

The Learner-Centered Classroom and School

**Strategies for Increasing Student
Motivation and Achievement**

**Barbara L. McCombs
Jo Sue Whisler**



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What Is “Learner Centered”?

I love my teacher and I love learning in this class. She knows me and makes learning fun.

—Middle School Student

I used to think I was a good teacher, but now I know I'm even better. I used to reach one end of an audience before. Now I reach both ends of that audience and students leave my class knowing that I've made a difference.

—High School Teacher

Many educators and psychologists have been urging us to reexamine our concepts of education, schooling, and whom the system serves (for example, Lincoln, 1995; Marshall, 1992; Sarason, 1995a). Consensus is emerging that schools are *living systems*—systems fundamentally in service to students—and that they serve the basic function of learning for the primary recipient (the student) and also for the other people who support the learning process (including teachers, administrators, parents, and other community members). Proponents of this *learner-centered* perspective further add that to support the function of learning for all learners, education and schooling must concern themselves with how to provide the most supportive learning context for diverse students—a context that is shaped primarily by the teacher and where that teacher “comes from” in terms of valuing and understanding the rich array of individual differences and needs that

students present. From this perspective, curriculum and content are important but not exclusive factors in students' desired motivation, learning, and achievement. What is as important as curriculum and content, and fundamental to the learning of curriculum and content, is attention to meeting individual learner needs.

The importance of meeting the basic needs of all learners in a learner-centered educational system is becoming particularly acute as this nation's schools face increasingly diverse student populations. What do we mean by *learner centered*? How do we distinguish this concept from *child or student centered*? How, too, do we differentiate it from older more traditional concepts of education and schooling? The purpose of this chapter is to define learner centered from a research and theory base that integrates what is known today about learners and learning.

When learner centered is defined from a research-based perspective including both learning and learners, we believe that definition establishes a foundation for clarifying what is needed to create positive learning contexts at the classroom and school levels, contexts in which the likelihood of more students experiencing success is increased. This goal is critical if this country is to achieve increased motivation, learning, and academic achievement for a much larger number of students, including many who are currently underachieving or dropping out. This research-based foundation that focuses on both learners and learning can also lead to increased clarity about the dispositions and characteristics of those who are in service to learners and learning—including teachers, administrators, parents, other community members, and the students themselves. Finally, a clear definition of learner centered will lead to clear definitions of the practices, programs, and policies that characterize learner-centered classrooms and schools.

The Learner-Centered Psychological Principles

In 1990, the American Psychological Association (APA) appointed a special Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Educa-

tion whose purpose was twofold: (1) to determine ways in which the psychological knowledge base related to learning, motivation, and individual differences could contribute directly to improvements in the quality of student achievement and (2) to provide guidance for the design of educational systems that would best support individual student learning and achievement. One task force project, directed by Barbara McCombs, was to integrate, from psychology, education, and related disciplines, research and theory concerned with education and the process of schooling. The purpose was to surface general principles that could form a framework for school redesign and reform. The resulting document, *Learner-Centered Psychological Principles: Guidelines for School Redesign and Reform*, specified twelve fundamental principles about learners and learning. Taken as a whole, they provide an integrated perspective on factors influencing learning for *all* learners.* Together, they are intended to be understood as an organized knowledge base that supports a learner-centered model.

No one principle can be considered in isolation if maximum learning is to occur for each student. The principles are categorized into domains of basic factors that cannot be ignored in understanding individual learners and the learning process, as they provide the foundation for sound teaching practices. The domains describe areas identified in the research as having an impact on learning. The factors making up the domains are related to the intellectual aspects of learning (metacognitive and cognitive factors); motivational influences on learning (affective factors); individual differences in intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development areas (developmental factors); influences of the individual's own self-assessments and the assessments of others on learning (personal and

*Because our purpose in this book is to lay out implications of the twelve principles for a new model of learner-centered classrooms and schools, we do not review the research that supports each principle here. For readers interested in this research support, several sources are relevant. The specific research and theory reviewed in developing the principles is described by McCombs (1994a). Further research support is described by Alexander and Murphy (in press) and McCombs and Lambert (in press).

social factors); and differences in family backgrounds, cultures, and other experiences that influence learning (individual differences factors). Exhibit 1.1 presents the individual principles and explanations of each. Exhibit 1.2 summarizes definitions of the domains into which the principles are divided.

