisions (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Washington & Bernacki, 2020).

This review of the literature describes the federal policies that influenced student achievement, providing details about personalized learning and instructional leadership and how it influences the implementation of personalized learning. Additionally, the literature review describes leaders' experiences and implications for the implementation of personalized learning.

# Chapter 3

## Theoretical Framework

Leadership takes many forms. For this study, instructional leadership was the framework used to examine school and district leaders' perceptions of personalized learning. Hallinger (2003) noted that principals serve multiple roles, including political figures, managers, and, most importantly, instructional leaders. Bellibas & Liu (2016) highlight the importance of instructional leaders focusing on the school's academic mission. Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) and Bellibas & Liu (2016) also note the importance of observation, feedback, and professional development. Kraft & Gilmour (2016) also note the importance of the observation and feedback cycle.

Specifically for this study, instructional leadership was defined using the constructs of Hallinger and Murphy (1982). The dimensions and constructs of instructional leadership are included below in Table 3:

Table 3

*Hallinger and Murphy's Dimensions of Instructional Leadership*

| | |
|---|---|
| **Define the Mission** | • Framing school goals<br>• Communicating school goals |
| **Manages Instructional Program** | • Supervising and evaluating instruction<br>• Coordinating curriculum<br>• Monitoring student progress |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Promotes School Climate** | • Protecting instructional time<br>• Promoting professional development<br>• Maintaining high visibility<br>• Providing incentives for teachers<br>• Enforcing academic standards<br>• Providing incentives for students. |

This study sought to examine personalized learning from an instructional leadership lens. For this study, as outlined in the literature review, personalized learning is defined as instructional models where students' needs and interests are met academically based on instructional strategies and learning environments (Grant & Basye, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2017.). Since personalized learning is an instructional model, this study sought to examine the perceptions of how school and district leaders implemented personalized learning from the southeastern United States. As stated in the previous paragraph, defining the mission, managing instructional programming, and promoting school climate were the dimensions examined in this study.

Ultimately, this study used the tenants of personalized learning and the dimensions of instructional leadership to address the research questions. The research questions for this study are:

1. What challenges and successes were perceived in the implementation of personalized learning?

2. What instructional leadership behaviors helped or hindered the implementation of personalized learning?

**Research Design**

For this study, a qualitative methodology was used. According to Yin (2009), a qualitative study should be used when a phenomenon needs to be examined within its real-life context. Creswell (2013) also stated that the purpose of qualitative research is to examine a data sample in the natural setting and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive. Furthermore, this study focused on participants' perspectives (Hatch, 2002; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). More specifically, for the research design, a case study was employed.

Based on Creswell's (2013) characteristics of a case study, it is an in-depth description of a case or multiple cases. It is important to note that Creswell's (2013) case study description is based on Yin's (2009) definition of a case study. The purpose of this study is to understand how personalized learning met or did not meet its intended goals based on the perspectives of educators at both the school and district level from the southeastern United States. Additionally, this study was designed to understand an event: personalized learning implementation, with multiple stakeholders, including central office staff members, school leadership, and teachers from the southeastern United States. This also relates to the theoretical framework of instructional leadership (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985) since the core tenants include school goals as well as managing instructional programming. Finally, this study will provide a detailed analysis of the case.

While there are various types of case studies, a single instrumental case study was used. The single instrumental case examined school leaders, district leaders, and teachers' perceptions of personalized learning implementation to understand how and if it worked. According to Yin

(2017), when an explanation of "how" or "why" something works or the lack thereof, a case study should be used. Merriam (1998) describes a case study as a participant's testimony that helps build patterns of understanding and insight. To help develop insight into schools' implementation process of personalized learning, interviews were conducted with varying staff members of public school districts from the southeastern United States. These interviews address the how and why of implementation of personalized learning, which is the essence of the research questions guiding this study. This also helped gain a better understanding based on the participants' own experiences and see how the experiences related to the various individuals participating in the study (Merriam, 1998).

**Participants**

To increase the data saturation and give richer context to aid in the explanation of the research questions, purposeful sampling was used (Suri, 2011). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), purposeful sampling involves selecting individuals that are knowledgeable about an experience.

The participants of the study have implemented personalized learning, at minimum, three years. Participants came from a variety of districts and organizations. The National Center for Education Statistics (2006) provides characteristics about school districts' classification based on size. For example, some of the school districts participants are from a large suburban school district. This is due to the fact it is outside a principal city and inside an urbanized area with a population of over 250,000. However, there are participants who come from smaller school districts as well as other organizations.

The use of the following roles of educators gave richer information for an analysis of the data. The table below, Table 4, describes the sample positions and criteria for the study.

Table 4

*Participation Criteria*

| Position | Criteria |
|---|---|
| **District and School Leaders**<br>• Assistant/ Associate Superintendent<br>• Principals/Assistant Principals | • Must have been employed with a district implementing personalized learning during the 2017-2018 school year.<br>• Must manage or support core instruction or instructional programming at the school or district level.<br>• Must manage or support a public school or district. |
| **District and School Curricular and Instructional Support**<br>• Core Content Specialist/Coordinators/ Directors<br>• Curriculum Support Specialist or Instructional Coach at the school level | • Must have been employed with a district or organization implementing personalized learning during the 2017-2018 school year.<br>• Must support a public school or district<br>• Must have manage or support core instruction or instructional programming at the school level or district level<br>• District and school leaders' recommendations |
| **Teachers** | • Must have been employed with a district or organization implementing personalized learning during the 2017-2018 school year.<br>• Must teach in a public school<br>• Must teach a core content area<br>• District or school leaders' recommendations |

Purposeful sampling allows for more specific criteria used to justify participation in the study (Robinson, 2014). This process allowed the purpose of the study to occur: to gain a deeper understanding of a personalized learning initiative from multiple perspectives. This process also helped answer the research questions of the study.

Additionally, core content areas teachers, which includes those who teach mathematics, science, social studies, English/ language arts, and support staff, were interviewed. The reason for this is due to state assessments and accountability measures that assess these areas for student achievement (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015, Improving America's Education Act, 1994, No Child Left Behind, 2001, Race to the Top, 2009). Historically, *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and the National Defense Education Act (1958) also made these content areas necessary to teach and assess.

Change takes at least three to five years (Thomas et al., 2007). For this reason, the participants must have been in their employment for at least three years with the implementation of personalized learning. This is also important because the federal policy was updated around 2017 with the National Education Technology Plan. One of the rationales for personalized learning includes ensuring the diverse population of students can learn content they need while interests' are met (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). To help ensure the justification of the sample criteria, initiatives need 3 to 5 years for implementation to occur (Center for Prevention Research and Development, 2015, Thomas et al., 2007). A questionnaire about the topic was presented on two social media platforms, Twitter and Instagram, to gain potential participants. Participants' insights also sought to find other possible participants that implemented personalized learning that also met the criteria for participation.

As stated previously, change typically takes three to five years (Thomas, Peng, and Gray, 2007). As a result, the following is justification for the criteria of having participants for the length of time of their position: an instructional model of schools changed; therefore, time is needed for the change process to occur. The perspective of the individual could change since the

roles have shifted. As stated previously, participants were required to be knowledgeable about an experience to gain more insight (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Based on the information above, the size of the sample was nine educators. It is important to note that those who participate in this study must have worked with a district that has implemented personalized learning by the 2017-2018 school year since the federal policy was updated (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The perspective of an individual could change based on their role or roles during the implementation phase of personalized. All participants' experiences as an educator ranged between 9 to 18 years. Table 5 provides a profile of the participants of this study.

Table 5

*Participant Profile*

| Participant | Gender | Race | Role | School or District Level | Highest Degree Obtained | Years in Public Education |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Macy** | Female | Black | Assistant Superintendent | District | Doctorate | 17 |
| **Bill** | Male | Black | Assistant Principal | School | Doctorate | 10 |
| **Martha** | Female | Black | Core Content Specialist | District | Masters | 11 |
| **Jackson** | Male | Black | Director of Professional Learning | District | Doctorate | 15 |
| **Agatha** | Female | Black | Teacher | School | Doctorate | 11 |
| **Eli** | Male | Black | Instructional Technology Coach | School | Specialists | 13 |
| **Abraham** | Male | Black | Instructional Technology Coach | District | Masters | 9 |
| **Luther** | Male | Black | Director of Professional Learning | District | Masters | 18 |
| **Esther** | Female | Black | Teacher | School | Masters | 9 |

**Data Collection**

For this study, the primary source of the data collection came from interviews. To collect the data from interviews with participants, interviews occurred with 9 participants. This is based on Robinson's (2014) recommendation of eight to twelve participants for interviews within qualitative research. Additionally, Bernard (2011) claims that interviews have an unquantifiable number for data saturation.

