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In the United States, teachers and teacher educators are being challenged to differentiate instruction and personalize learning for all students. Moreover, there is an increasingly multi-culturally diverse student body. Students in pre-K-12 classrooms reflect increasing diversity along multiple dimensions (e.g., race, culture, ethnicity, heritages that reflect multiple cultures, gender preferences, sexual orientations, and religious practices). According to Davis (2008), of the approximately 79.9 million students in grades pre-K through 12, the majority of students were non-Hispanic white, followed by Hispanic students, black students, and Asian students. In contrast, the majority of K-12 teachers are monolingual

(English) and white (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Additionally, high school drop out rates are becoming ever higher in rural, suburban and urban communities across the country.

Moreover, the National Dropout Prevention Center (2014), in an executive summary of important facts and statistics derived from the U.S. Census Bureau, indicates that students who drop out of high school are likely to be in the lowest 12% of the population in terms of educational attainment. Their earning power is greatly impacted and one could argue their quality of life and the consequences for them and their communities. Because of increasingly diverse student populations and because contemporary authors in the United States are recommending curricular reform towards personalized learning, we believe that John Clarke’s book, *Personalized learning: Student-designed pathways to high school graduation*, provides a field tested set of guidelines that others may find helpful. In this review of his work, we first describe the author’s qualifications and then provide a critique based on our reading of the book.

Clarke, a former high school teacher and teacher educator, has taught high school English, prepared secondary teachers at a state university, worked with local high school personnel, established a teaching improvement program for faculty at the University of Vermont, and worked with the Brown University Education Alliance and Lab to focus on student engagement and high school personalization. An author of four other books on personalized learning, Clarke has collaborated for more than two decades with faculty, students, and staff at Mount Abraham Union High School (Bristol, Vermont) where he works “with the Pathways Team to design personalized pathways to graduation with students who want to manage their own learning” (p. xxi-xxii).

Guided by the motto, “all learning is personal” (Clarke, 2013, p. 1), Clarke organizes the research gathered for his book into seven chapters: Engagement in Learning, Patterns of Growth, Shaping the Process of Inquiry, Scaffolding Personal Learning, Integrating School and Community, Assessing Readiness for College and Work, Transforming High School Learning. The chapters are embraced by an Introduction and a Conclusion and
features several evocative student reflections which show both the evolution of the Pathways system and the impact on individual students.

As noted by Joseph DiMartino (President, enter for secondary School Redesign, Inc.), Clarke “paints a picture of how a personalized high school might look using the words of those who created it” (p. x) and provides a “convincing road map for educating all of America’s students” (p. xi). Readers learn from the voices of the students, advisors, community mentors, and administrators involved in the program.

Clarke’s account is a welcome addition to the growing list of successful reform efforts to change the way high schools prepare their students for post-secondary life of work, further education, and citizenry. The explicit account of a local comprehensive high school echoes the broader changes in policy at state and national levels. As an example, Bramante (2012) describes the changes in policy, regulations, and practice in New Hampshire’s education system including the move from credit for seat time (the number of hours a student spends in class, known as the Carnegie Unit), to credit for demonstrated learning (anytime, anyplace, anyhow, any pace) Clarke’s book addresses an important question facing educators today -- how to personalize education for students in a system that is largely standards-based. The premise of Clarke’s work is that it takes comprehensive planning and involvement of all participants (students, teachers, families and community members, administration, and staff developers). The chapter on “Transforming High School Learning” includes comments from the State Secretary of Education, the District Superintendent, and the Associate Superintendent for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment. This chapter, in concert with the previous chapters, provides a rich discussion of the challenges and the ways members of the district staff have worked together across subjects and programs to create a process for personalizing “conventional” courses at the high school level.

To gain the most benefits from this work, we recommend that educators read this book with a self-critical lens. Given that the ability to question the assumptions underlying one’s own professional teaching practices can
uncover ways in which these assumptions might interfere with providing the best education possible for our students. Such a stance echoes a sentiment expressed by Margaret Mead (1963) who wrote, “If we are to achieve a richer culture, we must weave one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place.” Meaningful action often reflects a broader understanding of cultural diversity, including European culture.

John Clarke’s work echoes advice from John Dewey who wrote, “If we teach today’s children what we taught yesterday’s, then we rob them of tomorrow” (Dewey, 1944, p. 167). By making changes in the curriculum and facilitating personalized pathways, John Clarke and colleagues at Mount Abraham have ensured that today’s children can be better prepared for tomorrow’s uniquely individualized and culturally diverse world. Educators, parents and community members would be well served by reading, discussing, and implementing the concepts and examples presented in this work. While not a blueprint, the concepts and examples represent years of practice, reflection, refinement, and success stories which have made the educational process much more personalized and meaningful for today’s youth. We hope that readers can agree, based on Clarke’s account, that the answer to the question, “Can high schools personalize learning?” is an enthusiastic “Yes, they can.”

References


About the Reviewers

Ann Nevin is professor emerita at Arizona State University and a faculty associate of Chapman University in Orange, California. She has a PhD in educational psychology as well as an Ed.S. in educational administration from the University of Minnesota and M.Ed. in special education from the University of Vermont. Since the 1970s, she has co-developed various innovative teacher education programs in Vermont, Arizona, California, and Florida. Her interest in collaborating with K-12 students, teachers, and parents in designing and evaluating meaningful instructional procedures for students with disabilities has been reported in co-authored books, research articles, chapters, and supported by federal and state grants. Dr. Nevin’s most recent research activities involve the application of culturally responsive research methodology: Emerald Group Publishing with Berryman and SooHoo.

Mary E. McNeil, professor emerita University of New Hampshire System, received the doctorate in Systems Development and Adaptation from Boston University, M.Ed. in special education and CAS in administration and planning from the University of Vermont. Dr. McNeil was previously dean of Education at Rivier College in Nashua, New Hampshire; Associate Dean and Professor for the College of Educational Studies as Chapman University in Orange, CA; and Director of the Pakistani Institute at Plymouth state University. She has been a member of the New Hampshire State Board of Education and currently serves on the Professional Standards Board. She was co-editor of *Teacher Education and Special Education* and established the *New Hampshire Journal of Education*. An accomplished author of national and state grants, she has published research journal articles, chapters, and books. Dr. McNeil has consulted widely in a number of countries.