Looking at the twelve principles, we can see that they apply to all learners—young and old. As complex human beings, we each approach learning situations with fundamental human qualities in common. At the same time, however, we bring to these situations unique ways of learning based on our heredity and prior learning experiences as well as our special characteristics such as interests, talents, and intellectual or physical capabilities. Our common characteristics allow a definition of a general model of schooling; our unique characteristics determine the adaptations that schools and classrooms must make so that they are set up to meet the learning and motivational needs of all learners. The principles remind us that when it comes to meeting learning needs, we are all learners—teachers, administrators, parents, and community members—with learning and motivational needs similar to the students we serve.

The twelve principles form a systemic framework that can guide decisions about content, environment, and opportunities for learning, for the student in the classroom and beyond, and that can help define a dynamic learning context that is continuously improving. Of perhaps even greater importance, the principles both confirm and validate the knowledge and experience of the best teachers by providing research justification for their practices.

Defining Learner Centered

We believe a lot of confusion has existed about what is meant by *learner centered*. Some people equate learner centered with *child or student centered*. Generally, child or student centered refers to the use of schooling and learning practices that apply to learners from the ages of two to twenty-one or twenty-five, learners in preschool through secondary or postsecondary school. We think the focus

EXHIBIT 1.1 Learner-Centered Psychological Principles.

METACOGNITIVE AND COGNITIVE FACTORS

Principle 1: The nature of the learning process. Learning is a natural process of pursuing personally meaningful goals, and it is active, volitional, and internally mediated; it is a process of discovering and constructing meaning from information and experience, filtered through the learner's unique perceptions, thoughts, and feelings.

Principle 2: Goals of the learning process. The learner seeks to create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge regardless of the quantity and quality of data available.

Principle 3: The construction of knowledge. The learner links new information with existing and future-oriented knowledge in uniquely meaningful ways.

Principle 4: Higher-order thinking. Higher-order strategies for "thinking about thinking"—for overseeing and monitoring mental operations—facilitate creative and critical thinking and the development of expertise.

AFFECTIVE FACTORS

Principle 5: Motivational influences on learning. The depth and breadth of information processed, and what and how much is learned and remembered, are influenced by (a) self-awareness and beliefs about personal control, competence, and ability; (b) clarity and saliency of personal values, interests, and goals; (c) personal expectations for success or failure; (d) affect, emotion, and general states of mind; and (e) the resulting motivation to learn.

Principle 6: Intrinsic motivation to learn. Individuals are naturally curious and enjoy learning, but intense negative cognitions and emotions (e.g., feeling insecure, worrying about failure, being self-conscious or shy, and fearing corporal punishment, ridicule, or stigmatizing labels) thwart this enthusiasm.

Principle 7: Characteristics of motivation-enhancing learning tasks. Curiosity, creativity, and higher-order thinking are stimulated by

EXHIBIT 1.1 (continued)

relevant, authentic learning tasks of optimal difficulty and novelty for each student.

DEVELOPMENTAL FACTORS

Principle 8: Developmental constraints and opportunities. Individuals progress through stages of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development that are a function of unique genetic and environmental factors.

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS

Principle 9: Social and cultural diversity. Learning is facilitated by social interactions and communication with others in flexible, diverse (in age, culture, family background, etc.), and adaptive instructional settings.

Principle 10: Social acceptance, self-esteem, and learning. Learning and self-esteem are heightened when individuals are in respectful and caring relationships with others who see their potential, genuinely appreciate their unique talents, and accept them as individuals.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Principle 11: Individual differences in learning. Although basic principles of learning, motivation, and effective instruction apply to all learners (regardless of ethnicity, race, gender, physical ability, religion, or socioeconomic status), learners have different capabilities and preferences for learning mode and strategies. These differences are a function of environment (what is learned and communicated in different cultures or other social groups) and heredity (what occurs naturally as a function of genes).

Principle 12: Cognitive filters. Personal beliefs, thoughts, and understandings resulting from prior learning and interpretations become the individual's basis for constructing reality and interpreting life experiences.

Source: Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education, American Psychological Association, 1993, pp. 7-9. Reprinted with permission of Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory.

EXHIBIT 1.2 Domains of Learner-Centered Principles.**METACOGNITIVE AND COGNITIVE**

These four principles (1 through 4) describe how a learner thinks and remembers. They describe factors involved in the construction of meaning from information and experiences. They also explain how the mind works to create sensible and organized views of the world and to fit new information into the structure of what is already known. They conclude that thinking and directing one's own learning is a natural and active process and, even when subconscious, occurs all the time and with all people. What is learned, remembered, and thought about, however, is unique to each individual.

AFFECTIVE

These three principles (5 through 7) describe how beliefs, emotions, and motivation influence the way in which people perceive learning situations, how much people learn, and the effort they are willing to invest in learning. Individuals' emotional state of mind, beliefs about personal competence, expectations about success, and personal interests and goals all influence how motivated they are to learn. Although motivation to learn is natural under conditions and about things people perceive to be personally relevant and meaningful, motivation may need to be stimulated in situations that require individuals to learn what seems uninteresting or irrelevant to them.