Participants of this study were interviewed, as mentioned previously. Interviews were conducted in a month and a half time span. Interviews lasted no more than one hour per session. Each participant only needed one session for their interview. Due to the interview questions, which are based on the dimensions and constructs of instructional leadership (Hallinger and Murphy, 1985), participants had interviews that lasted for one session to ensure their interviews provided thorough information about their experience with personalized learning and implementation. It is important to note that the interviews were semi-structured to allow further clarification based on the responses and gain better insight into the perceptions of the implementation of personalized learning. Interview questions can be found below. Interview questions were developed using the research questions and the dimensions of instructional leadership by Hallinger & Murphy (1985).

The interview questions focused on questions that relate to school goals, managing instructional programming, and promoting school climate. Given the nature and uncertainty of the global pandemic of COVID-19, interviews were conducted using a video conferencing software program.

Table 6 provides the interview questions used with participants based on their role. It is also structured based on how the goals were framed and communicated.

Table 6

*Interview Questions for Defining School Goal*

| Theoretical Framework: Instructional Leadership Dimensions (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) | Role: District Leader | Role: School Leader | Role: Teacher |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Defining School Goal**<br>• Framing School Goal<br>• Communicating School Goal | 1. What was the goal or intention behind developing a personalized learning initiative where you worked? **(RQ1)**<br>2. How was the goal communicated to all stakeholder (district leaders, board members, principals, assistant principals, teachers, parents, and students)? **(RQ2)**<br>3. Was the goal was meet? Why or why not? **(RQ1)** | 1. What do you feel was the goal for implementing personalized learning? **(RQ1)**<br>2. How was the goal communicated? **(RQ2)**<br>3. Do you feel the goal was accomplished? Why or why not? **(RQ1)** | 1. What do you feel the goal was for implementing personalized learning? **(RQ1)**<br>2. How was the goal communicated to you? **(RQ2)**<br>3. What was your peers' and your response? **(RQ1)**<br>4. Do you feel the goal was accomplished with personalized learning? **(RQ1)** |

Table 7 provides the interview questions used to discuss the second dimension of instructional leadership: managing instructional programming. This includes supervising and evaluating instruction, coordinating curriculum, and monitoring student development.

Table 7

*Interview Questions for Managing Instructional Programming*

| Theoretical Framework: Instructional Leadership Dimensions (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) | | Role: District Leader | Role: School Leader | Role: Teacher |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Managing Instructional Program**<br>• Supervising and Evaluating Instruction<br>• Coordinating Curriculum<br>• Monitoring Student Development | 1. What was the implementation plan for personalized learning? **(RQ1)**<br>2. What did curriculum look like prior, during, after schools adopted personalized learning? **(RQ1)**<br>3. How were school monitored for the development and implementation of personalized learning? **(RQ2)**<br>4. How did the district supervise personalized learning at schools? **(RQ2)**<br>5. How did the district measure student learning? **(RQ2)** | 1. How was personalized learning implemented where you work? **(RQ1)**<br>2. How was personalized learning supervised personalized learning at where you worked? **(RQ2)**<br>3. How did you monitor personalized learning? **(RQ2)**<br>4. What did curriculum look like prior, during, and after the personalized learning initiative? **(RQ1)** | 1. How was personalized learning implemented at the school? **(RQ1)**<br>2. Did district or school leaders every come to observe your classroom or your peers' to see how personalized learning looked? **(RQ2)**<br>3. If so, what did they look like? **(RQ2)** |

Interview questions also related to promoting school climate. Table 8 shows the questions asked to participants about promoting school climate include the attributes that define this dimension of instructional leadership.

Table 8

*Interview Questions for Promoting School Climate*

| Theoretical Framework: Instructional Leadership Dimensions (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) | | Role: District Leader | Role: School Leader | Role: Teacher |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Promoting School Climate**<br>• Protecting Instructional Period<br>• Always Seen<br>• Providing Incentives for Teachers<br>• Promoting Professional Development<br>• Providing Incentives for Students' Learning | 1. What did professional development look like for schools in regards to personalized learning? **(RQ1)**<br>2. What professional development did district support/leaders go through for personalized learning? **(RQ2)**<br>3. What did the instructional infrastructure look like in regards to personalized learning? **(RQ2)**<br>4. How often are district support/leaders in schools to support personalized learning?**(RQ 2)** | 1. What did professional development look like that was provided for personalized learning? **(RQ2)**<br>2. What did the instructional infrastructure look like in regards to personalized learning? **(RQ1)**<br>3. How often are district support/leaders in schools to support personalized learning? **(RQ2)**<br>4. What does the support look like from district support/leaders? **(RQ1)** | 1. What did professional development for personalized learning did you receive? **(RQ1)**<br>2. Did you find the professional development effective? Why or why not? **(RQ1)**<br>3. What did the instruction look like in regards to personalized learning? **(RQ1)**<br>4. How often are district support/leaders in schools to support personalized learning? **(RQ2)**<br>5. How often are school leaders in schools to support personalized learning? **(RQ2)** |

To ensure the data from the interview could be collected, a colleague of mine helped to gain familiarity with the process of using the video conferencing tools and the interview processes. We used Zoom, a video conferencing application, to conduct the interview. Once on the Zoom call, I had my colleague turn off their camera and practice some of the interview questions with them. I also recorded the call to make sure there was an awareness of how to use the tool. I stopped the recording and ended the Zoom call. The Zoom call was converted into three files: a playback option that was saved as an MPG4 (movie) file, a Zoom video file that opened with the software Zoom, or an audio-only option as an MP3 file. I deleted two of the files and used the MP3 file only. The purpose of this was to ensure that no identifiable aspects of the participants would be seen. The mock interview's audio file was then uploaded to the transcription software, Rev. The interview was transcribed, and then I went back to review the transcription while listening to the audio. This provided greater clarity and helpfulness in understanding how the interview process worked using the various software platforms and the functionalities of the tools.

Individual interviews were scheduled primarily during the weekday between the afternoon and evening and on the weekends. Interviews again were conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic and to help ensure the safety of the participant and researcher. Each participant was granted one hour for their interview. It is important to note, though, no interview lasted more than forty-five minutes. The interviews were then uploaded to Rev to be transcribed. Then I reviewed the transcription and compared it to the audio to confirm the transcription matched the conversation from the audio. To ensure the authenticity of the transcripts, member checking was used. Participants were emailed the transcriptions to review. The purpose of this was to help provide greater validity and trustworthiness of the transcripts.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis aims to understand the information presented from the data that seek to answer the research questions. For this qualitative study, data was collected, then organized into themes based on the codes, and presented in the findings (Saldaña, 2016). The purpose of coding is to help search for patterns within the data and explain patterns (Bernard, 2011). Structural coding was applied since this study employs multiple participants, semi-structured questions were used in the interview process, and interview transcripts were used (Saldaña, 2016). This helped codes become categories by grouping them (Saldaña, 2016). The structural coding was based on the semi-structured interview questions used in the study.

At first, general words and phrases from the first interview were written down to begin the open coding process, also known as initial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 102). Words and phrases were then grouped by the topic of the question and commonalities among them. Even though open coding was used initially, structural coding then took precedence and created an organization to be followed for the eight other transcripts. Independent of the researcher, a colleague who has experience in qualitative research also conducted the coding process. This was completed to ensure more credibility and trustworthiness of the results of the study. Through the use of this process, research questions began to be answered, and a relationship was established between the responses and the theoretical framework of instructional leadership.

Another round of coding was conducted. The second round of coding used axial coding. From the structured categories created as a result of the first coding round, the categories' relationships were established (Saldaña, 2016). The first round of coding was compared to the second round. To assure the credibility and trustworthiness of the coding process, a qualitative computer software, *NVivo*, was used to aid in the coding process based on data presented from

the interview. Computer software helped organize the codes, categories, and eventually themes (Creswell & Path, 2017).

Once the data was uploaded to NVivo, there were nine categories developed based on the semi-structured questions from the interviews. Based on these nine categories, codes were assigned to each one. For example, the category of goals had 104 codes attached to it. These codes provided greater detail and importance of each category. These codes were reviewed, and some were deleted if they did not clarify the overall category. Categories were then merged to examine the commonalities among them (Creswell & Poth, 2017). As a result, the following themes emerged: implementation impacted outcomes; monitoring influenced implementation and outcomes; and prioritization of personalized learning varied.

Again, this study was an example of qualitative research. The purpose is to explain "how" or "why" an event, situation, or phenomenon occurs (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2017). One of the methods used in this study included interviews. However, there are limitations to interviews. One of the greatest limitations with qualitative research include the miniature sample size. The sample size is often too small to be generalizable. As a result, to aid in the trustworthiness and credibility of the data, another researcher employed the same processes for the two rounds of coding. Additionally, participants were able to participate in member checking.

