

PRINCIPAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTS OF PERSONALIZED LEARNING
INSTRUCTION ON MIDDLE GRADES ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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Principal Perceptions of the Effects of Personalized Learning Instruction
(Under the direction of Dr. REBECCA SHORE)

Personalized Learning Instruction (PLI) is the practice of personalizing instructional practices, scaffolding, and assessing the schoolwork of each individual student based on their specific learning needs and the standards of the curricular content, it involves student choice and interest within a flexible structure. Currently, most of the research that has been conducted on PLI has focused on math instruction, older secondary students (grades 9-12), and relatively small samples of students. Little research has been conducted to determine if and what impacts PLI may or may not have on English Language Arts achievement. Nor has much emphasis been placed on middle schoolers, where routines and patterns for future success in secondary school are established. The purpose of this study was to understand middle school principals' perceptions of (1) Personalized Learning Instruction (PLI), (2) the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades English Language Arts achievement, and (3) the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction in their schools. This qualitative case study involved in-depth interviews of four middle school principals who had experience with the implementation of PLI in their schools. Four themes emerged from these case studies and are expressed through thematic sentences; (1) A misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and current instructional practices, (2) Principals perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction, largely through increased engagement with reading through English Language Arts classes, (3) Staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction, and (4) Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-19

DEDICATION

To my wife, Ashlyn, and my girls, Kayla, Remy, and Sophie.
We're done!!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

PLI	Personalized Learning Instruction
ELA	English Language Arts
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
NSLP	National School Lunch Program
CESA	Cooperative Educational Service Agency

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The 21st century field of education is under immense pressure to identify an instructional approach to improve student achievement across all subgroups. Also, in the 21st century, technology has begun to play an increasingly prominent role in schools. School districts have purchased instructional technology, introduced new curriculum, and have implemented instructional approaches to target students' needs and promote academic growth. However, the results from these changes have not yielded the expected outcomes on national assessments. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, reading achievement data for the 2017 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) showed eighth grade reading scores to be three points lower than scores in 2015 (2019). Officials could attribute a slight drop in scores at the time to a number of variables, but when looking at the data across time from the beginning of the NAEP in 1992 shows eighth grade reading scores only rising to three points higher (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), thus indicating performance levels have not increased over the past twenty-eight years as one might expect from such targeted national investment. Furthermore, in the first NAEP assessment since the COVID-19 pandemic, scores actually fell in 2022 to be below even the 2019 scores (National Assessment for Educational Progress, 2023). It is critical to find instructional strategies to help reverse this downward trend.

The data becomes even more telling when one analyzes the achievement gap between students who qualified for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and those who did not qualify. Since 2003 when data was first collected on these criteria, students who qualified for NSLP have performed an average of twenty-four points lower than their non-qualifying peers

(The Nation's Report Card, 2019). The performance of this large subgroup category of students impacts achievement data more than any other subgroup. Finding a more effective method of instruction could change the view of overall student achievement in the American education system if the appropriate instructional practices can be identified and implemented with all students and particularly with these students.

Systemwide attempts have been made to improve the quality of education for all students across the country through several pieces of legislation. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) required states to adopt rigorous standards, data-driven instruction, a statewide accountability system, provide rewards for schools and school districts making yearly growth goals, and impose consequences for schools that did not make goals. NCLB also expanded the targeted scope to include performance and graduation rates focused on subgroups such as economic status, race, disability, and English Language status as part of reporting their adequate yearly progress. With the implementation of NCLB, states reintroduced standardized testing, school/state report cards, and performance bonuses, all intended to raise student achievement.

President Obama's administration further attempted to improve student achievement scores by promoting the adoption of the Common Core Standards in 2010 as part of the federal, Race to the Top grant program. According to Jahng (2011) states wishing to qualify for this lucrative grant had to adopt a rigorous standards-based system of instruction, improve assessments, create data systems, improve teacher retention and effectiveness, equitably distribute teachers, and improve achievement in low performing schools. The Common Core Standards for ELA and Math were provided by the grant and states had to adopt them as a means for states to qualify. A majority of states adopted the Common Core standards in order to qualify for the funding. President Obama's education reform policy, Every Student Succeeds Act (2015)

kept much of NCLB intact, though it allowed states to have greater control in deciding on the measures used for accountability purposes.

While the intent of these pieces of legislation was to increase student performance and better prepare students for the workforce or higher learning, the data indicates it has not had as great of an impact as hoped for, especially for students who are part of the economically disadvantaged subgroup. Data was first collected in 2003 for students who were economically disadvantaged as per the requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The eighth grade average NAEP reading score was 247 for students who qualified for the Federal Lunch Program (economically disadvantaged). By 2019 the score had only increased to 250, resulting in a growth of only 3 points (Nations Report Card, 2020). This group of students is possibly in greater need of a quality education because of their economic circumstances and could benefit the most from impactful reform. To address these variations in academic skills, abilities, data, and access to resources across grade levels and subgroups, some school systems around the country have turned to one instructional approach known as Personalized Learning (PL).

Personalized Learning is an instructional approach that has been in existence in one form or another for decades. As early as the 1980's TheodoreSizer was laying the groundwork for the modern concept of Personalized Learning, when he completed his research and wrote *Horace's Compromise* (1984). Sizer's work included almost exclusively secondary school students. In it, he explains a philosophy of school leadership which would provide students with a more personal education that is more relevant to their needs and interests (1984, 1992, 1997, 1999). Sizer explained there were five imperatives for better schools which:

1. Give room to teachers and students to work and learn in their own, appropriate ways.
2. Insist that students clearly exhibit mastery of their schoolwork.

3. Get the incentives right, for students and for teachers.
4. Focus the students' work on the use of their minds.
5. Keep the structure simple and thus flexible. (p.214)

To further understand the link betweenSizer's imperatives for a better school and Personalized Learning, one must review the meaning of each imperative. According to Sizer, giving students and teachers room to work and learn is to, "adapt their school to the needs, learning styles and learning rates of their particular students" (1984, p. 214). He advocated allowing students to build a personal connection to all students in the building, to learn the best way for themselves, and allow the teachers to significantly adjust instruction to help students succeed in learning.

"Exhibitions of mastery" before a student graduates from high school, allows students to show what they have learned throughout school in more than just a rote recall of facts on standardized tests. Individual students may show their mastery of concepts and skills in a variety of ways (Sizer, 1984). One could prove mastery through art, song, essay, or even multiple-choice testing if it was connected to the individual student's strengths. The salient point was to foster and build upon the development of students' individual strengths and interests, to personalize it.

The use of incentives for professional adults has been shown to elicit the idea of teacher pay or a physical reward being offered for motivation. Sizer (1984) argued even the different exhibitions of mastery for students can become incentives for learning as well as the knowledge that the high school diploma will have a more significant meaning to the student. The fact that students inherently want to provide the best version of themselves, changing the way they are assessed through mastery exhibitions, creates stronger incentives for developing self-regulation

and student-centered goals. Students begin to want to succeed for themselves instead of merely attending school and passing for compliance.

Sizer's next imperative is, "the use of the mind" or teaching students to think for themselves and take on the burden of learning (Sizer, 1984). In many classrooms, teachers impart knowledge to students through whole group lessons in which the teacher provides the important information. They have become, in a sense, the gatekeeper of knowledge and students must rely on teachers to acquire the necessary information. Under Sizer's idea of Personalized Learning the "students become responsible for their learning and the teacher acts as a facilitator" (1984, p. 216).

The final imperative is to keep a simple structure. While one may believe Sizer is referring to the physical structure of the school or class schedule, he is actually focusing on what is being taught. Teacher specialization in a specific curriculum can be counterproductive to student mastery because it may limit the students' ability to become the experts themselves according to Sizer (1984). In this sense, schools that tend to offer rigid specialized predetermined curriculums for students, to prepare them for life after school, may actually be harming the students by ignoring their individual interests. Sizer argues that if schools were designed to keep curriculum simple and aligned to what students must know, leaving room for students to be able to perform, and exhibit a deeper, more focused learning in an area of their interests, students could have developed an ability to learn at higher levels with greater success in post-secondary education or careers. It would contribute to developing lifelong learners.

Over the past thirty-five years the concept and definition of Personalized Learning has undergone a variety of changes. One such modification involves incorporating technology based learning systems and the use of data analysis, to direct student learning pathways (Sizer, 1999;

Akinsola, 2009; Courcier, 2007; Wanner, 2015; Halverson, 2015). The Institute for Personalized Learning defines Personalized Learning as, “an approach to learning and instruction that is designed around individual learner readiness, strengths, needs and interest” (2019). For example, a student who is not considered to be on grade level for reading would need specific instruction by a teacher who knows the child, through personal relationships, classroom interactions, student interests, and data analysis, to craft an educational plan to improve the student’s growth. This creates ownership of the learning by the student and makes instruction personal for them. The purpose of this study is to explore the use of a specific approach to personalized learning, which will be referred to as Personalized Learning Instruction (PLI) in middle grades English Language Arts/Reading coursework and to investigate principals’ perceptions of what effect it may have on student achievement.

Statement of the Problem

The use of Personalized Learning Instruction varies across school districts and content areas. While research has been conducted on the effects of various approaches to Personalized Learning Instruction for some content areas, mainly math and science (Akinsola & Awofala , 2009; Bautista, 2012; Bernacki & Walkington, 2018; Clinton & Walkington, 2019; Delgado, 2015; Ewen, 2012; Harackiewicz, 2008; Keefe, 2008) there is little research focused on the effect of Personalized Learning Instruction on English Language Arts Education. School Principals are in a unique position to be able to evaluate this as they evaluate and supervise teachers and explore student achievement across subject areas throughout each school year. This study will focus on middle school principals’ perceptions of PLI in the English Language Arts subject area.

Research Questions

This qualitative study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction practices in their schools?
2. What are principals' perceptions of the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades English Language Arts achievement?
3. What are principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction?

Conceptual Framework

Research has indicated personalized learning methods can have varying degrees of success dependent upon factors such as content, student interests, populations, and use of technology (Akinsola & Awofala, 2009; Bautista, 2012; Bernacki & Walkington, 2018; Cavanaugh, 2014; Clinton & Walkington, 2019 Ewen, 2012; Harper, 2003; Harackiewicz, 2008; Keefe, 2008). “While there is no standard process for implementing personalized learning in general, research has shown well-designed personalized learning environments can transform both the teachers’ and students’ behavior and encourage students’ academic growth” (Basham, Hall, Carter, Stahl, 2016, p. 127). Effective use of a specific approach to Personalized Learning Instruction is dependent on both the teacher, student, and how Personalized Learning Instruction (PLI) is being implemented. The principal of the school is in a position to evaluate these factors and so is the target population of this study’s research questions.

For this study the specific PLI method used was categorized by the Institute for Personalized Learnings’ Honeycomb Model (Fig. 1). This method of PLI is defined as an approach to learning and instruction that is designed around individual learner readiness,

strengths, needs and interests (IPL, 2019). This study will investigate principals' perceptions of the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction in their schools with a focus on middle grades English Language Arts.

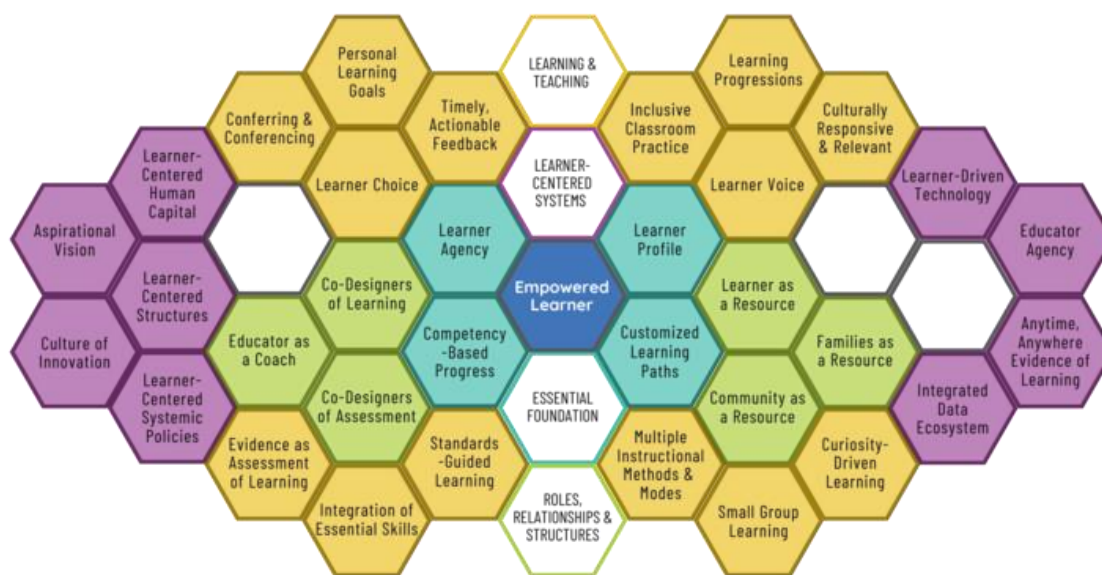


Figure 1. Honeycomb Model (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2023)

Several components from the Honeycomb Model became prominent from the study participants responses, particularly that of learner choice. This component was viewed as increasing engagement, specifically in English Language Arts classes where students were given freedom to select their own reading material based on interest.

