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Understanding Human Agency in Students and School Personnel's Perceptions of  
Personalization for Academic and Social Learning

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The National Center for Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU) is a national research center and development center that focuses on identifying the combination of essential components and the programs, practices, processes and policies that make some high schools in large urban districts particularly effective with low income students, minority students and English Language Learners. NCSU and this research are funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (R305C10023). The opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the sponsor.

**Abstract:**

## Introduction

Personalization in schools has gained marked attention recently as educators and other relevant stakeholders have recognized it as integral to teaching and learning. A history of the concept, however, describes the tendency to view personalization as separate from teaching and learning or in contraposition to standards and accountability measures (Lisi, 2003).

Personalization, however, could be understood as having two intertwined strands. On the one hand, personalization is a student-centered approach that primarily focuses on the academic element of school (Keefe, 2007) and is synonymous with “personalized instruction” and “personalized learning” (Keefe and Jenkins, 2002). On the other hand, personalization centers on how schools foster caring, adult-student relationships in schools (McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne, & Powell, 1990; Osterman, 2010).

Both strands of personalization, therefore, need to be understood as complementary, rather than incompatible. They share a reciprocal relationship in that students’ social-emotional well-being influences their academic performance and vice versa. However, in the current era of universal standards-based accountability, the emphasis tends to be solely on the academic aspect of schooling (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Sirotnik, 2002) which centers on achievement in the cognitive domain—with minimal or oblique reference to the social-emotional context and goals of school. Indeed, great stock has been placed in accountability policies for improving academic proficiency and closing the racial achievement gap (Lee, 2006).

These academic efforts obscure the need to address personalization practices in school and related social-emotional learning (SEL)<sup>1</sup>/non-cognitive outcomes (Hoffman & Levak, 2003; Lee, 2006; Sloan, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, researchers are pointing to a balanced focus on the school’s goals for high academic achievement *and* meeting students’ socioemotional needs

(Elias, 2006; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). As McCombs (2004) notes, “The importance of balancing the focus on high academic achievement with a focus on students’ social and emotional learning outcomes is vital” (p. 23). Both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are essential to the development of well-rounded students (Heckman, Stixrud, & Urzua, 2006).

A duly strong emphasis on this social-emotional facet is critical at the high school level, particularly for low-income minority students who come to believe that they matter and who benefit greatly from positive personalized experiences with adults in their schools (Becker & Luthar, 2002; Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). In particular, adults in schools have a role to play in developing students’ sense that they have the resources to exercise control over their own lives, something Bandura (2006a) calls human agency. A considered policy proposal should reflect the view that “students’ emotional and social maturation is every bit as important as their intellectual growth” (Sirotnik, 2002, p. 666). Yet, from all accounts, current education reform/policy appear to rarely reflect, if at all, such a developmental approach to learning. As education theorists and researchers have underscored, adult-student interactions within schools provide significant context for adolescent development and functioning (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006; Bandura, 2006a; Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Murray & Malmgren, 2005; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). High schools, though, have been deemed to be impersonalized learning environments that are “less supportive and less motivating for all but the highest achieving students” (Eccles & Roeser, 2011, p. 229).

The purpose of the present study is to examine eight high school students’ perceptions of their personalization experiences in school and, in particular, to understand the ways the adults in the school support student agency. Drawing from findings from a multi-level case study on school effectiveness, this paper explores enactment of the major finding from the study, namely,

that the higher performing schools *personalized the academic and social experience for students*, something we call PASL. In the larger study, we found that the HVA schools systemically attended to students' academic and socio-emotional needs through deliberate structures as well as a conscious effort to build relationships between adults and students. We found that the HVA schools differed from the LVA schools through structures such as the pairing of administrators and guidance counselors with students for all four years, strong behavior management systems as well as by fostering cultures that attended to students' academic and social needs.

From a theoretical perspective, ideas of PASL dovetail with essential features of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Social cognitive theory turns our focus to interplay of intrapersonal, behavioral, and environmental relationships and the way they support academic and socioemotional functioning in schools as well as promote student agency. Expanding on PASL, we compare students' descriptions of personal, proxy, and collective agency to understand the mechanisms of personalization as well as expand the concept.

## **Research Questions**

The overall intent of this study is to understand the nature and connections of PASL and to explore the modes of human agency, their manifestations, and their meanings in the context of adult-student relationships at the four case study schools. In this exploratory case study, we focus on the ways eight students—two from each case study school—talked about their personalization experiences as well as how they exercised personal agency, proxy agency and collective agency. We therefore query:

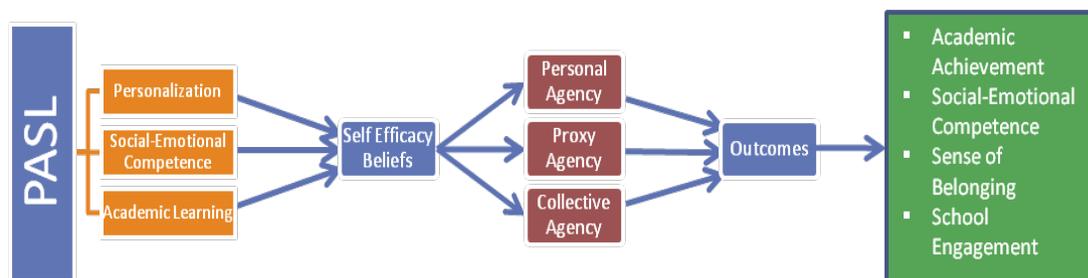
1. How do school personnel talk about students' personalization experiences and how do students talk about their own experiences?