Credibility can be defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as "confidence in the truth of findings." To aid in the credibility of the data discovered, triangulation of various data sources, including multiple interview transcripts and coding, was employed. Because participants were educators encompassing multiple roles at the school and district level, the common trends helped uphold the credibility.

Transferability is another means by which trustworthiness can be accomplished. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define transferability as findings are able to be taken and applied to other contexts. To ensure that the study can be replicated, the results were compared to other studies on personalized learning and the results of those studies. Some examples included Lokey-Vega and Stephens (2019) and Basham et al. (2016). Dependability is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as "findings are consistent and could be repeated." They also describe confirmability as the findings being formed by the participants and not the researcher's bias, motivations, or interests. To ensure the dependability and confirmability of the study, the steps from the beginning of the research project to the reporting of the findings were described (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Based on the information presented, the steps and actions demonstrated ensured credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability continued to hold the study's trustworthiness. Furthermore, the researcher's subjectivity was acknowledged at the forefront to prevent bias from creating a jaded point of view in the study. Also, interview questions were open-ended questions related to the research questions and the theoretical framework of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Furthermore, to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, one additional colleague reviewed the data. This person who mutually agreed to help has research experience in qualitative research. The colleague reviewed the data and used the same processes of coding as I did. As a result, the colleague helped to justify the themes of the overall study. The study used purposeful sampling to ensure the trustworthiness of the study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the interview questions were designed using the instructional leadership construct

based on Halligner and Murphy (1985) to eliminate further bias and the research questions to the study.

# Chapter 4

## Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspectives of personalized learning implementation through the lens of school and district leaders from the southeastern United States. Extensive research has indicated that various subgroups of students across the United States are not achieving academic success (U.S. Department of Education, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 2001; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; Theoharis, 2007). For example, even though the dropout rate for high school students nationally is at 5.9 percent, it is higher for students of color. The percentage of high school dropouts almost doubles for Native American students at 10.1 percent, 8.2 percent for Hispanic students, and 6.5 percent for Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Theoharis (2007) described how leaders see standardized assessment data improve across subgroups of students when high-quality instructional leadership is applied.

School districts began to implement personalized learning as a strategy to help promote student success (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Hatoum (2019) discussed how personalized learning allows all students to learn, and study participants believed this approach to education as being an instructional approach to close gaps and ensure academic success. The overarching goal for personalized learning shared by study participants was the desire to close achievement gaps among groups of students and ensure that all students achieve academic success.

During the study, participants provided an account of the implementation process, factors that presented successes or challenges, as well as the leadership behaviors that helped or hindered the implementation of personalized learning. After interviewing nine participants in

various roles, three key themes emerged that impacted personalized learning's goal of ensuring success for each student. The first theme that emerged was implementation impacted outcomes. While a common goal was established for personalized learning, the perception that it met its intended outcome varied. Another theme of this study was monitoring influenced implementation and impact. Due to the varying approaches to monitoring, inconsistencies occurred that impacted the degree to which personalized learning met its intended outcome. The last theme identified was that the prioritization of personalized learning varied. Due to the way schools and districts prioritized personalized learning, curriculum resources changed.

Moreover, instructional practices also transformed. Additionally, schools and districts faced other competing initiatives which challenged the way personalized learning was prioritized. The prioritization of personalized learning also varied due to the equity in resources used.

### Implementation Impacted Outcomes

The first theme to emerge from interviews with participants regarding their experience with personalized learning was that implementation of the initiative impacted outcomes. Participants described a common goal when implementing personalized learning: *ensuring student success.* Although participants were focused on a common goal, they did so in different ways. Some participants described their desire to ensure student success by meeting the instructional needs of students. Other participants attempted to ensure student success by focusing on a students' ownership of learning.

Although implementation varied by site, the participants commonly referred to ensuring student success as a reason for implementing personalized learning. This was first evident when participants discussed how personalized learning was initially launched. However, participants'

responses were mixed as to the degree to which the implementation of personalized learning met its intended outcome, as well as the reasons they perceived personalized learning did or did not meet its intended outcome. Some participants described personalized learning as not meeting its intended outcome. Reasons for this perception ranged from varied expectations to inconsistencies with implementation. Others even included unclear indicators to truly assess the effectiveness of personalized learning.

Esther was one participant who indicated the goals of personalized learning were not met. Her rationale for her response was, "No, I don't. I can speak from my school's standpoint. I mean, I feel like if the goal was reached, we would not have the amount of students that we had and (still) have in Tiers 2 and 3." This educator described students at Tier 2 or Tier 3 as those who received interventions in the Response to Intervention and Instruction process due to skill deficits that made it difficult for them to accomplish grade-level standards. Another participant, Eli, an instructional coach from a partner organization of one district, described the goal of personalized learning as not being met. His rationale was due to the district's focus on device management instead of teacher instructional practices (pedagogy), which illustrated how differing approaches to personalized learning impacted learning outcomes.

Some participants indicated the results of personalized learning were mixed. Bill described why he perceived the goal of personalized learning in some regards as being fulfilled and then in other regards, not being fulfilled,

> Partially. Partially, I think personalized learning was happening in some classrooms, but personalized learning wasn't happening at high levels in other classrooms. So, I would have to answer that question with partially. I think the root cause of this is, you know, initiatives take time.

Like Bill, Abraham also responded partially. When asked if the goal of personalized learning had been accomplished, he stated, “Honestly, as a whole, no. There were pockets of schools, and even in schools, different classrooms and teachers, where they were a lot farther ahead than others.” When asked for the rationale for the variation, he explained,

> Mainly because the communication of the expectation just varied so much. So what our beliefs were about personalized learning as a department differed from the ideas and beliefs of the Office of Academics... and it differed from a lot of the things that the state department was saying. So teachers and schools were being fed three or more different ideas and views that contradicted each other.

The communication of the messaging is also important as a result of instructional leadership, and both of these differed from site to site. According to Hallinger & Murphy (1985), instructional leaders also focus on the communication of the goal. The inconsistencies in the messaging presented a challenge for the sites where Abraham worked.

Inconsistencies in the implementation hindered the goal of personalized learning to be met. Agatha, like Bill and Abraham, also acknowledged this. She shared that, “As a school, I wouldn’t say there was a full change because it was the beginning of the initiative, something new. It wasn’t a full change, but it took a lot of teaching, a lot of trial and error.” She even shared that from a district perspective, she did not feel that the goal of personalized learning was met. “I do not feel it was fully accomplished. From what I could see, the district would highlight the best schools, highlight the schools that were already on top before personalized learning.” An additional point that she discussed was the notion of schools making “growth from personalized learning or is that growth just from you’re using better instructional practices…”

Macy, however, acknowledged that personalized learning met its goal. The caveat was it was dependent "upon what you use as the indicator of it being accomplished." Macy recounted the fact that if a person looked at the state report card accountability system, it appears that the personalized learning goal was met. She noted fewer schools with an "F" rating on their report card issued by the state's department of education. "Now, I know there were other variables that also impacted that." Martha's account of the goal being met demonstrated while student achievement may have improved, this was not solely due to personalized learning.

An additional participant, Jackson, also shared why he felt that it was difficult to determine if the goal of personalized learning had been met. From Jackson's point of view, this question was "a hard one."

> If the goal was to highlight that this was the new way we do business in instructing learners and ensuring that each individual learner equitably has access to an ideal learning environment…the knowledge of, I would say we have been very successful in, indicating the knowledge of it. I would have to give a hard I'm not sure because I would say that our data has not been reflective of a grand shift or change in a manner that I would say is indicative of personalized learning.

Based on the experiences of the participants, it is evident that implementing personalized learning impacted student outcomes. Whether or not the goal of ensuring success as a result of personalized learning was achieved remains in question. Respondents perceived this from meeting a student's needs or ability to students having ownership of their learning. Eli, an instructional technology coach, mentioned that it was "to improve instructional practices." There was a common goal noted by participants, ensuring student success. This goal corresponds to the instructional leadership behavior of framing and communicating the goal of personalized

learning. However, even though the goal was communicated, the goal actually being achieved was perceived to be either a “hard” no or “difficult to say.” Participants shared the realities of why they felt the initiative was not as successful as district leaders would have hoped. One participant described her response as a yes, but only based on the school’s report card issued by the state. She even noted other variables that affected this goal from being accomplished. It is important to note how several participants began to discuss the implementation of personalized learning.

As stated previously, ensuring student success was identified as the intended outcome of personalized learning implementation by nearly all of the participants within the study. While ensuring student success was the goal of personalized learning, ensuring student success was defined in two ways. The first definition included students’ academic needs and interests being met. The second definition included learners’ ownership. These definitions of ensuring student success also impacted the outcomes of personalized learning was implemented. Previously, participants gave rationales as to why the goal of personalized learning was or was not accomplished. While there were mixed reviews if to the degree of the goal of personalized learning was accomplished, it is important to note the way ensuring student success was defined also impacted the outcomes of the implementation of personalized learning.