Significance of the Study

Academic achievement in secondary schools is important for all students' post-secondary experiences, regardless of whether students choose to go on to higher learning, careers, or vocational schools. Research investigating the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction thus

far has focused on math and science content usually involving higher performing high school and college students (Akinsola 2009, Bautista 2012, Wanner & Palmer 2015, Bernacki & Walkington 2018). This is probably because student outcomes in math and science are typically more clear cut and measurable. Relatively little research exists on the effect of Personalized Learning Instruction on student achievement for English Language Arts and even less at the middle school level. This study has the potential to add to the body of knowledge for Personalized Learning Instruction by investigating how principals perceive Personalized Learning Instruction is being implemented in their schools as well as how it is impacting student achievement in English Language Arts classes. Results may potentially provide insight on the implementation and use of this PLI to close the student achievement gap.

Limitations

1. This study is limited to a participant group that includes school leaders who have been in the position of Principal at a middle school which implemented Personalized Learning Instruction in the 2019-2020 school year.
2. Participants must have been in the role of Principal during the COVID-19 Pandemic
3. This study is not evaluating the effects of other variables which may have an influence on student performance.
4. The targeted education years of this study are 6th, 7th, and 8th grade which will not account for the possible effect of Personalized Learning Instruction in primary grades (K-5) or upper secondary (9-12).

Definition of Terms

1. **Personalized Learning** - an approach to learning and instruction focused on individual learner needs, strengths, weaknesses, relationships, and student interest.

2. **Personalized Learning Instruction** - approach to learning and instruction that is designed around individual learner readiness, strengths, needs and interests. Learners are active participants in setting goals, planning learning paths, tracking progress and determining how learning will be demonstrated. At any given time, learning objectives, content, methods and pacing are likely to vary from learner to learner as they pursue proficiency relative to established standards. A fully personalized environment moves beyond both differentiation and individualization (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2019).
3. **Student interest** - adjusting instruction based on the personal interests of students to make learning relevant to the learner.

Summary

Educators are tasked with ensuring all students achieve a minimum of one year's growth on standardized assessments through a number of pieces of legislation such as the No Child Left Behind (2001), Race to the Top (2010), Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). However, simply achieving one year's worth of academic growth does not close an achievement gap between students of low socio-economic status and students of mid to high level socio-economic status who may begin the year already more than one year behind. Personalized Learning Instruction as defined by the Institute for Personalized Learning, has been introduced as an instructional approach designed to incorporate student strengths, needs, and interests to maximize student mastery of skills and content combined with the use of technology, thus hoping to impact student achievement. This qualitative study aims to identify the perception of Principals on the impact of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle school language arts students.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The concept of personalized learning has had a variety of definitions used over time to describe what it is both in theory and in application, ranging from knowing each student personally, applying intense use of technology-based programs to enhance student engagement, or to teacher led instruction based on student academic levels (Akinsola, 2009; Courcier, 2007; Halverson, 2015; Sizer, 1999; Wanner, 2015). The Institute for Personalized Learning's website (2019) defines Personalized Learning Instruction (PLI) as, "an approach to learning and instruction that is designed around individual learner readiness, strengths, needs, and interest." The addition of a technology component provides timely data regarding student performance, which allows for the combination of the practices of data driven instruction and differentiation. This is then enhanced by soliciting student interest to create more buy-in for the learner.

While there is not one specific approach to implementing personalized learning as an instructional practice, it is the consideration of learner interest combined with existing student data on performance which sets PLI apart from its prior definitions over time. Data-driven instruction or needs based instruction does look at individual student performance and provide instruction to increase achievement but does not consider learner interest. According to the Institute of Personalized Learning, the addition of learner interest to concrete data regarding student performance is believed to be a key for student engagement and retention of knowledge (2019). Simply put, if a student is studying a subject of interest, learning skills, and receiving targeted standard proficiency level instruction at the same time, they are more likely to remember and benefit from the practice (Institute of Personalized Learning, 2019). As a result,

educators hope to see this approach to personalized learning result in increased student achievement on assessments.

The following literature review will begin with the history and support for personalized learning and the documented effect of personalized learning on student achievement.

Table 1: Identified Themes in Literature

Theme	Source
History and Support for Personalized Learning Theory	
The Theory/Practice	Sizer, 1984, 1992, 1997, 1999; Shore, 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998; Shore & Beirne, 1997; Keefe & Jenkins, 2002; Courcier, 2007; Shore & Salas, 2011; Merriweather & Shore, 2015; Wanner & Palmer, 2015; Halverson et al., 2015; Shore & Morris, 2019; Kudlats, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021 Rosene, 2023;
Personalized Learning Theory	
Technology and Personalized Learning	Chen, 2011; Yang et al., 2013; Roberts-Mahone et al., 2016; Wongwatkit et al., 2017; Bernacki & Walkington, 2018; Clinton & Walkington, 2019
Effectiveness/Achievement	
Effects of Personalized Learning	Akinsola & Awofala, 2009; Bautista, 2012; Ewen & Topping, 2012; Bernacki & Walkington, 201; Clinton & Walkington, 2019
COVID-19 Pandemic	
Impact of COVID-19 on Education	Jameson et al, 2020; Santos 2020; Takar,2020; Townsley et. Al, 2019; Townsley 2020; Woodworth, 2020
Institute For Personalized Learning	
Institute for Personalized Learning	Institute for Personalized Learning, 2023

Personalized Learning Framework

As early as the 1980's TheodoreSizer was developing his concept of personalized learning in American schools. Building upon decades of research and analysis of the high schools across the country Sizer's 1999 article, *No Two Quite Alike*, he explains, "authentic personalization is the practice of an educator knowing each child they come in contact with well" (pg. 8). This would include spending time conferring with students, knowing student strengths, weakness, anticipating behavior, and tailoring lessons to the students. His version of personalized learning is the groundwork for our modern initiative; however, it does not rely on the data gathered by assessments and computer programs, unavailable in the 1980's. His research does document the importance of at least one adult making a connection to each student in the school (Sizer, 1999). Thus, he advocates for greatly reduced class sizes of no more than 15 students (Sizer, 1984).

A similar study was conducted by James Keefe and John Jenkins summarized in 2002, "A Special Section on Personalized Learning." This document focused on their proposed "six basic elements of personalized instruction" (2002). These elements were created after the authors researched schools across the county who were engaged in various forms of personalized learning instruction. The six elements were: teacher role, diagnosis of student learning characteristics, a culture of collegiality, interactive learning environments, flexible scheduling and pacing, and authentic assessment (Keefe & Jenkins, 2002). The researchers shared many commonalities with Sizer and even cited *Horace's School: Redesigning the American High School* (1992) when they discussed the idea of flexible scheduling. Overall, Keefe and Jenkins described a school and instructional environment that was learner focused, flexible to the needs

of students and teachers, committed to the growth of thinking, relationship oriented, and focused on student interests to build student engagement in learning.

The investigation of how to better personalize instruction for students was not limited to the United States. According to Courcier (2007), personalized learning was a “new” style of teaching in the United Kingdom introduced by the Five-Year Strategy for Children and Learners by the Department of Education there. This strategy was not just focused on the teaching but also the learners who they claimed are equally responsible for their learning. After conducting thirteen case studies across England at the equivalent of K-12 public schools in the United States, Courcier was able to define personalized learning as a teaching and learning style focusing on three characteristics, “individual need, interest, and aptitude” (2007, pg. 62). This does not mean a student works alone on their own individual education plan but that a teacher facilitates learning for a student by focusing on those three characteristics. Courcier did reveal however, that there was some confusion about what personalized learning looks like because each school and even teacher adjusts the personalized instruction for each student within their own classroom.

Similarly, Wanner and Palmer (2015) determined personalized learning is a student-centered approach to teaching which provides flexibility for both learning and instruction because of student desire to participate in instruction through a self-directed process. The researchers conducted a “flipped” classroom model in which students would receive lecture/content information through technology outside of class. Students were expected to view pre-recorded lectures, complete activities designed to support the lecture, and then report to the class to gain a better understanding of the material and receive assistance if necessary. The study,

however, dealt only with university students whose academic ability can be assumed to be above average because of their admittance into a university.

Additional research supporting the concept of personalized learning including student interest was conducted by Halverson, Hacket, Rawat, Rutledge, Kallio, Mould, and Mertes (2015). In 2015 Halverson et al., studied schools which focused on student interest and encouraged student participation in creating personalized learning pathways and profiles. This qualitative research was conducted across five urban and suburban elementary, middle, and high schools in the Midwest. Researchers conducted observations, interviews, and surveys to determine if the concepts established by the Institute for Personalized Learning were being implemented. The researchers found that all schools did incorporate technology to support, assess, and at times deliver instruction. However, each site ensured student interest stayed core to the practice of personalizing the instruction, therefore, students were receiving a truly personalized learning experience.

Technology and Personalized Learning

The use of individualized student achievement data has become an important part of incorporating personalized learning instruction in the classroom. The use of data to create learning pathways, identify student strengths, and target weaknesses in student skills is vital to current approaches to personalized learning. Technology has become a key factor in collecting, analyzing, and providing instruction based on data. Systems have been developed to assess student performance and provide remediation based on student knowledge (Chen 2011). Other programs identify student learning styles and assign course materials based on the collected data (Yang, Hwang, & Yang, 2013). Technology came into use as a method of delivery in several of the studies focusing on the effect of a more personalized learning instruction and self-interest

(Bautista, 2012; Bernacki & Walkington, 2018). While the development of technology has opened up other methods of personalized learning instruction, some researchers caution replacing relationships between students and professional educators with technology. AsSizer explained “true personalization comes from a professional educator knowing each child they come in contact with” (1999, pg. 8).

In contrast, Roberts-Mahoney, Means, and Garrison (2016) wrote, the use of technology in personalized learning “syncs with a deeply held cultural belief in the power of technology as a key driver of progress” (p. 405). With the increased use of data and adaptive learning systems, personalized learning has allowed instructional decision making to be removed from the teacher and made by computer programs. Roberts-Mahoney et al., conducted a “content analysis of US Department of Education reports, personalized learning advocacy papers, and published research monographs” (p. 411). Through their analysis the authors determined that the purpose of using technology and data is to customize learning to train workers. While the use of data is important for identifying needs and strengths, this narrowed view of personalized learning does not reflect the full definition of personalized learning because it lacks student interest, genuine engagement with learning, and authentic forms of assessment.

Effectiveness of Personalized Learning

The purpose behind the modern shift to personalized learning is to close achievement gaps and improve student scores for both proficiency and growth. Romiro Bautista (2012) defines personalized learning similarly toSizer. Teachers, “take into account individual student characteristics and needs, and flexible instructional practices, in organizing the learning environment” (Bautista, 2012, pg. 573) Bautista used a quasi-experimental design which utilized a pretest-posttest model with a sample size of seventy-eight students’ enrolled physics (2012).

Students in the experimental group were provided personalized learning instruction through flexible pacing, small groups, flexible scheduling, cooperative learning, and checkpoint assessments (Bautista, 2012).

Bautista found the students in the experimental group did perform better on the posttest and concluded, “personalized instruction positively impacted learning with a statistically significant p value of .001” (2012, pg. 581). This strong p value implies that the difference in performance could be attributed to the combination of personalized learning practices and not sampling error.

It is important to point out; however, Bautista’s sample consisted of students already enrolled in a university, which suggests these students have already been academically successful enough to be admitted into college. In addition, the sample was made up of students taking a physics course, which would suggest students who are studying academically rigorous materials. These results may not be generalizable to K-12 public education because students in K-12 public education typically represent a large range of ability levels.

Ewen and Topping (2012) conducted research with a sample of secondary students, “ages fourteen to sixteen who performed poorly in school due to social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties” (p. 221). The concept of personalized learning used in this study required the creation of, “individualized plans for each student which included compulsory core skills (literacy, numeracy), social skills, and post-secondary opportunities (college, work experience)” (Ewen & Topping, 2012, p. 224). The researchers used a mixed methods approach and gathered quantitative data for achievement and qualitative data for perceptions of the program. Thirty students were chosen from referrals and applications, to attend the Extended New Directions (END) project site, where personalized education plans were developed for each student.

The researchers used attendance and discipline data as quantitative measures for the study. In regard to attendance Ewen and Topping (2012) found, “65% of the young people attending END for 80% or more of the time whereas the comparable figure for previous attendance at mainstream (school) previously was only 19%” (p. 227). Students responded to the personalized approach at END by showing up and participating in the program.