2. How do students describe/exercise personal agency, proxy agency, and collective agency?

### Conceptual Framework

To understand the relationship between PASL and Bandura’s social cognitive theory, it is important to describe the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of both. We begin with a fuller description of PASL as well as its theoretical and empirical justification. We then turn to a discussion of social-cognitive theory. We close with a discussion of additional research that informs this perspective. Figure 1 outlines what we believe to be the connection between PASL and students’ agentic strategies and related academic and social-emotional outcomes.

**Figure 1: PASL-Human Agency Model**



#### *Personalization for Academic and Social Learning*

The concept of *personalization for academic and social learning* emerged from our research conducted by the National Center for Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU). In our multi-level case study in Broward County, Florida, we compared two higher performing high schools to two lower performing ones based on their value added scores (Sass, 2012). We found

that the main differences between the higher and the lower performing schools were the ways that the higher performing schools personalized the learning experience for students. The higher value-added (HVA) schools made deliberate efforts through systematic structures to promote strong relationships between adults and students as well as personalize the learning experience of students. In addition, the HVA schools maintained strong and reliable disciplinary systems that, in turn, engendered feelings of caring and, implicitly, trust among both students and teachers. Leaders at the HVA schools talked explicitly about looking for student engagement in classroom walkthroughs as well as in their interactions with students. Administrators and guidance counselors worked together to address students' academic and social needs. Teachers at the HVA schools were more likely to discuss instructional activities that drew on students' experiences and interests. The HVA schools also encouraged stronger linkages between the school and parents.<sup>3</sup>

While we coined PASL based on our research findings, the fundamental concepts of PASL can be found in the extant research. PASL is a systemic approach by which schools attend to the social-emotional and academic needs of students. It also involves structures and processes that promote social-emotional and academic competencies. Three salient, interrelated dimensions are embedded in this definition: personalization, academic learning, and social-emotional competence. First, the concept of *personalization* refers to the ways in which schools provide avenues whereby students develop a connection or sense of belonging to the school as a whole, as well as meaningful, positive connections with adults and other students in the school (Lee & Smith, 1999; McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010; Osterman, 2000). Schools with strong personalization have “structures, policies, and practices that promote relationships based on mutual respect, trust, collaboration, and support” (Breunlin, et al., 2005, p. 24). In such an

environment, personalization is both classroom-based and school-wide (Keefe, 2007). As Keefe and Jenkins (2002, p. 441) affirm, “Personalization is broader in scope, more systematic in organization, and more authentic in its goals and strategies.”

The second dimension, *academic learning*, relates to a mutual focus on academic achievement. Teachers’ high expectations for student’s academic success, coupled with their intentional efforts to become knowledgeable about their students, bolster the students’ sense of belonging, self-concept, and engagement in their own learning (Lee & Smith, 1999; McLaughlin, Talbert, Kahne, & Powell, 1990; Murphy, Weil, Hallinger, & Mitman, 1982). Instruction is also personalized (Keefe and Jenkins, 2002), while maintaining academic press (Lee & Smith, 1999; Murphy, et al., 1982). Systemically, personalized school environments employ strategies such as small learning communities (SLCs; Connell & Klem, 2006; Felner, 2007) and advisory programs (McClure, Yonezawa, & Jones, 2010; Meloro, 2005) to promote academic achievement and other scholastic outcomes. Through these varied personalized structures, practices, and processes, professionals become more aware of and attend to students’ individual learning styles, interests, and needs/wants (Jenkins & Keefe, 2002).

The third dimension, *social-emotional competence*, is at-once a consequence of personalization and a condition for high academic performance. Social-emotional competence involves “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish relationships with others” (Zins & Elias, 2007, p. 234). Students must be able to use self-regulatory skills to deal with normal and challenging school demands (Bandura, 2006a) and to demonstrate social responsibility (Wentzel, 1990). Socioemotional skills may be taught or caught via instruction or social learning or modeling (Greenberg et al., 2003; Pajares, 2006). In personalized learning environments, school personnel are developmentally responsive (Felner,

2007). Such environments reflect what Noddings (1988, p. 219) refers to as “an ethic of caring” or “a relational ethic” by which students develop their capacities to engage their peers, teachers, and school community at large. Students evidence several positive outcomes, including a higher sense of self-efficacy, more participation in class and school activities, more prosocial behaviors, less discipline/behavior problems, and improved academic performance (Zins and Elias, 2007).

### **Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory**

Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory (SCT) provides theoretical grounding for PASL. Social cognitive theory seeks to explain varied facets of human behavior and cognition within the context of the social environment, or “sociostructural influences.” As Bandura (2001, p. 165) puts it: “Human functioning is a product of a reciprocal interplay of intrapersonal, behavioral, and environmental determinants.” The theory has been applied to various spheres of human functioning, including health (Bandura, 1990, 2004), business (Wood & Bandura, 1989), and education (e.g., Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 2001; Zimmerman, 1990). Conceptual understanding about social cognitive theory has evolved from the concept of social modeling to human agency.