Personalized learning considers the individual learner over a group of learners (Bray & McClaskey, 2017; Grant & Basye, 2014). This was evidenced in the realization that despite a participant’s given role within a personalized learning environment (school leader, instructional or technology coach, teacher) he or she desired the same intended outcome. One participant, Esther, an elementary school teacher, shared her experience based on this common goal.

> Students come to us on many different levels; many different starting points. And so personalizing their learning would be fair to each of the students because we wouldn't be trying to teach them all the same things. We would instead be teaching them where they are in hopes of getting them to mastery.

This perception was described multiple times by participants. Bill, a middle school assistant principal, expressed that the goal for personalized learning was "to customize instruction based off student needs..." and this belief guided his efforts to implement personalized learning and ultimately impacted the outcomes of implementation. Jackson, a professional learning director, not only gave a specific definition for personalized learning but also realized that student learning was not about meeting the academic needs of low-performing students but also the advanced or higher-performing students. Jackson shared that "there wasn't much growth" with his district's advanced students, which made the district focus on personalized learning. When considering implementation, he also described how the district's focus on "differentiated instruction" and how personalized learning would ensure "individualizing" instruction. While this was a focus as a district for Jackson's district, implementation of the goal of ensuring student success was not necessarily the focus for every school in the district. More details about this also are listed in the final theme of Prioritization of Personalized Learning Varied.

Through the implementation of personalized learning, ensuring student success was the goal defined consistently by participants. While addressing students' academic needs and interests was one perspective examined that influenced how leaders and teachers approached personalized learning's implementation; another perspective was learners' ownership. Some participants shared their perceptions around this concept. Agatha, an elementary school teacher, stated, "…Personalized learning was to make sure every student was 21st century ready for the

workforce; to make sure students were advocates of their own learning…" She further described the ownership of learning as students being able to "make choices" and "…become self-advocates of their learning."

Abraham, a district instructional technology coach who served multiple elementary schools within the district, described the discussion of learning ownership. When asked the question about the district's goal for personalized learning, he provided a clear rationale that indicates learning ownership and its connection to ensuring student success. "The way we saw personalized learning was to prepare students for their futures because it empowered them to take ownership of their learning and how they learned." He expressed how personalized learning "empowers" students to figure out their interests. These interests would allow students to examine possible career goals and ultimately lead to "overall student success." This also led school and district leaders and teachers to implement personalized learning in a variety of ways.

Participants described ensuring student success as the goal of personalized learning. Participants either examined personalized learning from the lens of meeting students' academic needs and interests or students' ownership of learning. One participant, however, was able to define personalized learning from both points of view. Macy, an assistant superintendent who managed several schools and principals in one region of a school district, shared within her interview, "By doing personalized learning, strong instruction to meet the students' needs and providing a choice that kids would be able to have the necessary or essential skills, for their paths of choice." Macy's response captured the essence of personalized learning as supported by the literature: the idea of ensuring student success. She also described ensuring student success as "achieving at a high level."

One of Hallinger & Murphy's (1985) dimensions of instructional leadership is the urgent need to define the mission. A construct of defining the mission is to frame the goal. While a common definition was established for personalized learning by participants, there was a difference in the perspectives as to how the definition was applied. The first perspective for ensuring student success was explained through students' academic needs and interests. The other perspective for ensuring student success focused on learning ownership. These two perspectives impacted the way leaders and teachers implemented personalized learning. Results from the interviews clearly describe how the framing of personalized learning occurred and how they differed. This finding promotes a helpful attribute to participants' behavior as each leader was able to establish a clear goal to make sure that it helped define the organization's mission. Each participant, regardless of role, could describe what the goal was and how it was communicated.

There were notable challenges and successes with the implementation of personalized learning. The implementation of personalized learning impacted the outcomes. Participants' perceptions were mixed as to the degree to which personalized learning met its intended goals. Some ambiguities existed that made it difficult to determine if personalized learning's purpose was fulfilled. Additionally, while participants described the goal of personalized learning as ensuring student success, the perspectives of ensuring student success were viewed in two ways. These two ways also impacted how leaders and teachers implemented personalized learning in the classroom.

### Monitoring Influenced Implementation and Outcomes

The next theme revealed the impact monitoring had on implementation and outcomes. A distinct goal of this study was to delineate both successes and challenges a school district may

face when implementing a personalized learning framework. As a result, each participant involved in the study either worked within or with a public school district that implemented a personalized learning framework. As seen within the interviews, the ability to manage instructional programming and the promotion of school climate proved pivotal in the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of a personalized learning framework. As shared by Kwan (2020), a focus on supervising and evaluating instruction while monitoring student progress is a consistent focal point when implementing an instructional approach or framework well. Additionally, Kwan (2020) emphasizes that promoting school climate with a focus on enforcing academic standards and maintaining high visibility was also key. The scholarly research noted previously supports this.

Inconsistencies in how personalized learning implementation was monitored had a significant impact on the initiative's goal. Evidence extrapolated from interviews revealed inconsistencies in monitoring resulted in the variety of perceptions related to the success (or lack thereof) of a personalized learning framework. Furthermore, participants' perceptions described the inconsistent monitoring of student data to provide evidence of the impact of personalized learning.

Multiple participants noted the monitoring processes in relation to personalized learning. Martha, a core content specialist, described the academic monitoring process of personalized learning implementation in her interview. In her response, she noted that school leaders received "playbooks" that defined personalized learning and gave guidance on how to support the endeavor. Some participants noted that principals and school leaders could decide what they wanted to do and how they wanted to implement personalized learning through autonomous

leadership. This meant school leaders' understanding of personalized learning had a large impact on its implementation. As she shared:

> But as far as any instructional leader in the building or within the district, it really depended on the building. If you had a leader that really…not necessarily understand personalized learning, then it was not monitored or it was brought up. But I can't say overall that is was something that was monitored or included.

Some participants shared the sentiment that Martha expressed. When Jackson was asked how schools were monitored for the development and implementation of personalized learning, he could not describe the specific process. After some thought, he could see some possible methods in which the implementation process was monitored; however, ambiguity existed.

> I would say they're not monitored. Well again, I think if they're following the curriculum and the growth measures are being noted, that's one way in which they're being tracked based on their, the different data points… I would say that we're probably lacking in the way that it's truly being measured across the board.

Esther, like Jackson and Martha, also detailed how the implementation of personalized learning was not effectively monitored. Esther's school undertook additional initiatives that also required monitoring. That monitoring was not specific to personalized learning. "I don't really recall them looking straight up at personalized learning in your classroom."

As the theme of monitoring influenced implementation and outcomes emerged, more context was provided around inconsistencies with monitoring. For example, some participants noted how some educators in various capacities developed their own system of monitoring. Abraham, an instructional technology coach, developed his own system for monitoring the trends at his supported schools; however, there was no consistent method for monitoring by his district

for implementation. Through his account, there was no accountability or follow-up based on the professional development provided by his district.

> Well one thing I did, I used OneNote. And in OneNote I had a notebook for each of my schools and then I had a page for each of my teachers in those schools. And I also tried to personalize my professional development for those teachers. So I created learner profiles for each teacher where they had to list three goals and tell me how I could best help them reach those goals. And then I personally used OneNote to track the progress of those teachers and it led me and guided me on who I needed to work with from day to day in my eight schools.

While Abraham did develop his own detailed system for support and monitoring, he did share that there was no set process for monitoring the progress of personalized learning in each school within the district. When asked specifically about this, he responded, "No, everybody just kind of got to do their own thing." These inconsistencies in relation to monitoring continued to arise throughout participant interviews. Luther explained the inconsistencies further. Previously, he mentioned how schools received one-on-one coaching support; however, that support was based on the newer schools in the district receiving it.

> I feel like the schools that were receiving what I mentioned as the kind of the one-on-one coaching and consulting support (newer schools); I think there were some measurements in place for them because they had small teams of people working with them so closely during implementation, but other schools that did not have that, I don't think there was accountability or measurement that was really being tracked for them.

Like Luther, Macy described her experience with monitoring. In her interview, Macy discussed how there were different regional superintendents who managed a cluster of schools within her

system and shared each varied in their monitoring systems. Macy shared how monitoring did not come through her team but through the district's instructional technology team. "Which in hindsight felt like that probably was a missed opportunity for the district given the seat that I sat in and my supervision of schools." Macy also stated how there was a team of people from each school who would meet with instructional technology to complete surveys around the practices that occurred in schools. "I remember the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction referencing different data that came in through the platform used to collect data." However, she noted the data points were never clearly defined as to how they would be used. "I don't know to what degree the implementation of personalized learning started out; what I can tell you is that I monitored." This quote from Macy highlighted she was not in the district in the initial launch of personalized learning; however, she did monitor the implementation of the initiative. Based on the further discussion in the interview, it was discovered that Macy did monitor instructional programming, including digital tools used as a result of the district helped personalize the learning environment of students.