Researchers focused on exclusion (out of school suspension) data to track the impact the personalized learning program had on discipline. Ewen and Topping (2012) determined when the participants attended school in a regular education setting, they were, “three and a half times,” more likely to be excluded from school as at END (p. 227). The data implies that students chose to attend school and behave in a manner that kept them in attendance due to the personalized learning process of END.

While data regarding attendance and discipline was positive the study was limited in providing any reference to achievement because, “Rates of attendance/exclusion at mainstream schools previously would have rendered completion of work for standard grade assessments impossible” (Ewing & Topping, 2012, p. 228). The sample group simply did not attend school enough to participate in the grade assessments, therefore it could not be compared.

The researchers also conducted qualitative data gathering through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and questionnaires. These qualitative research methods were conducted with the students, professional stakeholders at END (teachers, social workers, etc.), and parents of students attending END. Overall, the qualitative data supported what was found in the quantitative analysis, “improved attendance and enjoyment of the curriculum” (Ewing & Topping, 2012, p. 231). While the study could not link the practice of personalized learning to

achievement it was able to identify a positive impact for students in the areas of attendance and discipline.

The application of a more personalized learning approach did show positive impacts on many facets of the subjects' education and was only prevented from being applied to their achievement on standardized test because of the lack of data from before the treatment. The real success of this form of personalized learning instruction was the fact that the students worked their way through the program with success and sat for the standardized assessments.

A plethora of additional case study research has shown positive outcomes across a wide range of school factors from attendance and behavior issues to improved student learning outcomes (Shore, 1995; Shore, 1996; Shore & Beirne, 1997; Shore, 1998; Shore & Salas, 2011; Merriweather & Shore, 2015; Shore & Morris, 2019). One study which took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and targeted student choice in reading materials in English Language Arts showed dramatic student learning outcomes on End-of-Course tests (Rosen, 2023).

Another study focusing on personalized learning's effect on student achievement was conducted by Akinsola and Awofala in 2009. For the purpose of their study personalized learning was interpreted as, "instructional context is made more meaningful by allowing learners to transform contextual information to contain familiar referents" (Akinsola & Awofala, 2009, p.389). The focus of the study was to determine if the use of student interest improved performance on mathematical word problems.

The study randomly sampled three hundred twenty senior secondary students from eight different schools with one hundred sixty in the control group and one hundred sixty in the experimental group. A student interest survey was administered to the experimental group. The survey consisted of questions pertaining to students' personal interests such as, favorite places to

shop, friends, and hobbies (Akinsola & Awofala, 2009). This information was then used in the regular instructional plan, both groups received the same instruction on solving mathematical word problems, but the experimental group had details changed to match their interest survey answers.

After receiving instruction on mathematics word problems students were provided with a post test to determine if there was a difference in achievement. Akinsola and Awofala reported there was a difference between experimental group and control group scores, “the mean score for the personalized group was 18.21, while that of the non-personalized group was 10.81” (2009, pg. 395). This supports the belief that personalized learning instruction with students’ interest or personal connections can improve student achievement.

While Akinsola and Awofala showed a positive effect on student math scores their study only measured a three-week treatment on a unit assessment. While this does indicate that personalized learning may positively impact student achievement it cannot be said if it would continue to have the same effect over the length of the course. Therefore, the study would need to be lengthened to show if the treatment could impact long term student achievement.

Bernacki and Walkington (2018) conducted a similar study to Akinsola and Awofala in order to determine if student’s performance in mathematics would increase as a result of Personalized Learning focusing on student interest, through an online math tutoring program. The researchers defined personalized learning as, “an intervention approach that can be used to integrate student’s out-of-school interest into learning.” (Bernacki & Walkington., 2018, p.865). This definition focuses on accessing student prior knowledge via interests and creating personal cognitive connections to new learning.

The sample consisted of one hundred and fifty ninth grade algebra one students enrolled in full and half year courses. The participants were divided equally among the whole year and half year courses in the control and experimental group. Participants in both the experimental and control groups used the Cognitive Tutor Algebra program (CTA), which is designed as an online tutoring tool that tracks and adapts instruction based on student performance. The experimental group's CTA was adapted to structure problems to include student interests. An example of this personalized approach according to Bernacki and Walkington (2018) would be;

Standard versions of stories such as, “A machine called the Crawler which moves space shuttles travels at the rate of 2.9 feet per second. The Crawler is currently 100 feet from the hanger moving toward the launching pad.” were personalized to student out-of-school interests in topics like games; “A racing game has a train which weaves through tracks and tunnels and travels at a rate of 2.9 feet per second. The train is currently 100 feet from the start of the course and moving toward the finish line.” (p. 869)

The program keeps the structure and mathematical concept the same but alters the story of the questions to connect to student interests. As seen in the example, the distance traveled remained the same (100 ft.) and the rate of travel remained the same (2.9 feet per second). Therefore, students are working with the same core information and solving the same equations.

In order to determine if this personalized learning approach had an impact on student achievement Bernacki and Walkington (2018) examined student performance on a summative assessment for linear equations (p.874). After statistical analysis of student scores, the researchers found personalized learning had a significant effect (Bernacki &

Walkington, 2018, p.874) on student achievement. While students who participated in the experimental group may not have shown significant differences during the computer based tutoring sessions, they did outperform the control group on the summative assessment.

While this study does show a positive impact on student achievement through the use of personalized learning instruction, the demographic sample may have also impacted the results. Bernacki and Walkington (2018) randomly sampled from a suburban school district in the Northeast which created a more affluent and predominantly Caucasian sample with only twenty-one percent of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch (pg. 868). This may have impacted the results of the study due to the socio-economic levels of the participants. There is no indication of any control variables that could be contributed to income, such as additional outside tutoring.

Studies on personalizing the school experience for student extends beyond simply the teacher student relationship. Kudlats' research has begun to lay the groundwork on possible connections between school leadership and student achievement based on personalized connections between these two groups (Kudlats & Brown, 2020, 2021; Kudlats 2019; Kudlats, 2021; Walls & Kudlats 2021; Kudlats, 2017). Again, any adult on campus, particularly that of the principal, can be impactful in cultivating more rigorous student engagement through building relationships with students.

Impact of COVID-19 on Education

In March of 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic had reached alarming levels of infection and prompted school districts around the country to suspend in-person learning. School districts pivoted to a virtual or remote learning model in which students participated in lessons in a

variety of methods. Virtual meeting platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Hangouts became popular classroom options, student expectations, experiences, and learning outcomes all changed.

An example of school districts being forced to pivot was how to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for students who qualify for special education services. Jameson, Stegenga, Ryan, and Green (2023) performed an analysis of legislation such as the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) provision of the Constitution, the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), statements of guidance from the United States Department of Education (USDE), memos of clarification for the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), and court cases to provide school districts with advice and strategies on how to provide services to special populations of students and students in rural settings. Through their analysis Jameson et al (2020) determined special education services must still be provided by state and local education agencies regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic or level of public-school shutdown to follow FAPE, the ADA, and the IDEA.

Further analysis by Jameson et al (2020), shared the challenges of special education were exacerbated by schools and districts in a rural setting. These challenges included access to technology resources for students and educators, family's ability to support instruction in the home, educators' ability to provide instruction through remote teaching strategies, and the loss of non-educational resources (consistent meals, childcare, healthcare etc.) (pgs. 184-185). These challenges, while present in all school districts, make the provision of special education services more difficult in rural areas especially when COVID-19, "caused families in rural and remote areas to, understandably, prioritize basic needs over the support of educational services for their children with disabilities" (Jameson et al, 2020).

To combat these challenges, Jameson et al suggested the following strategies: Understand individualized student and family needs, develop partnerships with families and community members, use data-driven decision making, promote ethical and valid evaluation in remote learning environments, and promote interagency and interdisciplinary collaboration (2020). Each of these strategies seeks to maximize the impact local education agencies have on students during remote instruction and/or provide support to families to meet the necessities so students could participate in virtual instruction.

Overall, Jameson et al (2020) concluded remote learning must include all families, even those receiving special education services, the challenges to educational support services must not put students at increased risk of infection, and finally all services should support and preserve IDEA even when including the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, discussed by Matt Townsley (2019), focused on grading practices in K-12 education during remote instruction. Traditionally, classroom teachers had evaluated students by using combination of assignments, effort, participation, and achievement which correlated to a grade (Townsley, 2019). These grades are important markers of academic success and achievement which allow for students and parents to understand individual progress in a simplified manner. As students move through the educational system grades become more important, high school, for post-secondary admissions (Townsley, 2019).

Early in the pivot to remote instruction schools focused on mitigating barriers to student access (lack of technology) and participation (ensuring students engaged in the instruction). As a result, the concept of evaluation was a lower priority, until the end of the school year drew near. According to Townsley, school systems implemented grading methods designed to avoid any

potential negative impacts on students, such as, “Freezing the previous grades, replacing letter grades with pass-fail” (2019). While these were not the only examples of alternate grading practices used it is clear school districts were unprepared to communicate how students were performing.

To provide guidance regarding grading through the COVID-19 pandemic Townsley recommends the following three principles; 1. students have learned a prioritized set of course objectives and standards. 2. non-cognitive behaviors should be reported separately. 3. create a grading system emphasizing what students have learned over when they learned it (2019).

Townsley’s first principle is the basis of standards-based grading. This grading practice focuses on if a student mastered a concept or standard as opposed to receiving a letter grade. The assessments for the standard could be completed by students through a variety of mediums which would allow for students to communicate what they have learned in a format that best fits their ability. Grading is then done based on how well they showed their understanding of the concept.

The second principle, reporting non-cognitive behaviors separately, prompts removing the use of participation or work completion from grading practices (Townsley, 2019). Teachers have often assigned grades to activities or assignments which were assigned for practice of a skill and may not have been used to provide feedback to the learner. As a result, grades with non-cognitive behaviors included did not accurately reflect how students mastered objectives or standards.

Finally, the grading system should reflect what students learned over when they learned it (Townsley, 2019), due to the interruption to learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally students were assessed in a manner consistent with a courses instructional pace and deadlines. However, due to the suspension of in-person learning, increased absences due to

infection, or lack of access, students may not master objectives and standards by specific deadlines. Townsley suggests what is more important than when and students should have the ability to show mastery at any point during the instructional period (2019).

Overall, Townsley suggests moving to standards-based grading in which students can show what they have learned at an objective or standard level in a manner that is available to the student.

A similar piece of research was conducted by Kyndra Middleton (2020) and focused on student learning and assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this qualitative research focused on the impact of COVID-19 on classroom assessment, student learning, teaching, and interpretation of student growth.

Middleton explained the impact of COVID-19 on assessment was an increase in, “test pollution”, a term coined by Messick (1984), in which test preparation, situational factors, and external factors have influence on student assessment. These factors impacted remote instruction according to Middleton because test preparation, stress, anxiety, and unfamiliar assessment practices were “different from what students were used to” (pg. 41, 2020). The purpose of assessment, to determine what students have learned, is influenced by factors outside of the classroom. In the remote learning environment students may have had access to things they would not have had during in person assessments (notes, internet, other students) (Middleton, 2020).

Student learning was also impacted by COVID-19 according to Middleton, “students have also experienced deficits in learning as a result of new approaches to teaching that were implemented” (2020). Due to the quick pivot to remote instruction students were forced to learn in a format that was unfamiliar to them. For example, teacher expectations for the classroom

environment on campus are different than those for remote instruction and cannot be replicated in the same way thus there is no way to determine if students are learning in the same manner as in the classroom.

This impact to student learning was a result of the impact of COVID-19 on teaching states Middleton (2020), which was effect by the “lack of knowledge of evidence-based pedagogical approaches to teaching online, lack of knowledge of technology, family/personal issues, illness, or many additional reasons.” According to Middleton teachers had to learn how to teach remotely which impacted what was taught, the amount of new material incorporated into lessons, and the standardization of assessment scenarios (2020). In some cases, students were taught “less new material” (Middleton, 2020), which sets students behind for the completion of the school year and the next year.

Finally, Middleton explained how the interpretation of student growth was impacted by COVID-19. “Classroom instructional divergence creates additional variance in test scores so the ability to compare the same student’s test performance relative to others across last year and this year will be problematic (Middleton, 2020). Calculations of student growth data will be altered due to the lack of testing that occurred for many school districts at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. “Further, the variability in instruction will likely create larger variance in the scores due to the varying degrees of instruction and learning as a result of online schooling” (Middleton, 2020).

The impacts of COVID-19 on student assessment, student learning, teaching, and interpretation of growth may be felt for multiple years according to Middleton (2020).

Leech, Gullet, Cummings, and Huag (2022) also investigated the impact on teaching and learning in K-12 education because of COVID-19. In their mixed method study, they looked at

the different experiences by grade level, elementary (pre-k-5th grade) and secondary (6th-12th grade). The studies participants consisted of 604 teachers who taught at either the elementary or secondary level with varied levels of experience. Participants answered a six-question survey that used open ended questions for a constant comparison analysis. The research found four themes from the data analysis.