*Human Agency.* Human agency involves the idea that individuals influence outcomes, rather than merely respond to social cues (Bandura, 2001, 2006b). Core aspects of agency include *intentionality*, *forethought*, *self-reactiveness*, and *self-reflectiveness*. Individuals (and groups) carry out intentional plans of actions to produce particular outcomes. They give thought to (and may reorient) future-directed plans in anticipation of intended outcomes. “Agents” are able to use self-regulatory processes, such as motivation, to bring plans to fruition. Significantly,

individuals examine and become aware of their own functioning, in terms of their personal efficacy, the logic of their thinking and (course of) actions, and the meaning of their endeavors.

*Self-Efficacy Beliefs.* To Bandura (2001, p. 10), “Efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2006). Bandura describes this fundamental perceptual dimension in several articles over several decades (e.g., Bandura, 1972, 1982). As Bandura describes, self-efficacy involves peoples’ beliefs about their own capacities to exercise control over their own functioning and environment. Perceived self-efficacy is a major determinant of what individuals think, how they feel, and how they respond under trying circumstances, and the nature of their outlook for the future. It influences individuals’ choice of activities and environments. Self-efficacy beliefs also influences other motivational factors, including goals (what individuals set out to accomplish), outcome expectations (what they expect to happen), and causal attributions (what they believe to be the reason for a given outcome).

As noted above, social cognitive theory differentiates among three modes of human efficacy that reflect the broad range of daily functioning. With *personal agency*, which is reflective of self-efficacy beliefs, the individual exercises a level of influence upon the self and the environment. An individual demonstrates *proxy agency*<sup>4</sup> in their efforts to move others with relevant resources to act on his/her behalf in the pursuit of a given objective or outcome. In their efforts to achieve a common goal, individuals within a group demonstrate *collective efficacy* as they pool their knowledge, skills, and resources and exert concerted energy to achieve that end. The demands in regards to particular areas of functioning may lead to the use of a variable blend of the three agentic actions and related beliefs.

Students’ school experiences are strongly linked to their exercise of these agentic beliefs and actions. In their study of the multi-faceted role of self-efficacy beliefs, Bandura,

Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli (2001) found that students' belief in their ability to regulate their own learning contributes to their academic achievement, promotes high academic and prosocial behavior, and reduces susceptibility to negative and depressive feelings. It is therefore essential that students develop self-regulatory skills that they can apply persistently, especially when facing challenging situations and distractions. Walls and Little (2005, p. 24) note that "agency beliefs about effort and ability in achieving academic success are the strongest and most critical predictors of actual school performance." The findings of their study also indicate that agency beliefs about effort mediate the relationship between students' motivation and school adjustment. It is believed that students are likely to have better school adjustment outcomes, if they put more stock in their efforts than in their abilities.

In a critical literature review of sources of self-efficacy in schools, Usher and Pajares (2008) describe four sources as hypothesized by Bandura. The most powerful involves students' "*mastery experience*" brought about by their interpretations of previous personal attainments. Their judgments of their competence are heightened if they are successful on previous tasks; the converse tends to be true if there is failure. "*Social models*" also play a significant role in the development of self-efficacy, particularly when students are faced with challenging or uncertain tasks. Potential models include other students and adults who bear some salient commonality with the individual student(s) or who are competent at a task to which students strive to accomplish. Outcomes associated with social models help to build or undermine self-efficacy beliefs. Another source of self-efficacy are the "*verbal and social persuasions*" students get from trustworthy individuals such as parents, teachers, and peers. Encouragements from such individuals can boost students' academic motivation and efforts to achieve. In terms of both social models and social persuasions, it seems intuitive that suitable mentors can be effective in

helping students in their development of self-efficacy. The final source noted involves students' own "*emotional and physiological states.*" A critical issue here is that students' interpretation of their school experiences are filtered by their emotions. This has implications for students' subjective well-being, or judgments about their life satisfaction to which their school environment contributes (Park, 2004). Issues of school climate and the role of personalization in fostering student well-being are implicated here (see Pilar, 2007; Waters, Cross, & Runions, 2009).

Although the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and human agency is well documented, very little study has been done on agency strategies and behaviors in schools. Beyond the two studies described above, only one other study conducted in New Zealand has been found that explores students' exercise of personal agency in school (see Marat, 2003). In Marat's study, the main focus is on the association between perceived self-efficacy and math achievement, which was found to be positive. Two additional studies have looked at proxy agency in the area of student functioning. However, one study conflates proxy agency and proxy efficacy, and personal agency and self-efficacy (Dzewaltowski, Geller, Rosenkranz, & Karteroliotis, 2010). Dzewaltowski et al. examined children's confidence in being physically active as well as their confidence in influencing their parents and after-school staff to provide more opportunities for physical activity. They found... The other study examined proxy agency in college (Elias & MacDonald, 2007). It found.... No study to-date seems to deal with students' exercise of collective agency in K-12 schools.

It should be noted that studies on self-efficacy beliefs and human agency mostly involve a deductive approach with quantitative analyses. Few use a qualitative methodology (e.g.,

Usher, 2009). This present exploratory study uses a deductive approach underpinned by a qualitative paradigm.

### **Adult-Student Relationships**

As indicated above, several additional factors are integral to PASL. A fundamental element involves interpersonal relationships within the school. Here, we examine the literature on adult-student relationships in schools and related outcomes, such as sense of belonging, engagement, and school climate.

Studies have found that the relationships between teachers and students shape the nature of personalization in schools. In their review of research in the past decade, Eccles and Roeser (2011) underscore that teacher-student relationships are an important facet of schools, providing critical developmental contexts for adolescents. To these authors, much depends on the meaningfulness that students find in the curriculum, instruction, and social interactions. Their review shows that the quality of student-teacher interactions is highly associated with students' sense of belonging, academic motivation, developmental competence, engagement, and emotional well-being.