Participants described the inconsistencies in monitoring the implementation of personalized learning, which impacted outcomes. While there were times personalized learning was monitored, it is important to note it was not consistent from school to school, which likely affected the final evaluation of the overall implementation. Agatha described how it was for her as district leaders did come into her classroom to observe. The observation would include the director of instructional technology, the head of personalized learning, the area superintendent, and personalized learning coaches from other schools in the district. "And I loved when they would come and observe because it was never a feeling of fear when they would come because they would give good feedback." Even though Agatha had a positive experience, that experience

seemed isolated. That experience was not the same for the majority of teachers in her building. She also noted how school-based administrators were always in the teachers' classroom to observe instruction, including personalized learning. However, when Agatha stated previously if the district met its goal for personalized learning, she inadvertently explained that implementation was not monitored. "So when we would see the overall snapshot of schools, we were seeing the schools that were already doing well before they initiated personalized learning." Agatha previously shared that some teachers in her own building were just doing the "minimum" to say they had implemented personalized learning while others had not. Because some teachers had not implemented personalized learning, there could be no monitoring occurring.

Bill, like Agatha, also was able to converse about the monitoring systems that were in place at the school he served. As stated before, it is important to note the possible outcomes of implementation and monitoring that occurred at his site are due to his experience of serving on the steering committee for personalized learning at the district level.

> After the first year, we added an actual walkthrough tools to kind of measure the success of the initiative, at the granular level, like at the classroom. We did observational rounds with district and school leadership. We had ongoing kind of analysis of where we were. So we had those observational tools. We had a district personalized learning walkthrough tool, we had a technology integration matrix tool, which was out of the University of South Florida, which we use to kind of measure the technical side.

From the interviews conducted, there was an overall perception that monitoring systems were inconsistent. Participants shared their experiences and provided examples as to why they thought monitoring was not effective. This finding relates to the instructional leadership construct by Hallinger & Murphy (1985). One of the dimensions of instructional leadership is managing

instructional leadership, which includes supervising and evaluating instruction as well as monitoring student progress. The findings from the participants show that the instructional initiative of personalized learning was not being supervised consistently nor monitoring student progress. Additionally, within the instructional leadership dimension, promoting school climate and maintaining high visibility. While in some cases it occurred, it did not occur to the degree in which it was solely based on personalized learning varied.

**Prioritization of Personalized Learning Varied**

The last theme indicated that the prioritization of personalized learning varied between participants and schools. School and district leaders prioritized personalized learning in multiple ways. Some school and district leaders prioritized personalized learning by the use of curricular resources and instructional practices. This included the use of adaptive computer software as a curricular and instructional tool. Both school and district leaders also described other priorities taking importance over personalized learning. A few participants noted the reason other priorities took precedence over personalized learning was due to leaders' understanding of personalized learning. Lastly, participants described the prioritization of personalized learning based on equity. The schools' or districts' socioeconomic status determined if students would have access to the components of personalized learning.

As mentioned previously, some school and district leaders prioritized personalized learning by the curriculums used and implemented instruction practices. At the beginning of this dissertation, some terms were defined for clarity. One of those terms was curriculum. Curriculum refers to what content a learner is taught and how it is being taught (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995). Furthermore, curriculum can include resources that help support what content a learner is being taught. Instruction is another defined term. This term refers to the method in

which content is taught (Wiles et al., 2002). Both terms are vital to understanding participants' responses.

Some participants noted some curricular changes during the implementation phase of personalized learning. This included the adaptive software used in the classroom when discussing different approaches to prioritizing personalized learning. The purpose of these software programs was designed to meet students academically and help remediate those who were behind while accelerating those ahead. This further illustrated how some educators prioritized technology-enabled instruction with personalized learning.

This was evidenced in Eli's interview. Eli discussed some of the changes within curriculum. Two programs he discussed were iRead and iReady. The purpose of these programs is to ensure students can learn at their own pace based on their academic needs. "They considered that high-quality technology integration, which will translate to them thinking that was personalized learning." He also described these technology platforms as a way for schools to gain data as to how students were mastering skills and standards as well as using technology in the classroom. He went on to describe this as a low-level way to integrate technology based on the Technology Integration Matrix used by the school district in which he worked.

Additionally, he discussed a reading and writing curriculum that was adopted by one of the schools he supported. The school prioritized the implementation of the reading and writing curriculums adopted over personalized learning. These curricular changes did not align with what he perceived as personalized learning. "That was the only big change that I saw within the district as far as curriculum-wise. My opinion is that it does not line up with personalized learning." Ironically, Eli discussed how personalized learning could occur if the new curricular tools were used. One of the ways he described personalized learning could occur is by the

elimination of the technology tools used. This would allow for curriculum to "line up with personalized learning… but you have to marry the two (personalized learning and curricular resources) in very weird ways." He noted, with a number of competing initiatives, this did not happen.

Participants did describe curriculum changes that occurred at the same time as personalized learning. For a few participants, this was detailed in their description of standards mastery framework. This was an attempt to provide a "guaranteed and viable curriculum," as a way to help prioritize personalized learning. It was described by participants, "As a really intensive focus on learning targets for each standard at different levels." One participant even noted that prior to the work of personalized learning, curriculum was, "Very loosely and centrally managed. School determined scope and sequences." Even though findings for this study have shown schools had lots of autonomy around the implementation for personalized learning, one participant shared that,

> The standards mastery framework is like a set of tools that makes sure that the curriculum is like what every kid should know and be able to do and in a sequential order. That makes sense. And it provides equity for all students, by making sure they all have access to that same Bible curriculum that is at the appropriate rigor and progression for each grade level.

While these participants felt that a guaranteed and viable curriculum did help create some sense of guidance and a focus on personalized learning, some felt that curriculum adoption was not changed due to the prioritization of personalized learning.

Luther highlighted how curriculum did change from teachers developing it to the district purchasing content. "Curriculum was only purchased in the areas of math and ELA." He also

noted how the resources had, “Lots of personalized lessons embedded.” This became a district priority. Like Eli, the district focused on using some technology tools to enhance the practices of personalized learning. He also shared that while there were gains in the ELA data, teachers were resistant since this was different from the way they normally would plan for instruction. The rationale for his perception included, “I don’t think we as a district did a good job of explaining the what, why, and how of personalized learning to help onboard even the curriculum I just mentioned.”

There was also a sentiment from multiple participants that curriculum had not changed or if it did, it was not a result of personalized learning being prioritized. Jackson explained how curricular changes were a result of the prioritization of personalized learning.

> Our curriculum models just changed across the board due to a combination of things. So I would say that it looked drastically different, but I don’t know if that’s attributable to the work for personalized learning. Some of that coincidentally; I would not wager that some of those curricular changes that were made were not done so specially for personalized learning.

There were notable varied approaches to prioritizing personalized learning. As mentioned previously, this was explained in terms of technology usage and curriculum resources. Due to the varied way districts prioritized personalized learning curricular resources, instructional practices began to shift. One of these shifts included providing students more choice and voice within their learning and assessments. This shift included a focus on the individual learner as well as making learning more flexible based on seating and the content in which students had to learn. The shift also emphasized student agency and goal setting and ensured that teachers focused on student learning.

An example was provided by Martha as she shared how there were different foci for personalized learning from school to school; there was also an overall conscience that many teachers did focus on providing choice boards to see how students would demonstrate mastery. Martha sat in a position where she was able to support multiple schools to see gain this perspective. Bill also described the instructional shifts as,

> We eventually got to a place where during the work period, there was some type of small group activity going on, driven by data. You know data-driven instruction is a whole other topic, but when you think about the core principles to really get to personalization, you have to leverage the data to figure out where students are at and what type of supports they need.

Bill went further to describe how it changed the way many teachers in his building delivered instruction Teachers went from simply providing instruction to using data to drive the introduction to the lesson.. Teachers began using stations (different activities to address standards in small groups that are usually independent) and would vary from day to day based on the needs and sometimes interests of students. Lastly, there was usually an assessment given by the end of the lesson to assess the learning for the day and to help modify future instruction. These shifts were a result of how schools defined personalized learning as well as how they prioritized it.