The first theme, Challenges with Student Motivation and Engagement emerged, which was described as students having trouble attending class, participating virtually, and putting forth effort. According to Leech et al (2022), “Due to the context of the pandemic, many requirements were loosened or removed, leading to some students not feeling the motivation to attend class or complete assignments”.

The second theme to emerge, Challenges with Teaching in a Remote Format, “included struggling to adjust curriculum to a remote setting, feeling disconnected from students and colleagues, and struggling to communicate remotely with students, families, and other staff” (Leech et al, pg. 255, 2022). While these are a broad range of challenges (teachers not feeling disconnected, adapting curriculum, and access to technology) many of the teachers felt they were ill equipped to meet the needs of students in a remote format.

Challenges with Student Resources and Support was the third theme developed from the data. According to Leech et al, this included parental support at home, technology resources, and support for students with disabilities (2022).

Finally, Challenges with Increased Stress and Work, this was not only related to their workload from teaching but also the necessity of taking care of their own households. This feeling was also impacted by the belief, “For some teachers, shifting to remote teaching from

home created double the work for them because of additional childcare responsibilities” (Leech et al, pg. 259, 2022).

These four themes were the same across each grade level, though there were some variations by grade level, for example, according to Leech et al, elementary teachers felt like adapting their curriculum to meet the needs of younger students was a greater challenge than the secondary teachers (2022). All of the themes were presented for each grade level and upon analysis could find connection to the other articles that were cited.

Institute for Personalized Learning

The Institute for Personalized Learning was created in 2010 by Wisconsin’s Cooperative Educational Service Agency #1 (CESA #1) (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2023), in an effort to support school districts implementing Personalized Learning Instruction. The vision of the Institute for Personalized Learning is to create, “a world where learners take an active role in the learning process and have power and ownership over their learning path and the results of their choices” (2023). The mission of the Institute is, “to support the implementation and sustainability of learner-centered systems that foster agency in all stakeholders” (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2023). To accomplish this mission the Institute leverages local, state, and federal resources to provide high quality, professional, personalized learning opportunities, and resources.

While the Institute for Personalized Learning was created by Wisconsin’s CESA #1, it works with a variety of customers to provide workshops, customized professional development, conferences, and training in Personalized Learning Instruction. This support is provided to public school districts, private schools, charter school organizations, and education focus groups (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2023).

One of the most identifiable resources created by the Institute for Personalized Learning is the Honeycomb Model. The model is a visual representation of the many different aspects of Personalized Learning Instruction and shows the interconnectedness with the individual learner at the center. The individual cells in the Honeycomb are categorized as either the Essential Foundation, Learning and Teaching, Roles and Relationships, and Learner-centered systems (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2023). According to the Institute for Personalized Learning, not all parts of the Honeycomb model must be implemented in order for a school to practice Personalized Learning Instruction, as each must personalize the implementation itself (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2023).

Summary

In this chapter, literature regarding personalized learning instruction, its uses, and effects on student achievement was reviewed. The literature reviewed showed there is an agreement among scholars that personalized learning instruction should focus on relationships, flexibility, data as a tool of instruction, student strengths and needs, and student interest. The literature also promoted using technology as a tool but also cautioned allowing it to become the central focus of a personalized learning approach to instruction. Finally, the literature revealed there are possible positive effects on student achievement especially in regard to mathematics-based curriculums. Literature focused on the effect of personalized learning instruction on reading achievement is scarce and many of the studies worked with samples of students who were either academically successful, post-secondary, or economically advantaged. This literature review will inform the methodology of the study, which follows in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 will explain the design and methodology of the study, the research questions, participants, data collection, and data analysis.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Personalized learning is an instructional approach used by teachers and leaders in schools that is centered on understanding student strengths and needs, using ongoing data analysis, and cultivating student interest with the goal of improving student learning and academic growth. The implementation of personalized learning in classrooms has changed over time, more recently incorporating data, technology, and resources previously not available to educators. After reviewing the literature in Chapter 2 much of the research on using a personalized learning approach has been focused on the student interest aspect of personalized learning instruction. In addition, much of the research on outcomes associated with personalized learning conducted thus far has been focused on the fields of math and science. For the purpose of this study the specific personalized learning intervention investigated will be referred to as Personalized Learning Instruction or PLI.

This qualitative study hopes to add to the field of research because it focused on the perception of principals who have implemented Personalized Learning Instruction in their schools. More specifically, the goal was to determine if principals believe there was an impact on achievement in English Language Arts classes for middle school students as a result of implementing PLI. By using a qualitative approach, the researcher was able to determine if school leaders believe Personalized Learning Instruction had a positive impact on student achievement. Since this study spanned two years during which schools were experiencing changes due to a global pandemic, the study also explored whether the COVID-19 Pandemic impacted the use of Personalized Learning Instructional practices. The results of this study have the potential to identify further areas of research and possible instructional practices to be used

post-COVID-19 to improve outcomes for students. This chapter will address the methodology, research design, participants, setting, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Research Questions

This qualitative study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction practices in their schools?
2. What are principals' perceptions of the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades English Language Arts achievement?
3. What are principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction?

Study Design

This study used a multiple case study research method. This method was determined to be an appropriate qualitative methodology because the researcher wanted to determine and analyze principals' perceptions of personalized learning and its effects on reading achievement through middle grades English Language Arts classes.

To conduct this multiple case study the researcher applied Social Cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999) which holds that personal beliefs, perspectives, and self-efficacy are shaped through experiences. The researcher investigated principal perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction in middle schools and more specifically on English Language Arts classes. As a result, this study focused on individual principals' perceptions, understandings, and experiences with Personalized Learning Instruction in middle schools as an instructional approach with a focus on English Language Arts and the impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic since the study took place during the COVID-19 epidemic.

When designing the study, the researcher selected four principals who had experience leading middle schools which implemented Personalized Learning Instruction in their schools. Furthermore, these principals had to be serving in their role at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic, which was the 2019-2020 school year. A survey and semi-structured interviews were used to gather principal perceptions.

Data collection occurred through surveys and semi-structured individual interviews, with each principal having an individual case report with their own findings. After the reports were created, the data from the four principals was compared and analyzed.

Setting

The four principals came from public school districts in the southeastern United States. Three of the participants came from a large urban school district serving over 100,000 students in grade PreK-12. The fourth participant came from a smaller suburban district which serves approximately 30,000 students. Both school districts follow a traditional 6th, 7th, and 8th grade model at the middle school level.

The districts in which this study took place allowed principals to decide to implement Personalized Learning Instruction as pilot programs, as the school districts did not require any type of common curriculum at that time. Each school leader was allowed to focus on the aspects of Personalized Learning Instruction they felt were best for their individual schools. This study sought to understand middle school principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction and the effects it may have had on English Language Arts achievement. This study also sought to understand any potential impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Personalized Learning Instruction.

The COVID-19 Pandemic started in March of 2020, and caused schools to move to a virtual learning model within a short time. Fortunately, PLI was an intervention intended to make use of technology in schools. As the pandemic continued, schools attempted to create more rigorous instructional practices and developed systems to bring students back to campuses for in person learning. Unfortunately, according to NAEP scores (2023) students nationwide returned to in-person learning with larger learning gaps than before March of 2020. Other issues have increased for school districts to address, including disruptive behaviors, socio-emotional health issues for students and teachers, and staffing issues, have all been impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic. As a result, this study also sought to understand principal perceptions about the COVID-19 Pandemic and its effect on Personalized Learning Instruction, particularly since PLI is primarily an individualized, technology-based approach that could arguably go unchanged due to a global pandemic, and in this case, had been implemented by these principals prior to the onset of COVID-19.

Participant Selection

Six middle school principals originally volunteered to participate in this study, however two were removed from the study due to scheduling conflicts and lack of experience with Personalized Learning Instruction in their schools. Participants were sent an invitation to participate via email specifically because of their schools' implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction. These principals were then sent a survey to determine if their experiences could be used to provide information relevant to the research questions. Each participant must have been serving as a principal at a middle school implementing Personalized Learning Instruction before the 2019-2020 school year and must have been a principal after the COVID-19 Pandemic. A recruitment email was sent out to potential participants explaining the voluntary

nature of the study, the study's purpose, and criteria for participation. A detailed case study is provided for each individual participant in Chapter 4.

Data Collection

The researcher applied and received IRB approval following university protocol and sent a recruitment email to six middle school principals who qualified for the study based on the specified criteria. After agreeing to participate in a demographic survey, criteria for participation, and informed consent were sent to each participant via email. Participants were also asked to provide times for availability to conduct interviews with the researcher. Ultimately, four middle school principals participated in this study.

The demographic surveys were completed by the participants through *Google Forms* before the semi-structured interviews were conducted. This survey gathered background information and information regarding the schools in which they served. Once the survey was completed, the semi-structured interviews were conducted, and a 45–70-minute block was allotted for each interview. All four interviews were conducted via Zoom in the Spring of 2023, and the transcription function was used to create a transcript of each interview. This allowed the researcher to easily create a transcription of the interview for analysis and coding. The transcripts were member checked by all four principals for trustworthiness.

Instrumentation

Two data collection instruments were used in the study to gather information. A *Google Forms* survey was first sent out to participants to collect demographic data (Appendix A).

The second tool was a semi-structured interview conducted with each individual participant. The design of the interview protocol was guided by the following topics: 1. Principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction in their schools; 2. Principals'

perceptions of the effect of Personalized Learning Instruction on English Language Arts achievement; 3. Principals' perspectives of the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction in their schools.

The interview questions were adapted from a previous study researching principal perceptions to help ensure internal validity. The researcher used a comparable study focused on Standards Based Grading to ensure credibility in the interview questions (Nash, 2023). Nash used semi-structured interviews with principals to collect data and analyze their perceptions of Standards Based Grading. The questions on this survey were adapted to collect data on principal perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction to answer the study's research questions. (Appendix B)

Data Analysis

The researcher used semi-structured interviews to obtain a clear understanding of perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction of each participant. Analyzing the initial survey and the interview transcriptions provided a better understanding of each principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction, its impact on English Language Arts achievement, and the effects of COVID-19 on the implementation of PLI.

After each interview was transcribed, the researcher compared it to the recording for accuracy and member checked the participant responses. The researcher then began coding each transcript with an inductive coding approach. This approach allows codes to emerge from the data as opposed to having codes applied to the data (deductive coding).

The researcher read the transcripts of each interview to gain meaning and followed the constant comparative method (Saldana, 2021). The information in the text was then reread and organized into smaller related chunks of similar words and concepts. These chunks were then

assigned a relevant code. Codes were designed to capture the essence or meaning of each chunk. After both rounds of coding were complete, similar codes were grouped into 6 categories of similar phrases which created themes. The themes were then articulated as thematic sentences.

Trustworthiness

To establish credibility, the researcher relied upon his personal knowledge of Personalized Learning Instruction as a middle school administrator who piloted PLI in his school. He was familiar with PLI and had undergone the same implementation professional development as the principals in the study. This experience and deep understanding helped shape the interview questions. The researcher ensured his professional peers understood all information would be kept confidential and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality of participants.

While qualitative studies are not easily transferable or generalizable to the general population, much can still be learned from the data analysis. This study provides thorough descriptions of principal perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction, which can be used by other school and district leaders considering adopting PLI or a similar personalized approach to instruction in the classroom.

The next important component of qualitative research is to ensure the dependability of the study. Dependability means a study can be replicated over time. To increase the study's dependability, a thorough description of the participant selection process, participant description, and explanation of the coding process were provided by the researcher. As a result of the descriptions of the study, future researchers can replicate the process to further add to the body of work.

Due to the researcher's status as a novice, his dissertation chair and committee members provided insight throughout the research process. Participants were able to review their responses in the transcripts to provide clarity, ensure accuracy, provide feedback, and confirmability of the study methods.

Risks, Benefits, and Ethical Considerations

Participants in the multiple case study faced minimal risks. The researcher applied to and received permission from the university IRB office to ensure compliance with ethical standards. Participation was voluntary and participants signed an informed consent to participate, understanding that they could withdraw at any time with no penalty. Pseudonyms were used for all participants and school locations to protect confidentiality. All data was coded and de-identified to provide anonymity and maintained and stored on a university *Google* drive. These documents were destroyed following the study.

Summary

Chapter 3 included a detailed description of the qualitative multiple case study. Data collection was conducted through electronic recruitment, a *Google* survey, and semi-structured interviews via Zoom, and transcripts were created of all interviews. Inductive coding under the constant comparative method was used to analyze the survey and interview data. The analysis of the data allowed the researcher to identify themes that corresponded across all cases. Chapters 4 and 5 will provide findings, analysis, discussion of cases, and recommendations for future study.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

As previously described in Chapter 3, the purpose of this study was to understand middle school principals' perceptions of the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades with a focus on English Language Arts achievement using a multiple case study approach. The research questions for this study were:

1. What are principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction practices in their schools?
2. What are principals' perceptions of the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades English Language Arts achievement?
3. What are principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction?