Davis (2003) looks at research in the last twenty years on how student-teacher relationships are conceptualized and the developmental impacts of such relationships on students. Her review highlights research on student-teacher relationship from attachment, motivation, and sociocultural perspectives<sup>5</sup>. The attachment perspective focuses on how student-teacher relationships are shaped by students' beliefs about adults, themselves, and the nature of the interaction. The teacher's role is akin to that of nurturer. Teachers are important to helping students to regulate, manage, and express their emotions. The "emotional closeness" of teachers

and the manner in which they respond to students' classroom demands are salient measures of the quality of the relationships, which shapes behavioral, cognitive, and socioemotional outcomes. The level of conflict and dependency also influence the student-teacher interaction.

With the motivation perspective, "teachers' beliefs about the nature of schooling, knowledge, and learning... beliefs about themselves as teachers... and beliefs about their students' abilities and motivation and the likelihood of their students' success" are major determinants of the "quality" of student-teacher relationships (p. 212). Quality, though, is more so viewed in the terms of cognitive outcomes—such as academic motivation and achievement—and less so in terms of affective outcomes (e.g., sense of belonging and social competence).

From the motivational perspectives, Davis discusses the role of students in attempting to meet their own interpersonal needs, such as gaining teacher and peer approval. Teachers' support of students' need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness, per self-determination theory, was described in terms of improving students' motivation to learn. Students are expected to become self-regulated learners. Citing Wentzel (1991, p. 190), Davis calls to attention a long-held view: "An implicit goal of educational institutions has always been to socialize children into adult society by teaching work- and responsibility-oriented values such as dependability, punctuality, and obedience in conjunction with the learning process." This underscores the role of teachers in "the socialization of motivation" as they interact with students. Furthermore, teachers are able to meet their students' need for relatedness. This enhances students' perceptions of teacher support which leads to greater engagement and help-seeking behavior (see also Anderman, Andrzejewski, & Allen, 2011).

In the mode of sociostructural perspectives, the issue of student-teacher relationships transcends the teacher-student dyad to also consider the influence of the class-room and broader

school contexts. As Davis accounts, this view is likely to focus on role of the general classroom and school climate, along with the specific sets of standards and norms. A rather germane concern was the time constraints teachers experienced in maintaining quality interactions with students as they negotiated challenges of large class sizes and curricular constraints. Other issues had to do with student's perception of the quality of relationships teachers had with other students. Perceptions of differential treatment was noted to lower morale and motivation among some students and constrain positive student-student relationships.

In high schools, peers also play an important role. Adolescents tend to turn to their peers rather than their teachers (and parents) for social, emotional, and academic support. Davis notes that what is perceived as adolescent detachment could be viewed as a "dynamic bond" through which students are able to express their autonomy, suggesting "it is not that adolescents need adult relationships less, but in different ways (p. 223).

While giving credence to attachment, motivation, and sociocultural perspectives, Davis identifies limitations of grand theories to explicate the complexity of student-teacher relationships. She makes a call for the adoption of a methodology by which "to make sense of data in ways that would honor each construction and approach, as well as the true complexity of the phenomenon" (p. 227). This would help to create, what Davis calls a "midlevel theory". We acknowledge this challenge and seek to provide additional perspective through PASL in concert with Bandura's social cognitive perspective.

Taken as a whole, these studies underscore the importance of understanding the mechanisms in which personalization occurs in schools. In particular, we are interested in understanding how adults in schools work to develop students' agency and how this relates to PASL. In what follows, we discuss our methodology, site selection, methods and data analysis.

We follow with our findings from eight students—we from each of the case study high schools. We follow with our discussion and concluding sections.

### **Site selection, methods and data analysis**

To understand the characteristics of effective high schools, we applied a framework of effective high schools to four schools in the same district. We made this decision based on the idea that schools nested in the same district, state and federal context would share many of the same critical characteristics, resources, and policy context. Broward County, Florida was identified using a simple value-added achievement model (VAM) to estimate the relative performance of the state's high schools.<sup>6</sup> The district serves large proportions of traditionally underperforming student subgroups, including low-income, minority, and English language learners (ELL). The student population in the district during the year of the study (2010-11) was 38% African American, 28% Hispanic, 27% White, and 7% other. In the district, 48% of students were eligible for free or reduced price lunches and 10 percent were classified as ELL. Four high schools in the district - two higher performing and two lower performing - were selected for case study on the basis of findings from the VAM analysis. In Table 2, we provide the demographic and performance profile of each school. We describe each school here.

Cormorant High School, our first lower performing (LVA) school, had between 2000 and 2300 students in 2010. Students qualifying for free and reduced priced lunch made up 45-55% of the student body. Approximately 55-65% of the population was minority 5-10% of its students were classified as English language learners. Its school grade has fluctuated from As to Bs over the last several years.<sup>7</sup>

During the 2010-2011 school year, Heron High School, the second LVA school, had between 1800 and 2100 students. Approximately 60-70% of students qualified for free and reduced priced lunch. Between 55-65% of the population was of minority status and 10-15% of its students are classified as English language learners. The school grade moved between a “C” and a “D” over the last several years.