In addition to curricular and instructional changes that influenced how districts prioritized personalized learning, other initiatives took precedence over personalized learning. An example of this was noted by Esther. When Esther discussed how personalized learning implementation was prioritized in her building, she stated that while “district leaders were in the school to evaluate learning outcomes, it was not due to personalized learning.” This meant the supervision

focus was not on personalized learning, but was on other initiatives that specifically related to school accountability scores. She went further to discuss how the changes implemented did not yield positive student test scores as the school's data began to decline.

From multiple interviews, participants shared how other school or district initiatives took priority over personalized learning. This included how leaders understood personalized learning. Martha, a core content specialist who supported multiple schools in one district, noted, "It really depended on the building. If you had a leader that did not really understand personalized learning, then it wasn't monitored or brought up." She went onto describe the understanding or the lack thereof that made leaders shift their focus. Eli also described this in relation to principals' understanding. "If the administration team or the principal didn't understand it beyond kids need devices, then there is a difference in understanding that the teachers need ongoing support as well as the administration."

Bill, who served on the district's steering committee for personalized learning and was able to put a lot of practices in place within his building, exemplified a leader who understood personalized learning. As a result, he was able to make personalized learning a priority. While that was his goal, he realized this was not the goal of the district in which he worked. He noted that personalized learning was not the focus of the district. Bill shared, "I think it was a matter of the district prioritizing this now." He went on to describe the district needing to, "buckle down and focus on this because it was a district-wide initiative."

Again, the way schools and districts prioritized personalized learning varied. Leaders were sometimes given autonomy as to how they implemented different initiatives in their buildings or districts. As stated previously, a leader's understanding of personalized learning made it a priority or lack thereof. This made many leaders decide to focus on other initiatives

beyond the implementation of personalized learning. The goal of personalized learning was to ensure student success and improve student outcomes. Jackson described how personalized learning was not an essential focal point for initiatives going on in the district. “It was part of district’s vision for 2020, which was focused on improving student outcomes.” Although personalized learning was an entity within the district’s vision, principals had the autonomy to develop how they wanted personalized learning to be implemented. Thus, this autonomy allowed some leaders to change the priority for implementing personalized learning.

Lastly, when considering how the school and district leaders prioritized personalized learning, equitable practices became a recurring response. Equity can be defined as fairness in processes, practices, and outcomes for those subgroups who have been historically marginalized (Ishimaru & Galloway, 2021). Some participants described their experience with schools not having access to similar resources, thus not making personalized learning a priority for school and district leaders. For example, previously, Jackson’s account of implementation shared how newer schools in higher socio-economic areas received consulting on implementation as well as more resources. Additionally, these schools were constantly monitored, which helped provide priority over personalized learning. Abraham, a district instructional technology coach, shared similar experiences. As he shared, personalized learning was prioritized differently in schools. There are, “50 schools in the district,” and “some will work a little harder than others.” While some would work harder, this was also due to the access to resources in some schools, including the support of personnel. Support of personnel varied. In addition to the district not supplying equitable resources at schools to support implementation, personalized learning was not its entity.

Based on interviews with participants, the prioritization of personalized learning varied from school to school. The findings showed while curricular and instructional approaches started to change, there was not a clear indication this was due to personalized learning. In one instance, it was noted that the reading and writing curriculums adopted did not match the definition nor constructs of personalized learning. Participants also perceived personalized learning's priority based on a leaders' understanding. In essence, some did not understand what personalized learning was; therefore, they allowed other priorities to take the lead. Equity also was discussed in regards to personalized learning's priority. Based on higher socio-economic status, schools and districts acquired more resources and more support for implementation.

This finding relates to Hallinger and Murphy's Dimensions of Instructional Leadership (1985) in promoting school climate, particularly promoting professional development. It was perceived by a number of participants that leaders' understanding influenced how personalized learning was prioritized. Additionally, the purpose of personalized learning was designed to help various subgroups achieve (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The findings demonstrate that in some schools and districts, equity was not applicable. This finding contradicts the purpose of personalized learning.

**Summary of Findings**

This study resulted in multiple themes that emerged based on the interviews conducted and the details discussed throughout. The first theme that emerged was implementation impacts outcomes. Through the implementation of personalized learning, participants sought to ensure student success. While ensuring student success was a common goal, participants were unclear whether or not that goal was met. Another theme highlighted the impact that monitoring had on both implementation and the outcomes of personalized learning. The inconsistencies in the

monitoring of personalized learning were significant. The way in which personalized learning was prioritized was the final theme as a result of this study. Participants indicated school and district leaders prioritized personalized learning based on curriculum resources or instructional strategies, other initiatives, and equity. One of the research questions of this study asked what the challenges and successes were perceived in the implementation of personalized learning. The findings highlight those challenges and successes that were perceived. Additionally, the second research question examined instructional leadership behaviors that helped or hindered the implementation of personalized learning. Again, the findings demonstrate instructional leadership behaviors that helped or hindered the implementation of personalized learning.

# Chapter 5

## Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain a greater understanding of personalized learning implementation based on the perspectives of school and district leaders as well as teachers and instructional coaches. This discussion makes connections from the study's findings to important literature on personalized learning (Bingham et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2015, 2017). It builds off of Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) framework for instructional leadership. Additionally, it highlights the implications for academia and practitioners, in particular for school and district leaders.

Three themes emerged from this study. The first theme captured the impact that implementation had on the outcomes of personalized learning. The next theme revealed that monitoring influenced implementation and outcomes. The final theme revealed how the prioritization of personalized learning varied significantly. The themes and findings from this study did answer the research questions as well as gave greater insight into the how and why of the successes and challenges of implementation of personalized learning.

The first theme, implementation impacts outcomes provided detailed descriptions of the goals of personalized learning. All of the participants continuously provided the rationale for personalized learning as ensuring student success. Ensuring student success was defined in two ways. The first way it was defined included meeting an individual student's needs or ability. The second way it was defined was ownership of learning. Although participants defined the goal for personalized learning as ensuring student success, there were mixed perceptions if the goals of personalized learning had been accomplished and were able to provide clear rationales as to why the goals of personalized learning were accomplished or not.

Again, participants noted the purpose of personalized learning was to ensure student success. This theme relates back to the scholarly literature that defined personalized learning as an "instructional model where students' needs and interests are met," and focuses on the "individual learner." (Bray & McClaskey, 2017; Grant & Bayse, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Bill, an assistant principal, shared the goal of personalized learning was, "to customize instruction based off student needs." The National Education Technology Plan (2017) also described the goal as a way to help students who have been historically marginalized. This was also iterated in the literature through federal policies that have been enacted over time to help subgroups of students who have been marginalized (Le Tendre, 1996; Levitt, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Jackson discussed this as he shared about students who were two different ends of a spectrum: high and low achieving students.

Additionally, participants described the goal of personalized learning as a means for students to take ownership of their learning. This also related to the literature that also defined personalized learning as, "activities that are meaningful and relevant to the learners, driven by their interests, and often self-initiated." (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Students owning their learning was a concept also described by Lokey-Vega and Stephens (2019), which is further discussed as "learner agency" is one of the goals of personalized learning. This was described by Agatha, an elementary school teacher, and Abraham, a district-level instructional technology coach, during their description of what was the goal for personalized learning. The goal of personalized learning was, "To make sure students were advocates of their own learning."

The theoretical framework used for this study was Hallinger and Murphy's (1985) construct of Instructional Leadership. One of the dimensions defined by Hallinger and Murphy

includes defining the mission. This dimension of instructional leadership includes two constructs: framing school goals and communicating school goals. Based on the findings, it is evident that the school and district leaders of the participants of this study followed this attribute of instructional leadership. Each participant of the study was able to define the goal of personalized learning as ensuring student success.

While school and district leaders followed some of the dimensions of instructional leadership, including defining the goal, there were mixed reviews about the goal's fruition. Many participants indicated personalized learning did not meet the intended goal. Some felt it only did so partially. However, there were some participants who believed personalized learning goals were met. Each participant described their rationale for their response. For one participant, she felt the purpose was to close the academic gap between students, yet more students required interventions. This is supported by the literature from the National Education Technology Plan (2017) as well as ESSA (2015). Some participants shared how school performance data increased for students.

Another participant described this as "partially" due to the initiatives taking time and not occurring at the same level from classroom to classroom. Gross and DeArmond (2018) describe the importance of creating "non-negotiables" to help leaders when implementing an initiative. This provides clarity around the expectations. Participants consistently discussed the variation that occurred from school to school and classroom to classroom with the implementation of personalized learning. In many cases, there was no uniformity or clear expectations for implementation. This also corresponds to the theoretical framework of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). The instructional leadership framework defines that framing and

communicating school goals are essential; however, the findings revealed that the goals were not clearly defined.