In this chapter, demographic survey data is presented for each principal and for the student population of the school in which they led the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction. An explanation of codes and categories used in the analysis of participant interview transcripts, and the individual case studies follows. Pseudonyms were used for each of the participants, their schools, and school districts to provide anonymity and protect confidentiality.

Each participant was interviewed using semi-structured interview questions referenced in appendix B. The interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and read for precision and understanding. The second transcript reading was conducted to allow the researcher to identify meaningful phrases and sentences from the transcripts. These phrases and sentences were added to a spreadsheet and a code was assigned to each. This process was conducted for each interview and codes were assigned from the previous case study or new codes were created. After coding

each transcript, the researcher sorted the codes into six groups and assigned category names to each group. Once grouped, the researcher analyzed the codes to identify themes that emerged from each category to find the commonalities between the case studies.

Each case study included a description of the participants' backgrounds, demographic data of each school, a narrative of the participants' experiences and perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction and its perceived effects on middle grades English Language Arts achievement. The data from each of the case studies was compared following the multiple case study procedure (Yin, 2018). Themes that developed from this comparison and match the research questions are described after each narrative.

Demographic Survey Results

The researcher sent an email to principals who agreed to participate and had been identified as having experience with Personalized Learning Instruction in early 2023. Four of the principals ultimately participated in the study. A ten-question demographic survey was then sent to each of the participants via *Google Forms*. Participants' personal demographic information is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 2
Participant Demographic Survey Questions 1,2,3

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Years in Principalship
Karen	Female	White	4
Kevin	Male	White	11
James	Male	White	20
Mark	Male	White	15

As shown, three of the four principals were veteran leaders with over a decade of experience in the principalship. The three veteran leaders were all white males with the fourth

participant being a white female. This is an unfortunate reality in the lack of diversity of demographics across the principalship in the state in which this study was conducted.

Principals were also asked to provide information on their schools for further consideration during analysis. This information included the percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch, which typically serves as an indicator of the number of students in poverty that the school serves. The survey also asked about the teaching staff's years of experience, specifically how many teachers had five or more years of experience.

Table 3
School Demographic Survey Questions 4,5,6

Participant	School	% of teacher 5+ years	% FRL	# of Students
Karen	Lilly	50	100	733
Kevin	Rose	83	27	950
James	Tulip	85	45	450
Mark	Daisy	90	20	1159

As shown, the three white male veteran principal led schools with a higher percentage of experienced teachers and a lower percentage of students qualifying for Free-or-Reduced Lunch (FRL).

Table 3 shows the principals' responses to the final questions of the survey, which focused on the schools' current use of Personalized Learning Instruction, if the principal received PD for PLI, and if the principal was working as a school-based administrator during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 4

Demographic Survey questions: 7,8,9

Participants	Principal During COVID-19	PLI PD	Currently using PLI
Karen	Yes	Yes	No
Kevin	Yes	Yes	No
James	Yes	No	No
Mark	Yes	Yes	No

Table 4 is a breakdown of each school's Ethnicity Demographics obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics and was used to help identify any responses or themes that may have been influenced by working with different ethnic populations. This was particularly useful when discussing ELA achievement with the principals.

Table 5*School Ethnic Demographic Breakdown*

Participant	School	% of students by Ethnicity				
		Asian	Black/AA	Hispanic	Multi	White
Karen	Lilly	6	48	39	2	5
Kevin	Rose	9	38	39	2	12
James	Tulip	0	15	20	0	65
Mark	Daisy	2	16	33	1	48

Analysis Process

Codes & Categories

After completing the transcription of each interview an analysis was conducted. Each analysis began with the coding of each transcript. A total of twenty-four codes were found

throughout the interview data which were then sorted into six larger categories. The six categories are:

1. Changes in required curriculum
2. Increased student engagement
3. Inexperienced teaching staff
4. Teacher shortage
5. Issue with implementation of PLI
6. Post COVID-19 Inequities

Descriptive Themes

The six categories were then organized into four data sets, thematic sentences were created for each set. These thematic sentences made connections across the principals' perspectives as descriptive themes in the case studies. The four thematic sentences were:

1. A misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices.
2. Staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction.
3. Principals perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction.
4. Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-Covid-19.

Case Study 1: Karen Lilly Middle School

The interview with Karen was conducted via Zoom, a virtual meeting platform, in the spring of 2023. Karen's semi-structured interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Karen's self-reported demographic data indicates she is a white female with four years of experience as a principal. She is the principal of Lilly Middle School in a suburban school district in the southeast United States.

Lilly Middle School consists of 733 students in grades 6-8, 100% of the students qualify for free-and-reduced lunch prices. The demographic breakdown of Lilly Middle School is as follows: 48% Black/African American, 39% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 5% White, and 2% Multiracial students. Fifty percent of the teachers at Lilly Middle School have 5 or more years of experience in education.

Lilly Middle School is Karen's first principalship. She had served as an assistant principal for 5 years before being appointed to the principalship. Karen did not receive any professional development for Personalized Learning Instruction before becoming the principal of Lilly Middle School. The school had already been established as a Personalized Learning Instruction school by the previous principal. This meant that all subject areas had incorporated PLI throughout the school. Karen also pointed out she only had one year of being the principal of Lilly Middle School before the COVID-19 pandemic shut schools down.

Karen shared that her now school has a very uniform and structured instructional approach to English Language Arts through a scripted curriculum. The school no longer employs the use of Personalized Learning Instruction for English Language Arts classes. Instead, a common scripted curriculum is used. The decision to use a scripted approach was made by the school district prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but was not implemented until after students returned to school. Karen shared that many of the teachers who were on staff before COVID-19 have tried to implement some of the Personalized Learning Instructional practices they had learned but found it difficult to incorporate into the new scripted curriculum.

Karen continued to explain how Professional Learning Communities (PLC's) plan for instruction using the pacing of the curriculum, the designated curriculum/resources, and data analysis of work samples. The curriculum calls for a skills time in which students' data

determines what they work on or practice, so in this respect the work is personalized. However, there is no student interest incorporated into the lessons. Karen's description of instructional planning at her school supports the theme that *a misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices*.

Karen proceeded to explain that she believed PLI would be a beneficial practice for the students returning from COVID-19 though staffing would make it difficult. She shared:

Students are coming to schools behind at an even greater degree than before we shut down. Using the strategies of PLI would benefit them, however, to successfully do this it takes teachers who have experience. Right now, half of my teachers are within their first three years of teaching. It's just too hard on them (teachers) to ask them to learn how to be a teacher and then learn how to incorporate an instructional practice that is very detail oriented.

Karen also agreed with the school districts' decision to utilize a common scripted curriculum, because of the inexperience of her staff. She shared, "More and more of the people I am interviewing and hiring have not gone through a teacher education program and are using some sort of lateral entry certification program. By using a scripted English Language Arts curriculum, the district is attempting to ensure all students receive instruction that is rigorous and aligned to standards regardless of who is standing in front of them." As a result of the staffing situation at her school Karen has moved away from continued implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction at Lilly Middle School. Her action supports the theme that *staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction*.

When asked about the impact of Personalized Learning Instruction on student achievement specifically for English Language Arts, Karen shared that she believes it did have a positive impact on student achievement. Lilly Middle School had exceeded growth on state assessments in several of the years preceding her taking over the principalship while PLI was being implemented. However, she did note that the school has exceeded growth under the new curriculum as well. Karen shared, “PLI wraps around the child and starts where they are academically, teachers do a lot to make sure they are scaffolding instruction, conferencing with students, using data, and including student interest. Before COVID-19, student engagement was up and students were growing, though we fell short of reaching proficiency numbers.” Karen also explained, “My students come to me behind already so reaching proficiency in a year may be very difficult to do. However, we have also been following the new curriculum and instructional practice with fidelity and have exceeded growth since testing has resumed. There are just too many factors to determine which is better for students.” Karen’s belief in PLI supported another theme, *Principal’s perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction.*

Finally, Karen was asked several questions about the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Personalized Learning Instruction and its value to education since the return to school. Her comments led to the theme *Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-19.* She shared that with the districts move to a uniform scripted curriculum the decision was made to go in the opposite direction of PLI.

So many of my kids were below grade level before COVID-19 and are even farther behind upon returning to in-person instruction. PLI could help close the gap, but with the other factors like staffing I don’t believe it’s supported. I don’t know that we (principals)

could lead a staff to implement PLI schoolwide again. I don't know if the scripted curriculum excludes PLI as a strategy so much, but COVID-19 really hurt teaching and learning on a large scale, and I don't know if we can afford not to have a large-scale approach.

While Karen did not have the experience of implementing PLI from the beginning she did inherit a school that was established in the practice. She was able to gain an understanding of what it took to effectively teach with PLI and its potential impact on student achievement. However, she believes the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic combined with the staffing issues she is facing makes it necessary to go away from Personalized Learning Instruction. It may also be possible that those teachers who were present prior to the COVID-19 and who remained following the Pandemic may be having some instructional effect concerning the continued growth following the formal PLI implementation. This could be explored through research beyond the scope of our study.

Case Study 2: Kevin Rose Middle School

Kevin's interview was also conducted via Zoom in the Spring of 2023, the interview lasted for approximately 50 minutes. Kevin has been the Principal of Rose Middle School for 11 years and introduced Personalized Learning Instruction to the staff in the 2014-15 school year. He self-reported that he is a white male who has been a principal for 11 years. Rose Middle School is a suburban school serving approximately 950 students grades 6-8. The demographic breakdown of Rose Middle School is as follows: Asian 9%, African American/Black 38%, Hispanic 39%, White 12%, and Multiracial 2%. Twenty-seven percent of the students at Rose Middle School qualify for Free-Reduced Lunch (FRL). Approximately 83% of the teachers have 5 years of teaching experience currently.

According to Kevin, Rose Middle School was one of the first in his school district to use Personalized Learning Instruction and as a result received a variety of professional development so he could learn and understand the concept of PLI strategies, and how to assist teachers to implement the practice in the classroom. He shared, “I flew to several different school districts around the country to see how they had implemented PLI, then the district brought in experts who were using it in their schools to help us understand how to navigate the hurdles that would come up with it. Finally, we had a summer boot camp with follow up throughout the year for teachers who needed support.”

This emphasis on professional development initially led to an increase of instructional alignment using Personalized Learning Instructional practices including and particularly for English Language Arts. Kevin shared, “PLC plannings really worked hard to make sure they utilized a lot of what they had learned. Data dives, scaffolding work based on student specific needs, choice pathways for readings, it was great.” However, following COVID-19, Kevin’s district made the decision to move to a scripted standardized curriculum for English Language Arts as well. Kevin shared, “I don’t believe the scriptedness of the curriculum lends itself to PLI. My teachers that have been doing it for a while, use some of the PLI strategies but not nearly to the level or depth they were before.” This perception supports the theme that *a misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices*.

When asked follow-up questions regarding the scripted curriculum the school now uses being a viable approach to teaching, or if PLI should be the focus again he was conflicted,

I think PLI is the best approach to teaching and learning because it gives students the opportunity to help drive their own instruction, increases engagement, and teachers move past just being content experts. Now, post COVID-19, this approach might be what we

need right now. It is hard to keep a staff together to get them trained and aligned with PLI. My staff is full of veteran teachers, but many of them were not there when we did all the groundwork for PLI. It takes a lot of time to teach teachers, and longer for them to practice it to do well. Many are not sticking around as long.

According to self-reported data, 83% of Kevin's teachers are considered veterans with over 5 years of experience. However, he estimates about 50% of those teachers come to the school post-COVID-19. This would mean these teachers missed the intense professional development and planning time to implement Personalized Learning Instruction. Professional development that would be unlikely to be provided by the district to the level it was before. Furthermore, most of the district's professional development, according to Kevin, has been to support teaching this curriculum paid for by the district. This perception supports the theme *staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction*. The district rationale for the current instructional practice is intended to be uniform for all schools so a teacher can move from building to building but still use the same professional learning to teach students.