Laurel Oak High School, the one of the higher performing (HVA) schools, had approximately 2100 to 2400 students during the school year. Students eligible for free and reduced priced lunches represented 45-55% of the student population. The majority of the student body was of minority descent, comprising between 65-75% of those enrolled. Between 5-10% of students were English language learners. Beacon Hill’s school grade has been an ‘A’ over the last several years.

Monarch High School, the second of the HVA schools, enrolled between 2800 and 3100 students during the 2010-2011 school year. Of those students, between 30-40% qualified for free and reduced priced lunch. Students of minority status comprised 50-60% of the student population and 5-10% of its students were classified as English Language Learners. The school grade has moved between an “A” and a “B” over the last several years.

### *Data Collection*

We used a multilevel comparative case study design (Yin, 1989). Researchers collected data during three weeklong visits to each of the four case study high schools during the fall, winter and spring of the 2010-12 school year. Data collection consisted of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, student shadowing, observations of selected administrative and professional development meetings, and document collection. We

chose to focus on 10th grade classrooms to explore differences in the instructional quality and personalized learning connections across tracks and sequences. We chose grade 10, as it is the latest common year in which Florida requires students to take standardized exams in Mathematics and ELA.

We conducted 174 semi-structured interviews lasting between 35 and 120 minutes with the principals, assistant principals, guidance counselors, the department heads for ELA, mathematics, and science, the eighteen observed teachers, instructional coaches, ESE coordinators, ELL coordinators, and behavioral specialists in each school. The interview protocols were designed deductively around the program and practices that support and sustain the essential components and inductively to probe for other components participants credit with school effectiveness. We also conducted three focus groups in each of the case study schools with teachers from different departments and grade levels. Another three focus groups included students identified by school personnel as taking primarily AP, honors, and regular/remedial classes, respectively.

In addition to interviews, we observed an administrative team meeting as well as a scheduled professional development day activities at each of the four schools. We also shadowed six students at each of the four case study schools. Shadowed students were chosen based on their course assignment track. Researchers followed the student's daily schedule by attending the student's classes as well as observing the student during non-instructional times such as passing time between classes and lunch. Researchers ended the day-long shadowing with a semi-structured reflective interview. The interview focused on the student's educational and social experiences within the school. Finally, we collected multiple and uniform sets of

documents from each school such as the course assignment matrices, School Advisory Committee minutes in addition to documents that emerged as relevant during the fieldwork.

### *Data Analysis*

After each interview as well as in school teams twice during the week of data collection, researchers completed Post Interaction Forms (PIF) and School-level Case Analysis Forms (SCAF) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The PIFs and SCAFs served as structured ways to capture preliminary findings as well as identify emerging themes. In between the first and second visits, researchers used the PIFs and SCAFs to systematically analyze each essential component, creating matrices of findings of components and subcomponents that emerged both from the research as well as the data. These findings served as the basis for the second and third set of interview guides.

Pattern coding of interview and focus group transcripts, field notes, and documents were used to identify central constructs in the data (Fetterman, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1989). We began by coding our transcribed interview data with codes from our conceptual framework in a master file created in NVivo. To establish dependability, multiple analysts (i.e., coding pairs/triads comprised of at least one “senior” researcher with experience using NVivo and a “junior” researcher) coded the preliminary data. A three-phase approach was used to guide the coding and analysis of the data.

The initial round of coding involved a subset of 28 data files across participant and data types. The purpose of this round was to construct definitions for codes for each component and subcomponent; to identify qualitative dimensions in the subcomponents, where they exist; and, finally, to identify any emergent themes that may not be captured under existing subcomponents.

Coding in round two involved re-coding and analyzing data coded in the first round. During this process, each pair/triad engaged also in a reliability-building process. The pairs coded the first 28 files individually. Then they ran the Kappa score function in NVivo and met as a team to systematically discuss and compare coded text. After achieving inter-rate reliability, members of the pair/triad in the third round actively coded seventy-five additional files, chosen to equally represent schools and data types. The full coding team met weekly to share findings and discuss emerging themes. In addition, coders passively coded the remaining files, reading each file for contradictory or competing findings that were then integrated if pertinent.

Each pair/triad wrote memos throughout the coding and analysis process. Memos are written records that contain the products of the analyses of the components/themes that emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Memoing in this project was aimed at identifying the properties and dimension of our components as they were manifested in our case study schools.

For this exploratory study into students' personalization experiences as well as their descriptions of agentic behaviors or strategies, we identified eight student transcripts, two from each school, to reanalyze using new codes drawn from the research on human agency and PASL. We chose each student based on... These codes included personal agency, proxy agency, collective agency, personalization, academic learning, self-concept, social-emotional competence, and sense of belonging. We wrote our findings around the different codes.

## **Findings**

As stated earlier, in this paper we are conducting an exploratory study to understand the nature and connections of PASL and the three modes of human agency, their manifestations, and their meanings in the context of adult-student relationships at the four case study schools. We

begin by presenting our findings on personal and proxy agency and then turn to our findings on personalization.

### *Different kinds of agency*

Our analysis revealed that, across schools, students exercised variable degrees of *personal agency*. Students at the HVA schools tended to describe more extensive use of personal agency than their LVA counterparts. In the data, there was limited evidence of the exercise of *proxy agency* and no evidence of the use of *collective agency* among the eight students.