Additionally, while the goal for personalized learning was defined, a clear and concise definition of personalized learning was never truly described. While the participants of this study could describe personalized learning in consistent ways, it was noted by one participant in particular that if you were to ask "20 different people, you would get 20 different answers" from her school district. One of the goals of this study was to help provide a clear and concise definition for personalized learning. Based in the research provided by Bingham et al. (2018), Lokey-Vega and Stephens (2019), and the U.S. Department of Education (2017), these unclear understandings of personalized learning influenced the way was the goals were achieved.

Districts and schools must determine if they will approach personalized learning from a pedagogical or technology lens. Even from a pedagogical lens, leaders must establish if personalized learning will focus on direct instruction, choice, voice, or flexible facing (Bray & McClaskey, 2017 & Grant & Basye, 2014). Additionally, leaders must establish if personalized learning will be examined from competency-based learning (National center on Time and Learning, 2011).

The second theme that emerged from the data was monitoring influenced implementation and outcomes. This theme highlighted that schools and districts lacked or had inconsistent monitoring systems. Although there was a lack or inconsistent monitoring systems for the implementation of personalized learning, one of the characteristics of instructional leaders include the ability to supervise and evaluate instruction as well as monitor student progress (Bambrick-Santoya, 2012; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Kwan, 2020). From several participants, it became evident that school and district leaders were allowed autonomous leadership in

implementing personalized learning. Martha's description highlights this point further as she worked at central office and supported multiple schools. "It really depended on the building.. but, I can't say overall that is something that was monitored." Gross and DeArmond (2018), as well as Washignton and Bernacki (2020) discussed the importance of creating consistency as well as a system of checks and balances for school and district leaders. This might have led to clearer results if personalized learning met its intended goal without ambiguity.

While the literature supports the behaviors of instructional leadership (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Bellibas & Liu, 2016; Hallinger & Muprhy, 1985; Neumerski. 2012), there needs to be a system of checks and balances, non-negotiables, and a level of uniformity that helps with monitoring personalized learning (Washington and Bernacki, 2020). The findings provide evidence that school and district leaders lacked consistency in regards to monitoring personalized learning. For example, one participant described how he used OneNote to keep track of the progress of teachers he supported. While he used this, others in the same role in the same district did not.

The last theme revealed how schools and districts prioritized personalized learning differently. Leaders varied in the choices around curricular materials purchased, including computer software and programs used for instruction. Again, the literature review provided evidence that schools and districts must coordinate curriculum and supervise instruction (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985; Neumerski, 2012). The findings also provided insight into why the prioritization of personalized learning varied. School and district leaders' knowledge of personalized learning was a perceived factor as to why and how it was prioritized. Some participants perceived this as a rationale for other initiatives taking priority. Bellibas & Liu

(2016) and Bambrick-Santoyo(2012) shared that professional development is critical to instructional leadership.

Equity was also discussed regarding prioritizing personalized learning. Jackson and Abraham shared how newer schools and schools with higher socioeconomic statuses received more support for personalized learning. This contradicts the literature regarding the purpose of personalized learning. Federal policies have highlighted the fact that students of various subgroups, in particular those of lower socioeconomic status as well as students of color, have been historically marginalized (Theoharis, 2007). Personalized learning was designed to help close academic gaps and provide equity to all students (Hatoum, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Based on data from the interviews and the review of the scholarly literature, it is evident the first research question was answered. There were notable challenges and successes that were perceived in the implementation of personalized learning. Some of the challenges include the purpose of personalized learning being defined; providing a common definition of personalized learning; and the initial launch of the initiative. There were also several challenges, including a debate of focus between instruction and technology, the intentionality of the goal being met, inconsistencies with monitoring personalized learning, a lack of understanding of personalized learning, and a lack of systems and structures that provide uniformity for uniformity implementation.

The second research question was addressed and answered as well. Interviews conducted provided behaviors that helped or hindered the implementation of personalized learning. Instructional leadership was examined through the lens of Hallinger and Murphy (1985). From their constructs, leaders should be able to define the mission, manage instructional programming,

and promote school climate. This study noted multiple examples of when these behaviors were helpful in the implementation of personalized learning. It was also apparent when these behaviors were not exhibited and it hindered the implementation from occurring.

**Implications**

Multiple themes, ideas, and concepts emerged as a result of the conclusion of this research study. Based on the findings, numerous lessons were gained from the successes and challenges of implementing personalized learning. There are several implications for school and district leaders as they embark on an initiative for personalized learning.

The first recommendation for schools and districts implementing personalized learning is developing consistency. First, leaders need to establish consistency by providing a clear definition for how the district or school will define personalized learning. Lokey-Vega & Stephens (2019) noted the varying definitions of personalized learning. The results of this study also provided multiple accounts of how schools and districts defined personalized learning. They also provided various ways it would be implemented. For example, Eli described how schools focused on the use of technology instead of pedagogy. Secondly, schools and districts need to develop consistency in the messaging of personalized learning. During Martha's interview, she described if one were to ask how personalized learning was defined, "You would get over 20 different answers." This sentiment was also noted by Abraham. In his example, teachers and leaders in his district had to work with the Office of Academics for the school district, the Department of Instructional Technology for the school district, and the State Department of Education. He shared how all three provided definitions and means for implementing personalized learning.

Another recommendation for schools and districts implementing personalized learning is to create clarity with non-negotiables with implementation. As personalized learning is an instructional model (Lokey-Vega & Stephens, 2019; Watson & Watson, 2016), schools leaders need to provide clear guidance on instructional structures that should be uniform from classroom to classroom so implementation can occur. The study showed that in some classrooms, in the same school, personalized learning occurred at different levels as well as not at all in some classrooms. This also needs to happen for schools within a district so a uniform version of professional development can occur. It was stated by one participant that "it was very difficult" to support schools with personalized learning as they had different principles for personalized learning. This practice lends itself to the Hallinger and Murphy (1985) dimension of instructional leadership of promoting school climate.

Lastly, a final recommendation for the implementation of personalized learning is defining how the initiative will be monitored at the local school level. The local school level's monitoring tool needs to match that of the district if personalized learning is a district initiative. Instructional leaders provide observation and feedback, supervise and evaluate instruction, and most importantly, they monitor student progress (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2012; Bellibas & Liu, 2016; Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). Monitoring student progress is another aspect of monitoring implementation. The purpose of personalized learning relates back to increasing student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). If progress monitoring of learning does not occur, it becomes difficult to assess if students will do well on summative assessments that measure the overall achievement of students. Monitoring student progress also means school and district leaders will need to develop a conscience about what they will use to assess student progress.

The data from this study provided significant proof of the effects of not monitoring the implementation of personalized learning. For example, Abraham shared, “I mean, I had my own system of monitoring using OneNote.” But he also shared how this was the tool he used, and it was not universal. There was no accountability nor follow-up for professional development. Martha echoed a similar perception about the monitoring of personalized learning. “But I can’t say overall that it was something that was monitored….” The accounts provided contradict one of the core dimensions of instructional leadership: managing instructional programming (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

When considering developing a process for monitoring, both school and district leaders need to develop who is responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of instruction with personalized learning. Previously, Luther explained how some of the schools in his districts managed the effectiveness of personalized learning due to a small team of coaches and consultants working in them. Macy also shared how regional superintendents had various systems for monitoring instructional programming that differed from one another. As a result, district leaders must create uniformity when implementing instructional programming as it allows for the goal, in this case, student achievement, to be monitored effectively and to see if the instructional programming put in place enhanced the performance. Esther noted this in her account of personalized learning monitoring being inconsistent. She shared that while instruction was being examined, it was not due to personalized learning being implemented but rather based on results of other instructional initiatives.

As school and district leaders consider implementing personalized learning, it is important to consider the importance of creating systems for monitoring. First, leaders need to define who will monitor the implementation and how it will be monitored. Leaders must also include the use

of a consistent tool for monitoring. By doing this, schools and districts can truly measure the dimensions of instructional leadership. The literature supports that when the behaviors of instructional leadership are implemented with fidelity, then an increase in student achievement occurs (Sebastian et al., 2019; Shatzer et al., 2014; Xu & Liu, 2016).

As personalized learning continues to grow, it is necessary more research is conducted to help school and district leaders understand the successes and challenges of personalized learning especially as schools think of ways to help students continue to learn due to the strains of the COVID-19 pandemic. This should include schools and districts effectively monitoring personalized learning and examining the data on summative assessments that measure student achievement through the use of standardized assessments. While there are a number of research articles that discuss the negative implications of standardized exams, this is how schools and districts measure if student achievement occurs (Mitani, 2018; Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2017; Ruiz et al., 2009).