As the interview progressed Kevin was asked if he thought the use of Personalized Learning Instruction had an impact on English Language Arts achievement. His answer, "Absolutely! I had more students talking about what they were reading to me, engaged in rigorous conversations about what they were reading, and I think I had more students meet or exceed growth than before." He believed the core instructional approach his school used of analyzing data, creating pathways of choice, and having weekly student-teacher conferences had a positive impact. He shared, "There is something powerful about students being able to see their data in a manner that's just not pass or fail, about how much I grew and connecting that back to

what they are doing. Even when a student might not be proficient on a state test, to see that they got better does a lot to move them.” Kevin’s remarks support the third theme, *Principals’ perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction.*

As the interview ended, we discussed the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Personalized Learning Instruction. He shared:

COVID really hurt. It is probably the single worst thing to happen to education in history. Taking all the politics out of it, kids just went backwards. Everything school systems had been working on came to a standstill and then for many of the kids, reversed. Especially at a school like mine where most of my kids are middle to lower income and don’t have the resources or support at home to get caught up. I think it’s still going to take several years for us to get caught back up from COVID-19 to the point of where we were before. But the fallout on things that’s not just teaching is going to be hard to beat.

When he was asked if Personalized Learning Instruction could help combat the impact of COVID-19 he hesitated before answering, “I don’t think it is just an instructional practice, if that was all we had to fight then yes. But I can’t get enough trained teachers, truancy, and mental health (students and teachers) has become a bigger issue.” Kevin’s response supports the theme, *Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-1.*

Kevin’s experience piloting a Personalized Learning Instruction program from the beginning and staying with the same school through the COVID-19 Pandemic give him a unique perspective. While being fully supportive of PLI, he no longer sees it as being a priority outside of his own practice and even one he struggles with implementing due to the many effects of COVID-19 and a scripted curriculum.

Case Study 3: James Tulip Middle School

In the spring of 2023, a Zoom interview was conducted with James, who was formerly the principal of Tulip Middle School for close to four years, a traditional 6-8 middle school in a rural school district. During the interview James did reveal that his Personalized Learning Instruction experience came from his time at Tulip Middle School, but his COVID-19 experience came from a high school position he had accepted just after the COVID-19 Pandemic began. James's self-reported demographic data aligns to his high school position. Upon further questioning he shared the middle school had an enrollment of 550 students, approximately 65% White, 20% Hispanic, and 15% African American or Black. Roughly 42% of the students were eligible for FRL. The teaching staff at Tulip Middle School were predominantly veteran teachers with 77% having five or more years of experience.

Tulip Middle School was in its third year of PLI when James became the principal. His assessment of the instructional planning and practices indicated an attempt at incorporating PLI strategies but not a coherent approach to instructional planning. According to James, "The teachers had been through professional development for Personalized Learning Instruction for about a year before I got there. Then the IF (instructional facilitator) left so the person guiding the planning and implementation was gone. During plannings it was just kind of a process of trying to work in a strategy." When asked how he and his administrative team addressed the alignment of instruction he replied, "we took it back to the basics of PLI, here is what you have been doing, data driven instruction, then from there we showed them how to make the adjustment with PLI so we took the data and made learning pathways. Over time we tried to incorporate more PLI practices, though I never really felt we aligned our instruction with

PLI.” James’s experience and opinion aligned with the theme of having *a misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices.*

James reported his staff at Tulip Middle School was primarily made up of veteran teachers with 77% having over five years of experience. In his opinion, “it’s not uncommon for schools that are in the more rural communities to have more veterans in my experience. These are folks who returned home from college or moved out here and stayed.” One’s first thought is that having a veteran staff would make it easier to implement any changes to instructional practices because professionals are past the point of needing teach classroom management, lesson planning, and the variety of other things newer teachers need. According to James, “it should have been a little easier for teachers to pick up PLI because they were mostly veterans but that’s not always the case. Most people, and teachers are no exception, like to stick with what is comfortable and don’t change easily. Though once they felt like they had support and coaching for PLI it helped.” He also shared, however, that it would be even harder to do with an inexperienced staff or post COVID-19. James shared, “When we shut down for COVID-19 teachers were trying to learn on the fly how to do so much remote instruction and the extra stress of trying to move kids that they didn’t really see. It was hard on many of them, coming back from that trying to learn a new practice or trying to learn how to manage a classroom with a post-COVID-19 kid would make it very difficult. Heck, even now I don’t know that I would have enough adults in the building because people aren’t coming to this profession.” He continued to share, “My teachers right now are being more successful with a standard plan across the PLC because the two or three veterans I have can make sure the others are teaching what they need to up to the standard.” James’s experience supports the theme, *staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction.*

As the interview transitioned to James's opinion about the impact of PLI on student ELA achievement, his thoughts and perception supported the theme, *Principal's perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction*. James shared much of his experience supported using PLI to promote academic growth and student engagement in the learning process.

“Students began to be the real owners of their learning and teachers really became facilitators who guided learning and supported content. I think I saw more students reach their growth goals consistently in those few years than any other time. I would often sit in PLC meetings with teachers and hear about how quickly a student has progressed to the next level in ELA because they were genuinely interested in what they were learning or how a teacher was able to set them exactly on the right path for their growth. I also heard from families how their students would actually talk about what they were learning and how much better they could read, these are middle schoolers who traditionally don't want to be at school during those grades. So, the impact of PLI is positive, does it work out on End of Grade test, that part could use more research.”

Finally, the interview reached the COVID-19 portion of the questions and his perception of the impact the pandemic had on Personalized Learning Instruction. James explained his move to a high school in a different district happened during the COVID-19 shutdown. However, he believes the impacts of COVID are the same across the different levels of school, elementary, middle, and high. He shared his school, like the other case studies, is having staffing issues, which stretch from losing people to private sector jobs (pay, remote work), vacancies, and candidates who are not qualified and must learn on the job. He also shares, “Instructionally, I think we have been set back years because of COVID-19. We have students who in some cases

missed over a year of school for a number of reasons. The remote instruction was sub-par in my opinion for most students, educators were trying but it was not as rigorous as it should have been for students. I think that can be seen in a lot of the data we do have access to. So far, I have seen districts respond by moving to standardized lessons all teachers can carry out and each student gets the same. It's done under the name of ensuring all students get the same, but I don't believe that's the best for students and it sure isn't PLI." James's opinion and experience supports the theme, *Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-1*.

James experienced Personalized Learning Instruction as a new principal coming into a school which had already started the process of implementing PLI concepts and strategies but needed direction. He was able to provide teachers and students with an environment in which students were able to grow academically and teachers could align the instruction appropriately. However, even though his assignment changed, his experience showed that he could offer the perspective of how PLI would still be affected at different levels of instruction at the middle school level.

Case Study 4: Mark Daisey Middle School

Mark has been a principal for 15 years with most of his professional leadership having occurred at Daisy Middle School, a 6-8 middle school in the suburbs of a southeastern school district. Daisy MS would be considered a more affluent school with only 20% of its students qualifying for Free-Reduced Lunch. The demographic breakdown of Daisy Middle School is as follows: 48% White, 33% Hispanic, 16% African American/Black, 2% Asian, and 1% Multiracial. Mark also initiated Personalized Learning Instruction at Daisy Middle School before the COVID-19 pandemic. Mark's interview took place in early 2023 and lasted about 1 hour and 10 minutes.

Mark's decision to bring Personalized Learning Instruction to Daisy Middle School was made to improve student growth. Mark shared his thought process, "Daisy had been meeting proficiency goals on End of Grade tests with relative ease. My teaching staff was solid in data driven instruction, classroom management, and instructional alignment. However, that really was only supporting my higher income and predominantly white students. I still had sub-groups who were not growing the way they needed to under traditional teaching methods." The school district provided professional development for teachers and administrators over the summer and the following school year. The PLC leveraged their skills with data driven instruction and worked to incorporate more student choice in the reading selections for English Language Arts. "There are a few works we had to make sure students read as part of the curriculum, but any of the ones we had flexibility with we switched out. We were fortunate and were able to get students to provide feedback of what they wanted to read, and our Parent Teacher Association bought any books we didn't have funding for," he shared.

Unfortunately, the instructional alignment was tested with the change by Mark's school district to a standardized set curriculum. "The change was made in the name of providing an equitable curriculum to all students. I am not sure that is what it does," Mark stated. Similar to what was shared previously, the new curriculum incorporates some data driven instruction, and offers a variety of activities intended to interest students but is assigned for all students instead of being an individual choice. "Many of my teachers have found it hard to continue to follow many of the practices and strategies of PLI with this new curriculum, especially the pace they are supposed to move at," shared Mark. The curriculum does not provide for the use of technology, regular conferencing with students, or individual student interest. As a result, PLC meetings

become more of a conversation focused on pacing instead of curriculum. This supports the theme that *a misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices*.

As the interview continued the subject of preparing staff to support PLI was addressed. At Daisy Middle School 90% of the teachers would be considered veterans when Mark introduced Personalized Learning Instruction to the staff. “Most of my teachers were hired by me at that point in time. I brought in my team, and we learned about PLI together and utilized district support and professional development to help prepare the teachers. They were easy to get on board with the idea of moving to PLI. I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that they agreed we needed to change our tactics to reach kids we kept missing,” shared Mark. Mark did not start the transition to PLI until his 6th year at Daisy Middle School, which allowed him to build trust and rapport with the teachers.

As the interview continued, Mark shared the struggle he had with keeping PLI going strong was the arrival of new teachers.

As time went on and we moved farther away from the additional district supports it became harder to adequately train my new staff members so they would be effective. Usually, when I had to fill a position, I was able to hire veteran teachers. This is a double edge sword; I don’t really have to teach you what to do in the classroom, but you’re also set in your ways because you were good at what you did. They weren’t as ready to jump into PLI because it sounded like a lot of different moving parts would create extra work and when it got harder, they would revert to what they knew worked. It took some extra convincing that a lot of what they did already existed just in a repackaged framework with PLI. What made this even tougher was that as time passed less PD (professional development) was offered. So, we had to teach them at the school with our staff.

It is no secret that Personalized Learning Instruction does take time for teachers to adjust, learn new strategies, and practice. With the loss of support from the district the responsibility falls on the school-based administration. This can become difficult for a school team to accomplish, Mark explained, “Once the district felt like it completed the necessary PD to get us started the process became ours with new staff, they didn’t get the sessions in the summer or quarterly work groups, the district did walk through to see what they were doing but by and large it was my responsibility to train them. Then when district initiatives change, we have to support the new ideas and mandatory learning for teachers. It creates an extra strain on all our staff.”

When Mark was asked if he thought PLI would be started today in a school without the district’s support to improve English Language Arts achievement, he said, “No. I think the lack of support you would get to teach or reteach the staff would be too great with everything else we have going on. I mean after COVID-19 we are struggling just to fill positions and Daisy has never had a problem attracting talent.” Marks’ opinions support the theme *staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction.*

The next portion of the interview focused on Mark’s perception of Personalized Learning Instruction impact on English Language Arts achievement. “Overall, I think it has a positive impact on English Language Arts achievement.” When pressed as to why he thought it had a positive impact he answered, “It’s equitable teaching at its core.” Mark believes the push for equity in education does not have to exclude PLI as an instructional practice. He asked, “at its core does PLI not offer students a learning experience which supports their individual needs, strengths, and interest?” School districts across the United States have pushed for equity for all students, especially when educating struggling sub-groups. As Mark says, “If we really want to

provide a leg up shouldn't we give them the individual support and not change curriculums to ensure all getting the exact same activity on the same day?" Marks' opinion further supports the theme *Principals perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction*.

Finally, Mark's perception of the impact the COVID-19 Pandemic has had on education and Personalized Learning Instruction, *Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-19*.

COVID-19 has messed everything up. We are still trying to come back from shutting down, but it created more problems than just loss of learning. If we were only dealing with learning loss, I would be at the lead saying let's do this, PLI can work for us here. Unfortunately, we lost time, students forgot how to interact with each other and their teachers, accountability has to be retaught, and there aren't enough teachers for any of us to fully staff a building. Before I left Daisy I had 5 openings due to COVID-19 which was high for me, and when I interviewed teachers they were already being offered two or three positions, I had one who actually turned me down when we discussed using PLI, they didn't feel like they needed to learn a new style of teaching and they could go to just as good of a school and not have to work as hard. They can!

Mark's experience at Daisy Middle School as a scenario was different due to its high level of student performance, socio-economic status, and his longevity in the position. His perception of the impact of Personalized Learning Instruction on English Language Arts achievement and the impacts of COVID-19 share similarities with the other case studies.

Research Question 1

What are principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction practices in their schools?

The first research question dictated the research was to analyze the principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction practices in their schools. Understanding the principals' familiarity and knowledge of PLI and practices in their schools helped to answer the additional research questions. Analysis of participant responses led to the emergence of the first theme: *a misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices.*

This theme arose in all four of the case studies. All four principals explained what Personalized Learning Instruction looked like in their buildings through planning meetings, strategies used in the classroom, and student involvement. With PLI, there is a focus on individual student data, scaffolding based on individual needs, incorporating technology, and student interest/choice influencing teaching and learning. While the four principals' introductions to PLI were different, some piloted the approach while others inherited it, they spoke positively about how their teachers were incorporating it into instruction prior to COVID-19.