*Personal Agency.* Our focus on personal agency focused on students' discussions about actions taken to achieve particular school-related goals or outcomes as well as actions taken in preparation for post-secondary life. We identified two main areas in which students demonstrated personal agency. First, students exhibited personal agency in their level of use of Pinnacle, the system-wide grade management program that allowed students (and parents) to track their progress in classes. Second, they showed personal agency in the ways they talked about what they were doing to prepare for college or work after graduation.

While students across both schools exhibited personal agency when they discussed their use of the district's online computer grading program, the students at the HVA schools described using the program more frequently. At the HVA schools, students tended to check Pinnacle to determine the status of their class grades or their general performance almost every day or twice in a week. They were generally intent on ensuring that they keep up with their schoolwork. One student at Monarch revealed that when he was not doing as well in a class, "I either go to my

teachers and ask them for like extra credit opportunities, or like just try to study more for the next test.” A student at Laurel Oak also described using Pinnacle to gauge how he should emotionally respond to his performance:

I check Pinnacle... to see what I am doing, how I am doing, if I am slacking, and I need to pick it up in one of my classes or if I am doing exceptionally well, and maybe I can be like not so stressed about a class... I can always see how I am doing and how I can do better or how I can improve.

Students at the LVA schools described discrepant agentic dispositions and responses to their use of Pinnacle. Both Heron students stated that they use Pinnacle five times a day or once every day. One student explained that one reason why he did this was to hold the teachers accountable:

Sometimes I have to bug a teacher to put in my extra credit. I have it printed out, and show the teacher that I did turn it in... Sometimes the teachers forget to put in a grade. I have to show it to them.

By contrast, Cormorant students' use was “once [in] like two weeks” and “not often at all.” One of the Cormorant students also reported, “I don't do anything on it... plus I don't have a computer at home.”

In terms of students' descriptions of their post-secondary plans, all eight students articulated intentions to go to college or to take up a specific career after high school, however, what each did in preparation their stated goal reflected varying degrees of personal agency. Students in the HVA schools aspired to be one or more of several professionals: a criminal investigator, a sports reporter/agent, an engineer, an architect, and a pediatrician. When asked what kinds of things they were doing to get ready for college and their intended pursuits, the students in Monarch referred to courses they were currently taking and intended to take. The students at Laurel Oak went beyond references to courses and described specific actions they were taking in preparation for college and career. One student indicated that he spent lots of time viewing how sports casting is done on ESPN as well as learning about being a sports writer,

“I am subscribed to Sports Illustrated, so I read a lot of columns and see the type of writing. I want to-- not now, but when I am in college, I want to start a sports blog online.” The other Laurel Oak student described seeking out the advice about college. Speaking of his peers, he remarks, “A lot of my friends didn't turn in their essays, but now they changed their mind they want to go, but they can't do anything about it.”

As with their HVA counterparts, students from the LVA schools aspired to be one of several professionals, including pediatrician, engineer, or veterinarian. However, the responses from the students at these lower performing schools indicated very little by way of personal agency in regards to preparing for their intended future endeavors. Like the students in Monarch, one student at Heron, referred to the AP courses that she expected to take. The other Heron student reported that she was saving money toward achieving her goal : “I have a bank account, with money saved... birthday money, savings, my mom every time she gets a pay check she takes out \$20 every Friday to put in the account. You know over the years little by little it does add up.” This student though admits to not having made specific steps—such as talking to the school’s college counselor—to find out more about college scholarships. Both students at Cormorant readily admitted that they had done “nothing now really” or “absolutely nothing” to prepare for their post-secondary goals.

***Proxy Agency.*** Examples of proxy agency involve students’ intentional actions in seeking the assistance of other adults in school. In our interviews, we asked students to describe actual and intended interactions with teachers, counselors, administrators as well as other adults when dealing with an academic, social-emotional, or ‘extra-school’ issue that the student may have

been unable to address on his or her own. Several questions that were expected to elicit (to some degree) descriptions of proxy agency include:

- a. What teacher have you learned the most from this year?
- b. What kinds of interactions have you had with your guidance counselor?
- c. Are there adults at this school that you feel care about you?
- d. What do different adults in the school expect from you?

In their answers, very few students from either sets of schools described intentional or specific actions to move the adults in school to act on his or her behalf. For instance, when a student from Laurel Oak was asked whether adults at the school cared for him, he described emailing the AP Psychology teacher to ask for his assistance afterschool on Friday as he studied to take the psychology exam. The student recounts:

I am sure [he] has things to do, but he always jokes around; he was like: ‘If you need me to stay after school Friday I will, but you are going to have to call all of the ladies and tell them why I can’t be with them right now.’ Like I am sure he has things he would rather be doing, but he will be there to help me.

This student also recalls going to the guidance counselor several times to have a course changed when he was not learning well in a particular class. He notes, “We have a good relationship... She knows who I am. If I ever went to her I know I could trust her or talk to her about anything.” This student, therefore, described adults in the school being willing to work with him.

In contrast, a student at Heron described a lack of resources at the school and her effort to get the principal to address it. She explained:

One time my English teacher was absent and the school principal came to the class and he addressed an incentive, a \$50 incentive for everybody that got a six on the writing [section of the state assessment]. With all due respect, I kind of pointed a few things out to him that weren't very good around the school, like some laptops are missing keys on them, you know, letters. Three of my core classes don't have a class set of books. Just

very important things that he should notice before he passes out \$50 to anybody that did well on the writing. I can't bash him either, because that's just rude, but I addressed him about it.