**Conclusion**

The goal of personalized learning is to help have an impact on student learning and motivation, which will then increase student achievement (ESSA, 2015; Grant & Basye, 2014). This study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the extent of the how and why personalized learning initiatives work. Based on a review of the literature, there is an abundance of information on federal policies that have influenced student achievement and the use of personalized learning. There is also a plethora of information regarding instructional leadership. While there are numerous articles that discuss federal policies for student achievement, personalized learning, and instructional leadership, there are still some gaps that exist. One of those gaps includes providing school and district leaders information about the implementation

of personalized learning. As stated previously, the goal of this study was to understand the range of perspectives from district leaders, school leaders, instructional coaches, and classroom teachers within public education in regards to the implementation of personalized learning. Ultimately, the study aimed to provide further research for school and district leaders to help develop and sustain personalized learning initiatives in the K-12 setting.

In the review of the literature, the National Defense Education Act (1958), *A Nation at Risk* (1983), the Improving America's Education Act (1994), No Child Left Behind (2001), Race to the Top (2009), and ESSA (2015) have influenced the way in which student achievement was measured. Through these efforts, academic standards have become a focus for educators (Le Tendre, 1996). To ensure every student achievement was met with every learner, No Child Left Behind (2001) was enacted. While the intentionality may have been for the greater good, there were a host of negative implications (Mitani, 2018; Royal & Dodo Seriki, 2017; Ruiz, Kelsey, & Slate, 2009; Saultz, Murphy, & Aronson, 2016). As a result, Race to the Top (2009) and ESSA (2015) allowed schools and districts to be creative and promote innovative strategies to promote student success. As a result, personalized learning was an instructional practice many schools began to implement (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

This study examined the perspectives of educators in both leadership, managerial and support, as well as teachers in public schools and districts that implemented personalized learning within the southeastern United States. Through interviews, there were several factors that helped or hindered personalized learning from being effective as well as instructional leadership behaviors that influenced the implementation of it. These factors included implementation impacted outcomes; monitoring influenced implementation and outcomes, and prioritization of personalized learning varied. Instructional leadership, as defined by Hallinger

and Murphy (1985), aligns with the successes and challenges with implementation of personalized learning.

The review of the literature discussed the purpose of personalized learning. This study's findings aligned to the review of the literature with the goals of personalized learning: ensuring student success. This also aligned with the instructional leadership framework established by Hallinger and Murphy (1985) of defining the mission. Within this dimension of instructional leadership, framing and communication of the goal are vital. Based on participants' perceptions, the established goal for personalized learning was evident.

Although the goal was clear, many participants felt the goal was not met or fully not met. The reasons varied from inconsistent data sources used, lack of consistent professional development, time, and student achievement data not increasing. This finding led participants to discuss the successes and challenges of implementation. Participants also shared the idea of personalized learning being driven through the lens of technology in the classroom. This relates back to the literature review that shares the idea that personalized learning involves technology being used. Also, the review of literature highlighted that although personalized learning and differentiation are different, some use the two terms interchangeably. The participants of this study; however, were able to describe the two as two separate entities.

While there were some successes, there were a number of challenges with the implementation of personalized learning. Some of these challenges included a debate on instruction versus technology; lack of support or training; as well as being inconsistent from school to school and classroom to classroom within the same school. This finding was critical to aspects that hindered personalized learning from possibly meeting its intended outcome. A major theme that arose when discussing the challenges includes inconsistencies with monitoring.

School and district leaders were not monitoring implementation consistently or had consistent tools for monitoring.

Other challenges that arose were other initiatives or factors that took priority over personalized learning. This was based on leaders' understanding, determined to the degree to which personalized learning was implemented. Leaders, in some cases, thought personalized learning and technology were one and the same. Some focused on the idea of purchasing new curricular resources. The purchase of some resources was unclear, though, if it was due to personalized learning and, in some cases, did not align to the endeavors of personalized learning. Finally, equity was a concern highlighted within the prioritization of personalized learning.

Participants of this study gave descriptions of the successes and challenges of the implementation of personalized learning. Successes of implementation included developing a common definition for personalized learning and having a common goal. The challenges gave insight as to why or how the goals of personalized learning may not have been met. In the end, participants did see value in personalized learning, especially when plans for it have clarity.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Georgia State University

Informed Consent

Title: Perceptions of Leading and Supporting School and District Leaders Through a Personalized Learning Initiative in the Southeastern United States

Principal Investigator: Nicholas Sauers

Student Principal Investigator: Christian Padgett

**Introduction and Key Information**

You are invited to take part in a research study. It is up to you to decide if you would like to take part in the study.

The purpose of this study is gain insight of the perceptions of school and district leaders as well as teachers to see if the implementation of a personalized learning initiative met its intended goals.

Your role in the study will last no more than two, 1 hour interviews.

You will be asked to do the following: participate in no more than two 1-hour audio-recorded interview and review the interview transcripts for accuracy.

Participating in this study will not expose you to any more risks than you would experience in a typical day.

This study is not designed to benefit you. However, I hope to gain information about personalized learning implementation in the southeastern United States.

**Purpose**

The purpose of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of a personalized learning initiative in the southeastern United States.

**Procedures**

If you decide to take part, you will do the following:

- ✓ Respond to the email invitation with some days and times that work for you to be interviewed.
- ✓ Determine a location that works best for you to be interviewed.
- ✓ Be interviewed by Christian Padgett for 1 hour of time per interview.
- ✓ Interviews will occur in one to two sessions.
- ✓ Review and verify the accuracy of your interview, which should take no more than 15 minutes for each interview.
- ✓ Be available for a brief follow-up conversation to clarify any questions. This conversation will take no more than 15 minutes.
- ✓ Participating in this study should take no more than 1 hour and 15 minutes per interview and review of transcripts for a maximum of two interviews and review of transcripts.
- ✓ Participating in interviews and reviewing transcripts for this study will occur no more than two times.

**Future Research**

The researcher will remove any information that may identify you and may use your data for future research. If I do this, I will not ask for any additional consent from you.

**Risks**

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. No injury is expected from this study, but if you believe you have been harmed, contact the Christian Padgett, as soon as possible. Georgia State University and the research team have not set aside funds to compensate for any injury.

**Benefits**

This study is not designed to benefit you. However, I hope to gain insight about a personalized learning initiative led by one school district.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal**

You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. You may refuse to take part in the study or stop at any time.

**Confidentiality**

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. The following people and entities will have access to the information you provide:

- Christian Padgett (student principal investigator) and Nicholas Sauers (principal investigator)
- GSU Institutional Review Board
- Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)

I will use a pseudonym you select rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet and on a password- and firewall-protected computers. I will keep a copy of the audio recording until the interview has been transcribed and you have verified its accuracy. Upon your verification of the transcription's accuracy, I will destroy the audio file. When I present or publish the results of this study, I will not use your name or other information that may identify you.

**Contact Information**

Please contact Christian Padgett at 912-414-3706 and cpadgett3@student.gsu.edu or Nicholas Sauers at nsauers@gsu.edu

- If you have questions about the study or your part in it
- If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the study

The IRB at Georgia State University reviews all research that involves human participants. You can contact the IRB if you would like to speak to someone who is not involved directly with the study. You can contact the IRB for questions, concerns, problems, information, input, or questions about your rights as a research participant. Contact the IRB at 404-413-3500 or irb@gsu.edu.

**Consent**

I will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to participate in this research, please sign below.

_____

Printed Name of Participant

_____ _____

Signature of Participant Date

_____ _____

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent Date

**APPENDIX B**

Questionnaire for Possible Participation for Dissertation Study

# Questionnaire for Possible Participation for Dissertation Study

Currently, I am in the process of completing a study. The purpose of this study is gain insight of the perceptions of school and district leaders as well as teachers to see if the implementation of a personalized learning initiative met its intended goals. If selected to participate, your role in the study will last no more than two, 1 hour interviews.

* Required

1. First Name *

Enter your answer

2. Last Name *

Enter your answer

3. Best Contact Phone Number *

Enter your answer

4. Best Contact Email *

Enter your answer

5. How would you describe your race/ethnicity? *

Enter your answer

6. How would you describe your gender? *

Enter your answer

7. How many years have you worked in public education? *

Enter your answer

8. What is your role as an educator? *

- [ ] Classroom Teacher
- [ ] School- Based Support Specialist (e.g. Academic Coach; Curriculum Coordinator, Instructional Technology Coach/Specialists)
- [ ] School Administrator (e.g. Principal/Assistant Principal)
- [ ] District Support (e.g. Consultant, Core Content Specialist, Instructional Technology Support)
- [ ] District Administrator (e.g. Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Executive Director, Director)
- [ ] Other

9. Did you work in or with a public school before the year 2018 in GA, FL, SC, NC, AL, KY, MS, MD, VA, WV, or TN? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

10. Did you work in or with a public school before the year 2018 in GA, FL, SC, NC, AL, KY, MS, MD, VA, WV, or TN and did the implementation of personalized learning occurred? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

11. Would you be willing to discuss your experience? *

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No