However, all of the principals indicated that Personalized Learning Instruction was no longer the subscribed practices in any of their schools. Karen and Kevin shared that the district decision to move to a scripted curriculum ended the use of PLI as the driving instructional practice and had become a resource of strategies teachers would attempt to incorporate if there was time. Mark shared that the move to a common scripted curriculum was done in the name of equity, wanting to ensure all students received the same rigorous curriculum, which took the ability to personalize instruction away because of the requirements of the new, more structured program. As a result, Personalized Learning Instruction is no longer the primary approach to teaching and learning following COVID-19.

Furthermore, it was seen across all four case studies that district level support faded out over time. Kevin and Mark both shared how as pilot schools for the Personalized Learning Instruction, district backed professional development was thorough, relevant, and abundant when they first moved to PLI. As they and their staff gained experience less professional development was offered even when new staff members were hired. Then, the prevailing thought was that the teachers and administrators on campus could train the new teachers. This shift in support may have also been impacted by a change in district leadership, the vision of a new superintendent may not have aligned to supporting Personalized Learning Instruction thus resources were allocated elsewhere. Karen and James shared that as principals taking over schools that were using PLI, they did not receive additional support from the district and were responsible for providing the learning on their own. Both examples contribute to the misalignment that came to exist once priorities changed.

Research Question 2

What are principals' perceptions of the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades English Language Arts achievement?

The second area of analysis was to determine if principals perceived an impact on middle grades English Language Arts achievement. This is a particularly important topic because of the lack of research conducted on PLI and English Language Arts content. Much of the research that has been conducted on the effects of PLI has focused on more concrete and analytical contents such as math and science, the goal being to ensure students are growing academically each year. If principals perceive a positive impact from Personalized Learning Instruction, it may be worth expanding the research and incorporating PLI on a larger scale. Responses from the participants

in this study gave rise to the theme, *Principals perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction.*

Each of the principals interviewed affirmed their belief that Personalized Learning Instruction had a positive impact on student achievement particularly in English Language Arts (ELA). All four spoke of the higher levels of engagement in ELA classrooms particularly of the apparent increase in student reading. As Kevin shared, “students engaged in rigorous instruction about what they read,” and described how students understanding their own growth data positively encouraged students to do better. Mark believed it was an equitable approach to instruction because each student received instruction at the level the student needed and that produced growth. James shared that the positive impact of PLI was the increased engagement and its overall impact on learning for students. He provided an example of how families saw a difference in their student’s engagement and students wanted to go to school because they had a choice or input in how they were learning.

The principals shared that while they observed increased engagement in ELA classrooms, they did not necessarily see the impact of Personalized Learning Instruction clearly in achievement scores of students. As Karen explained that while she believed PLI had an impact on growth, there were other factors that could also produce growth, so she remained neutral on attributing it to PLI. In her words, “there are just too many factors to determine which is better for students (referencing the scripted curriculum).” However, there was agreement that the principals perceived improved achievement in ELA classes mainly through increased engagement in reading and reading is an important skill with implications in achievement in other subject areas.

Research Question 3

What are principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction?

The four case studies led to two final themes that answered Research Question 3. First: *staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction*. All of the principals in the study noted that the issues connected to the third theme existed somewhat before the COVID-19 pandemic, but they were amplified in a post COVID-19 world. As the principals noted, training new teachers in Personalized Learning Instruction was difficult before COVID-19 due to the rigor of the program and the required focus for teachers on each individual student. Also, getting veteran teachers to change their practices was a challenge but it could be done.

In contrast, principals in the post-COVID-19 world are having a variety of issues with more severe staffing shortages and widespread teacher vacancies that make it extremely difficult for them to train teachers in Personalized Learning Instruction. All of the principals shared how difficult it has become to fully staff a school. As Mark shared, even traditionally higher performing schools who regularly attract veteran teachers to fill their vacancies were now looking at recent college graduates or individuals applying for alternative licenses. As James stated, "I don't know that I would have enough adults in the building because people aren't coming to this profession." A principal's ability to fill vacancies impacts the quality of instruction provided in the school, and replacing veteran teachers, particularly those already trained in PLI, with new teachers presents a new strain on them.

The final theme directly related to Research Question 3, *Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-19*. After establishing this theme, each participant shared

their thoughts on the reasons PLI is no longer a priority after COVID-19. This can be seen in Mark's example of the teacher interviewing for a position post-COVID-19 who turned him down once they learned about the rigor due to the focus of PLI. COVID-19 created such a need for teachers that those who had certifications and experience often had multiple opportunities and could select the job that appealed the most to them. It was conceivably easier for them to accept a position that did not require new learning than that required changing the way they teach.

James shared that his school began having more success relying on veteran teachers to guide PLC's post-COVID-19 to ensure that standards aligned instruction was taking place in the classrooms than filling vacancies with new certified teachers and having to train them to utilize Personalized Learning Instruction.

Karen and Kevin shared that their districts' move in the name of providing an equitable curriculum for students ran counter to the use of PLI. Kevin also shared that a variety of other factors that have made teaching and learning even more difficult post-COVID-19, such as mental health, truancy, and transiency have forced schools and districts to adjust how they provide instruction. Kevin explained, "part of the idea of having a standard curriculum/instructional practice is to allow students to learn in one school and if they moved to another school across town, they would receive the same instruction."

All of the principals believed Personalized Learning Instruction could positively impact student growth in the post-COVID-19 world of education but conceded that with the variety of other factors that principals are having to deal with it is no longer a priority for districts.

Summary

In Chapter 4, the researcher provided descriptive data from each of the participants' case studies which included survey responses, self-reported demographic data, and a description of the analysis and synthesis process of the interview data. Four descriptive themes emerged from the analysis of the individual case studies:

1. Principals perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction.
2. A misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices, in each of the participants' schools.
3. Staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction, but not because they perceive it as ineffective.
4. Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-19.

Chapter 5 includes further discussion of the four case studies and themes, as well as implications for future research and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

School districts across the country have purchased instructional technology, introduced new curriculum, and have implemented new instructional approaches to promote academic growth for students. However, data from the National Assessment of Education Progress shows that all of these efforts have failed (2023). Reading achievement data in particular appears to be almost stagnant, with only three points of growth across the 28-year time span leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). To combat this stagnation some school districts and building principals implemented Personalized Learning Instruction (PLI) in hopes of targeting individual student needs to help promote academic growth. Academic research around Personalized Learning Instruction has focused primarily on content that can more easily be measured such as math and science. Little research exists on the effectiveness of PLI and middle grades English Language Arts achievement.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand middle school principals' perceptions of leading Personalized Learning Instruction practices in their schools. Utilizing a multiple case study design, four middle school principals from the southeastern United States participated in this study. Their school districts allowed the principals the autonomy to choose to initially pilot PLI and provided professional development and support for the process prior to COVID-19.

Recruitment of the participants was completed through phone calls and emails of individual principals who would be eligible for the study based on their prior experiences with PLI. Upon agreeing to participate in the study a *Google Form* was sent to capture demographic information about the principal and their schools. The researcher conducted semi-structured

interviews with the principals via the Zoom platform in the spring of 2023. The interview protocol was designed around: 1. Principals' perceptions and understanding of Personalized Learning Instruction. 2. Principals' perceptions of the impact of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades English Language Arts achievement. 3. Principals' perceptions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction. (Appendix B)

Once the interviews were completed a transcript was created through the Zoom platform. The written transcript was compared to the audio recording to ensure accuracy. The researcher then read through the transcripts and began coding the data, using the constant compare method. As the data was sorted into chunks and then grouped into categories, these categories were then analyzed and synthesized into four themes that were found in all four case studies. The themes are expressed as thematic sentences which were: (a) A misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices (b) Principals perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction, (c) Staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction, (d) Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-19.

By using this research method and the identified themes the researcher was able to answer the three research questions.

1. What are the principals' perceptions of Personalized Learning Instruction practices in their school?
2. What are principals' perceptions of the effects of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades English Language Arts achievement?

3. What are principals' perceptions of the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of Personalized Learning Instruction?

The researcher sought to add to the body of research on Personalized Learning Instruction by focusing on how principals perceived the instructional impact in their schools, particularly on English Language Arts achievement. The principals' experiences with Personalized Learning Instruction occurred during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The principals' perception on the impact of COVID-19 on Personalized Learning Instruction is also discussed. This chapter will provide an interpretation of the findings, discuss implications, and limitations of the study. Recommendations for future research will also be suggested to conclude the chapter.

Interpretation of Findings

Misalignments exist between using Personalized Learning Instruction strategies and the current instructional practices at schools.

The principals in all four case studies described Professional Learning Communities (PLC) which would meet, and plan instruction based on Personalized Learning Instruction strategies. These strategies included investigating individual student data, alignment to standards, scaffolding, one on one conferencing, the incorporation of student interest/choice, and learner ownership which are all tenants of the Honeycomb Model (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2020). The PLCs did vary in the level of alignment to PLI practices which was attributed to the amount of professional development, practices, and instructional leadership provided to the school at the time. This was mostly attributed to the level of involvement with Personalized Learning Instruction by the principal. The principals' initial experience with PLI varied as two principals were originators of pilot programs and the other two were named principal after the instructional shift to Personalized Learning Instruction had started.

Misalignment of instruction occurred as Karen, Kevin, and Mark's school districts made the decision to move to a scripted curriculum following the implementation of PLI. Each shared the difficulties of using Personalized Learning Instruction with the new curriculum, mostly due to the pacing and rigidity of the prescribed curriculum. According to Karen, "there just isn't the time to do all the necessary planning or flexibility to do what we need to really personalize the instruction." The role of student interest in the new curriculum is removed, "students' are all reading or studying the same topic, though it is in a variety of genres they still read about the same thing. If there is any choice it might be between two or three activities or assessments but those are still dictated by the curriculum," according to Kevin. Mark shared, "there is a skills time that is supposed to focus on the students doing work to support English language arts skills but even then, it is what the curriculum tells teachers to assign to the student." This finding was particularly disappointing considering the next theme that showed principals did perceive that PLI was having a positive impact on student achievement.

James' misalignment occurred not because of a change to curriculum but because of the leadership change during the process of implementing Personalized Learning Instruction. As a result of James' being appointed to the school after the prior administration had started PLI, teachers used selected strategies instead of the overall instructional practice. As he said, "a choice board here, a conference there, but nothing cohesive."

The transition to a scripted curriculum goes againstSizer's first tenant of Personalized Learning; Give room to teachers and students to work and learn in their own, appropriate ways (pg. 214, 1984). Once districts decide to follow a common scripted curriculum or have veteran teachers create lesson plans for all to follow, they have lost alignment with a core component of

Personalized Learning Instruction. As a result, none of these principals currently have alignment to Personalized Learning Instruction in their schools.

Principals perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction

Each of the principals expressed a belief that there was a positive impact on student achievement. This was particularly true in the English Language Arts instruction. Each shared a similar story about how students were more engaged, reading improved, students were active participants in their education instead of just recipients. Each also attributed this engagement largely to allowing student interest and choice of reading material to drive the ELA content. Mark commented on PLI being an “equitable” approach to teaching and learning. PLI does provide opportunity to provide each student a very specific course of study that is aligned to the state standards, with the goal of moving each student to show mastery of the standard. In other words, it provides students with the instruction they need to rise through content materials based on their personal interests. This is unattainable by a common scripted curriculum that does not meet the needs or engage the interest of each student.

Karen explained she believed Personalized Learning Instruction had an impact on the growth scores for her school and cited how each year before the scripted curriculum was adopted her school had met or exceeded growth on state assessments. While she expressed that it may be too large of an assumption to claim that PLI was the only reason for her students’ success, it does encourage further research into the practices that were used for PLI in the English Language Arts classes.

In addition to seeing students’ scores grow, James cheered the level of student engagement with learning that was robust enough to reach student families at home. He shared,

“I also heard from families how their students would actually talk about what they were learning and how much better they could read.” He believed that this was a clear result of students feeling academic success under Personalized Learning Instruction, taking pride in their accomplishment, and possibly encouraging family engagement in their learning as well.

Finally, Kevin found students more passionate about their learning and skills growing in English Language Arts, “I had more students talking with me about what they were reading.” All these examples would be considered positive improvements to student learning. Having students engaged in reading, excited about what they are reading, and talking about their progress can be viewed as having an impact on English Language Arts achievement. Since improved reading ability can result in improved student achievement in other subject areas, it is conceivable that PLI in the ELA classes helped expand the magnitude of improvement schoolwide.

The examples provided by these principals are whatSizer (1984) described as “Exhibitions of Mastery”, which allow students to show what they have learned in more than just a rote recall of facts on standardized tests. It reveals true learning by the student and provides them with ownership of what they have accomplished.

However, there are a few variables which could work in concert with Personalized Learning Instruction to improve student achievement. For example, Daisy Middle School had a teaching staff with veteran teachers who were hired by Mark and believed in the PLI process from the start. These two factors could account for better content and teaching knowledge as well as a positive bias towards student success with strategies they were using. Regardless, all four principals perceived that PLI had a positive influence on student achievement.

Staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction

As seen in Chapter 4 this theme is influenced by COVID-19 but not entirely. Much of what the principals shared aligned with issues school leaders were facing before COVID-19 became a major problem for education. Having to hire inexperienced teachers to fill vacancies has always been a practice at some schools more than others, issues with veteran teachers failing to adjust, and simply not having teachers to put in the classroom is not new. All four of the principals involved in the study shared how these issues made it difficult to continue Personalized Learning Instruction.

Furthermore, with staffing issues such as vacancies, a personal connection to all students in the building (Sizer, 1984) cannot be created and teachers will not be able to adjust instruction to help students succeed in learning. Students perform better when they have adults in the classroom with them who know them and are partners in their learning (Shore, 1995, 1997, 1998); Kudlats, 2019, 2020, 2021).

Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-19.

COVID-19 is, “the single worst thing to happen to education in history,” stated Kevin. By all accounts shared during these case studies it did have the worst impact on Personalized Learning Instruction. While COVID-19 did not cause school districts to turn to a scripted curriculum for all middle schools to use during English Language Arts instruction, it did provide an argument that it would be best for all kids to approach learning in the same manner because so much was missed and easiest for new and novice teachers to implement.

Even though all the principals agree that Personalized Learning Instruction sets itself up to move more individual students through strategies like customized learning paths (Institute for

Personalized Learning, 2020) because each student would receive a pathway of instruction tailored to their needs and academic goals, Personalized Learning Instruction has been left behind because COVID-19 has magnified issues like staffing. Simply put, you cannot customize a learning pathway if you do not have a teacher in the room. In addition, if schools experience a revolving door of teachers (and leaders), they fall short in establishing meaningful relationships with students. This misses a critical aspect of Sizers' tenants (Sizer, 1984, 1992, 1999).

Furthermore, COVID-19 laid bare the inequities students face in resources and support outside of school. School districts have responded by utilizing a common scripted curriculum that provides all students with the same instruction. It is an attempt to lift students up to the same bar of instruction while attempting to cover up the issues of staffing vacancies and inexperienced teachers because they simply need to follow along in the script for the next lesson, activity, or strategy. This goes against another of Sizer's Five Tenants of Personalized Learning (1984), "Keep the structure simple and thus flexible." Teachers are expected to stay on a script at the correct pace and if they fall behind run the danger of not adequately teaching the curriculum. Personalized Learning Instruction provided flexibility for students to grow and eventually prove mastery of skills and concepts, not complete a pace.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be considered with caution as they may not be generalizable to other schools or districts. This multiple case study included the perceptions of four middle school principals. While originally six principals did agree to participate, two had to remove themselves from the study due to conflicts and personal reasons. As a result, the number of case studies may not be enough to capture enough data to be generalizable. All the principals who participated were middle school principals at traditional middle schools where Personalized

Learning Instruction had been adopted. The leaders must have been in the role during the 2019-2020 school year. While they did represent multiple districts, these factors could impact the transferability of this study to other school districts, schools, or principals.

Using semi-structured interviews for data collection in this qualitative study may also be a limitation to the finding. Data analysis is dependent on the participant to provide honest responses to the questions based on their own personal experience, which depends on their willingness to share. However, a delimitation of this study is the researcher's professional relationships with the participants as a fellow principal trained in PLI and the anonymity provided.

The final limitation of this study is the subject of COVID-19 itself. This study sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 on Personalized Learning Instruction. COVID-19 may have had an impact on the perspectives of the participants who are still working to recover from the pandemic. It would not be possible to recreate the educational climate of COVID-19 because of the large scale shut down of our education system, and COVID-19 will have already impacted our decisions in the future if another pandemic arises.

Implications

This study attempted to understand middle school principals' perceptions of the effect of Personalized Learning Instruction on middle grades English Language Arts education in particular. This study found the middle school principals had a clear understanding of Personalized Learning Instruction and believed that there is a positive impact on English Language Arts achievement when using PLI. This was believed to be a result of the improved reading ability achieved when students are given a choice in their reading materials. Students spent more time reading and consequently built their reading skills. This impact on engagement

with increasing levels of reading was perceived to have improved ELA achievement through increased reading ability. As several of the case studies revealed, the positive impact may not necessarily be quantifiable as things like an increase in engagement and self-advocacy were revealed to be areas of significant improvement but are not measured with tests.

According to the case studies presented the impacts of COVID-19 on the many facets of education may have made it too difficult for principals to effectively lead schools through Personalized Learning Instruction. The issues of staffing (vacancies, qualified applicants) being one of the more severe impacts of COVID-19 have led districts to look for ways to account for the inexperience of those teachers who are hired. While strategies like scripted curriculum do allow for an inexperienced teacher to provide a standard level of instruction, it does not necessarily provide students with the most needed instruction for their own growth. As a result, student interest, a core tenant of Personalized Learning Instruction (Institute for Personalized Learning, 2020) is removed. It also removes the flexibility Sizer established as a core tenant of Personalized Learning Instruction (1984), which could limit students' academic growth. In other words, due to the decision to use a scripted curriculum to counter the effects of COVID-19 students will only grow as far as the curriculum will allow.

Recommendations

This study points to the need for further research into Personalized Learning Instruction and its impact on middle grades English Language Arts achievement. While this study analyzed multiple case studies of principal perceptions it did not analyze quantitative data to determine if schools who were using PLI were experiencing an impact on reading achievement scores. All the principals in the study indicated they believed there was a positive impact on student achievement, but primarily referenced student engagement and ownership of learning through

improved reading engagement. By comparing the data of schools, and subgroups who were taught with Personalized Learning Instruction we could begin to determine if there is a quantifiable impact to student achievement in English Language Arts. In addition, replicating this same study from the teacher's perspectives in English Language Arts class could add a layer of depth to the picture that this study paints.

Furthermore, research of both qualitative and quantitative nature should be conducted on the use of scripted curriculums and compare results with outcomes from using Personalized Learning Instruction. Qualitative studies could investigate if principals perceive positive impacts to student engagement and achievement in middle grades English Language Arts achievement. Quantitative studies could be conducted to compare student growth scores and End of Grade proficiency scores of both methods of instruction. This may allow researchers to determine if one instructional approach has more of an impact than the other. It may also be beneficial to investigate student perceptions of the different instructional efforts.

Finally, these studies should be conducted in a manner focusing on the impact these methods of instruction have on the performance of students from traditionally lower performing subgroups. It may be possible to identify an instructional approach which benefits members of lower performing subgroups and increases their growth and proficiency on middle grades English Language Arts assessments. This would potentially allow educators to progress in closing the long standing achievement gap.

Conclusion

Since the early 2000's attempts have been made to close the twenty-four-point achievement gap between students who qualify for the National School Lunch Program and those who do not qualify (The Nations' Report Card, 2019). Despite the use of legislation such

as the No Child Left Behind Act (2000) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) growth has been minimal and even absent.

In response, school districts across the country have employed a variety of instructional approaches to improve student growth and achievement. One such approach was Personalized Learning Instruction, a practice initially developed by TheodoreSizer in 1984 and re-imagined in 1999. The core tenants of Personalized Learning according to Sizer (1984, p. 214) are:

1. Give room to teachers and students to work and learn in their own, appropriate ways.
2. Insist that students clearly exhibit mastery of their schoolwork.
3. Get the incentives right, for students and for teachers.
4. Focus the students' work on the use of their minds.
5. Keep the structure simple and thus flexible.

All the tenants support student growth and were expanded upon by the Institute for Personalized Learning to include variables such as student specific data and custom learning pathways.

This qualitative study sought to add to the existing research on Personalized Learning Instruction by examining principals' perceptions. Using a multiple case study approach four middle school principals who implemented Personalized Learning Instruction and were principals during the COVID-19 Pandemic were interviewed.

Four themes were derived from the data of the four principal's interviews. These themes are (a) A misalignment exists between using PLI strategies and the current instructional practices (b) Principals perceive a positive impact on student achievement through Personalized Learning Instruction, (c) Staffing issues, inexperience, and vacancies have pushed instructional leaders away from Personalized Learning Instruction, (d) Personalized Learning Instruction is not a priority post-COVID-19. The findings of each theme also reflect how principals perceived Personalized Learning Instruction to be impacting English Language Arts achievement and the impact of COVID-19 on Personalized Learning Instruction.

The implications discussed that principals believed Personalized Learning Instruction had a positive impact on English Language Arts achievement especially in the areas of student engagement in reading and ownership of learning. However, it was noted a misalignment existed between PLI and current instructional practices especially in districts which have transitioned to scripted English Language arts curriculums.

Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 has been felt across school and districts, especially in the areas of staffing. Due to a magnified staffing shortage districts and school leaders have transitioned to using curriculum and instructional approaches that can be replicated by teachers in the classroom regardless of their experience, skills, or certifications.

Finally, this study identifies a need for continued research into Personalized Learning Instruction regarding a potential quantitative impact on English Language Arts achievement and student growth. If educators are going to reduce the achievement gap, they will need to have a clear understanding of which instructional approaches can be beneficial to use in their schools and the freedom and support to implement them. The results of this study show that Personalized Learning Instruction is, in fact, an equitable approach to curriculum and instruction in English Language Arts classes and should be reprioritized as such. Principals should also be allowed freedom to personalize the instructional approach in their schools that they determine best fits the needs of their staff and students. Ultimately, as this study showed, focusing on student interest and freedom of choice, particularly in the reading materials of their ELA courses, showed the potential to powerfully engage students and their families and improve student performance which leads to teachers and school leaders meeting their professional goals. Despite the interruption of a global pandemic and severe teacher shortage, this research suggests that

Personalized Learning Instruction as an instructional approach to learning should not be abandoned by educators, school leaders, or policy makers.

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APPENDIX A

Email Demographic Survey:

1. What is your professional role?
2. To which gender do you most identify?
3. Which of the following best describes your race? American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Pacific Islander, or White.
4. In what year did you become a principal?
5. What is the student population of the school you serve as principal?
6. Approximately, what percentage of your teachers have taught for five or more years.
7. Does your school use Personalized Learning Instruction?
8. Approximately what percentage of your students qualify for free-or-reduced lunch?
9. Were you working as a school-based administrator during the 2019-2020 school year?
10. Did you complete Personalized Learning Instruction professional development provided by the school district?

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions adapted Attitudinal Survey from:

Nash, S. (2023) *Caught in the Middle: Middle School Principals' Perceptions of Traditional and Standards-Based Grading Practices* (Publication No. 30249643) [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina-Charlotte]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Interview Question/ Research Questions Specifications

Interview Questions:	Perception of current (traditional) and PLI practices (Q1)	Effects of PLI in instruction/ ELA performance (Q2)	Impacts of COVID-19 (Q3)
1. Describe the instruction practices used by your school. Would you describe your school as one that primarily uses Personalized Learning Instruction?	X		
Follow up prompts if NOT addressed by previous question. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do teachers plan for instruction? • What data is used to determine what students need for instruction? • How do teachers incorporate student interest into planning? • How do teachers plan for assessment? 	x		
2. What are the strengths of the instructional practices that are currently used in your school?	x		
3. Tell me about your knowledge and experiences with PLI and non-PLI practices, and what are your perceptions of each?	x		
4. What types of feedback should parents and students receive as part of PLI and student achievement?		x	
5. What do you believe are your teachers' views about PLI vs traditional instructional practices?		x	
6. What factors should teachers consider when using PLI and student achievement?		x	

Follow Up (if not addressed by previous question) What effects does PLI in the classroom that are not seen on standardized tests?		x	
7. It is important for teachers in the same subjects and grades to use the same PLI approaches to impact student achievement and is it happening in your school? Why or why not?		x	
8. Describe your schools transition to PLI. What was your role in that process? What actions have you taken to support the transition to PLI?		x	
Follow up (if not addressed) What type of training was provided for PLI? Who led the training? Was it effective in supporting the transition to PLI? Does your school have ongoing conversations about how to implement PLI?		x	
9. In what ways do you monitor Personalized Learning Instruction in your school?	x		
10. What factors have contributed to your success in transitioning to PLI in your school?		x	
11. What factors inhibited the transition to PLI?		x	
12. What pressures exist to continue PLI? Abandon PLI?		x	
13. What do you believe is the benefit of PLI in middle school?		x	
14. What effects do you believe PLI has had on your school English Language Arts Achievement?		x	
15. Considering the current impacts of COVID-19 on student learning do you see a greater need for PLI? In what ways?			x
16. Considering the current impacts of COVID-19 on teachers do you see PLI as a priority for teacher professional growth? Why or why not?			x

17. Considering the current impacts of COVID-19 on yourself as a school leader, do you feel PLI can be successfully sustained to impact student achievement? Why or why not?			x
18. What improvements need to be made to the current instructional practices at your school at this point?	x		