The principal reportedly thanked her for bringing it to his attention. The next day, the English teacher reportedly commended the student for her bravery and leadership. since the student “basically spoke what a lot of teachers have been complaining about. I didn't know it. I just noticed it.”

### **Personalization**

In our exploration of personalization, we focused on students’ perception of adults’ ethic of caring, expectations for students by adults, as well as students’ perception about the availability and/or help of adults in achieving their goals.

*Caring.* Students across all four schools indicated that most teachers cared about them. However, the ethic of care by adults in HVA schools appeared to reflect concern for both the academic and personal well-being of students, while LVA teachers are perceived to express care in their emphasis on academic achievement. At Monarch, one Latino student from Colombia who was having a difficult time transitioning described how teachers cared for him:

If I am sick, or feeling down, they ask me, what's wrong, or what's up, or you don't look yourself today, do you want to talk about it. Mainly all of them. Because they get to know me. I am an open student. I don't just sit down and do my work and don't talk to anybody. I am usually talking.

Teachers were also described as “willing to go the extra mile” for and wanting to “push” students, while joking around with them.

At LVA schools, the apparent care of teachers via the emphasis on academics is expressed in this statement from the Heron student:

Like I have had a lot of good teachers who are very-- they care about the students, and they are always trying to be... 'Do you need help? I can't babysit you, but if you need help come talk to me and we can work something out.' I learned a lot of pre-calc. I have learned a lot in English. I have learned a lot in history. There are a lot of things that those are the teachers I feel who do more than just, they teach the class.

A student from Cormorant underscores this point in his example of how adults at his school care:

"If I am having trouble they take me aside and they make me understand the subject a little bit.

They try to help me out anyway they can." Yet, as another Cormorant student seems to suggest,

care for students' academic and personal welfare is also demonstrated: "Any time I was sad, or she saw something was wrong, she would wait until after class to talk to me. If I had something missing, she let me make it up. She was very nice."

*Expectations.* Student responses across the four schools regarding adult's expectations generally focused on getting "good grades". Put differently, we found no distinct contrast between the HVA and the LVA schools in the area of expectations. While, as discussed earlier, students set expectations for their post-secondary activities, they described only a few adults as setting expectations for post-secondary activities. There appeared to be at least some tacit expectation for student to attend college, particularly in the case of Laurel Oaks, as one student described help in picking classes "that would put me at an advantage to have a high GPA, and to have a better chance of going in a better college."

The expectations for students at both LVA schools tended to focus on how they should behave. To one Heron student, "[Teachers] always expect the best from me, because I always try and give the best. They expect me to take upon the role of leadership in the class. And, they always expect me to be ... very kind." For another student, they were expected "to be the good students." Students at Cormorant were expected to work "to the best of [their] ability," in order

“to get a great grade in their class, and to pass the FCAT, usually.” One of these students though did explain that his English teacher talked to them about college:

He explains to us what we got to do, and sometimes for some jobs you don't have to go to college, you can go after high school and do work that is really needed in the community that you really need a high school diploma for, because he explained to us that college is not for everybody, and it's really difficult to get into college. So he kind of makes us think outside of the box. Anybody wants to go to college, but nobody sees it in the big, and it's a really big chance you are not going to get into college, so what are you going to do after that.

While this student said he wanted to go to college to become a veterinarian, he noted that the said teacher has given no indications that he expects any of the students in the class will go to college. The student admits that he himself has done “absolutely nothing” in preparation for college and his future career. Although he believed that the counselor could help to give some direction and guidance, he said, “There is really nobody who is going to explain to you what to do about it....” He did not identify an adult at the school that had spoken to him about his future goals.

***Role of Counselors.*** Guidance counselors are important adults that foster personalization in schools. Yet when relating the kinds of interactions students had with their guidance counselors, most students reported that they hardly met directly with an assigned (or unassigned) counselor. In instances, when there was face-to-face interaction, the typically brief exchanges involved course selection. With one exception, students across all four schools had a rather negative view of their relationship with their counselors.

The Latino student at Monarch described his interaction of “five minutes”: “I chose [the courses], and they are like, ‘Put them in the computer. You are going to get this. Do you like it—yes, no. Okay, bye.’” Students in the LVA schools tended to view their relationship with their guidance counselors as distant or nonexistent. Of his assigned counselor, a Cormorant

student remarks: “It’s not like me and her are close.” Similarly, a student from Heron states, “It’s not personal enough. I feel closer to my teachers instead.”

*Self-Concept.* Students across the four schools tended to differ in how they viewed themselves as students. Three students from the HVA schools described themselves as hardworking, future-oriented, high overachieving, good, and smart students; the fourth student views himself as “a regular student.” Two students at one LVA school saw themselves as “average, or sometimes below average” and “capable of doing her best, but doesn’t.” The students at the other LVA school viewed themselves as “hardworking, intelligent, friendly” and good, mature, and well-behaved.

## **Discussion**

The overarching aim of this exploratory study was to understand the nature of personalization for academic and social learning (PASL) and to explore the modes of human agency and their meanings in the context of adult-student relationships at four case study schools. Building on our findings that the HVA schools in the study systemically attended to students’ academic and socio-emotional needs through deliberate structures as well as a conscious effort to build relationships between adults and students, we sought to delve deeper into our student findings to discover the nature of personalization as well as the type of agency exhibited by students at the four schools.

Our findings reveal that students in the HVA schools tended to exercise personal agency to a greater extent than their peers in the LVA schools and that students had a more holistic

personalization experience at the HVA schools than at the LVA schools. Specifically we found that the students at the HVA schools were more focused on their academic plans and engaged in behavior such as using the district's online grade program and course planning to a greater degree than the students at the LVA schools who showed more variation in the use of the online grading program and less knowledge of how to use school to attain personal post-secondary goals.

These findings are in line with previous research and theory that suggest that students generally fare better in effective schools that have more personalized environments (Breunlin et al., 2005). Schools with more personalized environments have been found to be more likely to foster student's commitment to and participation in their own schooling, especially one in which teachers cultivate positive relationships with their students (Anderman et al., 2011; McLaughlin, et al., 1990). Our findings also concur with social cognitive theory which explains adolescents' development in terms of their self-efficacy beliefs and their exercise of personal agency (Bandura, 2006a; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006).

We found a couple of examples of proxy agency and no examples of collective agency across the eight students. Students' descriptions of proxy agency were limited. While this could be a limitation in the data which we will discuss shortly, it might also reflect students' lack of comfort in pursuing school resources. In some way, this is reflected in research on help-seeking behavior that show that many (especially low-SES and low-achieving) students tend not to avail themselves of resources and desired outcome beyond their capacities to achieve (Nelson-Le Gall, 1985). Interestingly, we found no evidence of collective agency among the students, suggesting that students did not see themselves as acting in concert to meet personal or shared goals.

In terms of personalization, we found that all students reported that adults in the school cared for them, but the nature of this caring seemed to be more holistic at the HVA schools, while at the LVA schools students tended to see this as focused on academics. Further, while students may have been focused on post-secondary goals, we found no distinct contrast between the HVA and LVA schools in the ways that students described adults' expectations for post-secondary activities. That said, students at the LVA described adults as concerned about their behavior to a higher degree than students at the HVA schools.

These findings have important implications as we go forward in our further research with this data. To begin with, we acknowledge the limitations of our data at this point. Our intention here was to explore our data for our theoretical concepts and we believe we have identified important trends that we will continue to explore. Our plan is to expand this research to all student interviews, both individual and focus groups, as well as to adults participants including administrators, teachers and guidance counselors.

In some ways, the findings here provide greater detail into the mechanisms of PASL in our case study schools. While the general findings of multiple stakeholders revealed the deliberate structures and the conscious effort to build relationships between adults and students at the HVA schools, we find greater variation and detail in these student interviews. One working hypothesis is that a student's academic track has an influence on his or her self-concept and enactment of agency, thus we find that the high performing students at the LVA schools share many of the same characteristics and attitudes as the comparable-tracked students at the LVA schools.

Further, as discussed earlier, in our general study, we found distinct differences between the HVA and LVA schools (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, Roberts & Comer,

2012) in terms of deliberate structures and attitudes around personalization. Yet, clearly reanalyzing the data with this new lens will provide insight into the mechanisms of PASL as well as its variation. We also hope, drawing on the literature, that it will point to areas that could expand our understanding of effectiveness. For example, given our findings of weak proxy agency and no collective agency, are there ways that schools can work to develop these agentic behaviors in students?

We therefore look forward to our future examinations using the lens of Bandura as well as ideas of human agency to expand our definition of PASL. This will involve not only understanding the experience of students, but also going deeper into the experience of the adults in the school as well as their interactions.

## **Conclusion**

To Zimmerman and Cleary (insert date), adolescents must develop and use various self-enhancing strategies in order to succeed in school. How student access and utilize available (and sometimes unavailable) resources will be telling. Given current policy demands, high school students must go beyond the typical requirement of classroom engagement and learning to take specific actions to monitor their progress in school to achieve both short-term and the long-term goals of college and/or career. The exercise of personal agency, therefore, reflects both regulative and goal-seeking strategies. Our study suggests that students at different kinds of schools are supported in different ways.

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<sup>1</sup> SEL is designed to assist young people in the acquisition of “the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to recognize and manage their emotions, demonstrate caring concern for others, and handle challenging social situations constructively” (CASEL, 2005, as cited in Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011, p. 406). Core competencies of SEL skills are self awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

<sup>2</sup> Levin (2012) identifies several other non-cognitive skills, including effort, self-discipline, persistence, cooperation, self presentation, tolerance, and respect. He also notes that non-cognitive constructs have been conventionally associated with the Big Five personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of our findings see the report: Identifying the characteristics of effective high schools: Report from Year One of the National Center on Scaling up Effective Schools at <http://www.scalingupcenter.org/news/detail/index.aspx?pageaction=ViewSinglePublic&LinkID=50&ModuleID=23&&NEWSPID=1>

<sup>4</sup> Some theorists/researchers tend to see proxy agency as synonymous with help-seeking behavior (0). It can be also linked to the exercise of social capital (0).

<sup>5</sup> Studies based on each set perspectives appear to examine teacher-student relationships at different levels of schooling— kindergarten and elementary school, middle school, and high school, respectively, yet it

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evident that the perspectives have substantial conceptual overlap. However, we focus mostly on the latter two perspectives.

<sup>6</sup> The estimated fixed effect for each high school in the state was put in rank order and classified by deciles of value-added. These analyses indicated only one Florida district, Broward, with multiple high and low-performing schools serving our target student subgroups.

<sup>7</sup> Broward County Public Schools has a number of schools of choice. We excluded schools in our sample that were charter or magnet schools, but given the choice environment, several schools did have choice options.