DEVELOPMENTAL

This principle (8) recognizes capacities for learning that are known to develop or emerge over time. It is based on research documenting the changes in human capacities and capabilities over the lifespan. It informs us about the identifiable progressions of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social areas of development that are influenced by unique genetic or environmental factors. These progressions vary both across and within individuals and thus cannot be overgeneralized for any one individual or group of individuals because of the risk of limiting opportunities for learning. The important generalization in this domain is that individuals learn best when material is appropriate to their developmental level and presented in an enjoyable, interesting, and challenging way.

EXHIBIT 1-2 (continued)**PERSONAL AND SOCIAL**

These two principles (9 and 10) describe the role that others play in the learning process and the way people learn in groups. These principles reflect the research that shows that people learn from each other and can help each other learn through the sharing of their individual perspectives. If learners participate in respectful and caring relationships with others who see their potential, genuinely appreciate their unique talents, and accept them as individuals—both learning and feelings of self-esteem are enhanced. Positive student-teacher relationships define the cornerstone of an effective learning environment—one that promotes both learning and positive self-development.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

These two principles (11 and 12) describe how individuals' unique backgrounds and capabilities influence learning. These principles help explain why individuals learn different things, at different times, and in different ways. Although the same basic principles of learning, thinking, feeling, relating to others, and development apply to all individuals—what they learn and how this learning is communicated differs in different environments (for example, cultural or social groups) and as a function of heredity. From their environment and heredity, people create unique thoughts, beliefs, and understandings of themselves and their world. Appreciating these differences and understanding how they may show up in learning situations is essential to creating effective learning environments for all students.

should be broader because it is clear that the twelve principles apply to all individuals, from the very young to the very old, from students in the classroom to teachers, administrators, parents, and others influenced by the process of schooling and by other formal and informal learning experiences.

Some people equate learner centered both with child or student centered and with a focus on the affective side of education—the quality of interpersonal relationships and learning environments. They equate it with creating climates of caring and with focusing on fostering students' self-esteem and sense of well-being. Again, we believe these are important but make up only part of the picture. The domains covered by the principles—the metacognitive and cognitive, affective, personal and social, developmental, and other individual differences factors—emphasize both the learner and learning. A central understanding that emerges from an integrated and holistic look at the principles is that for educational systems to serve the needs of *all learners*, it is essential that they have a focus on the individual learner as well as an understanding of the learning process. Thus, we have evolved the following definition of learner centered:

DEFINITION OF "LEARNER CENTERED"

The perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners). This dual focus then informs and drives educational decision making. The learner-centered perspective is a reflection of the twelve learner-centered psychological principles in the programs, practices, policies, and people that support learning for all.

This definition in company with the principles themselves leads to five fundamental conclusions about learners and learning.

Because these conclusions offer a distillation of the principles and a holistic and integrative view of key assumptions about the meaning of learner centered, we call them *premises* of a learner-centered model. Later on we will use these premises to organize implications for practice in order to simplify the discussion.

Premises of the Learner-Centered Model

1. Learners are distinct and unique. Their distinctiveness and uniqueness must be attended to and taken into account if learners are to engage in and take responsibility for their own learning.
2. Learners' unique differences include their emotional states of mind, learning rates, learning styles, stages of development, abilities, talents, feelings of efficacy, and other academic and nonacademic attributes and needs. These must be taken into account if all learners are to be provided with the necessary challenges and opportunities for learning and self-development.
3. Learning is a constructive process that occurs best when what is being learned is relevant and meaningful to the learner and when the learner is actively engaged in creating his or her own knowledge and understanding by connecting what is being learned with prior knowledge and experience.
4. Learning occurs best in a positive environment, one that contains positive interpersonal relationships and interactions, that contains comfort and order, and in which the learner feels appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and validated.
5. Learning is a fundamentally natural process; learners are naturally curious and basically interested in learning about and mastering their world. Although negative thoughts and feelings sometimes interfere with this natural inclination and must be dealt with, the learner does not require "fixing."

None of these premises needs to take a particular form or look a particular way. However, they must be reflected in the beliefs,

characteristics, dispositions, and practices of teachers. When this occurs, teachers' interactions with learners and the programs and practices they adopt can maximize learning for each student. Generally this means that (1) learners are included in educational decision-making processes, whether those decisions concern what learners focus on in their learning or what rules are established for the classroom; (2) the diverse perspectives of learners are encouraged and respected during learning experiences; (3) the differences among learners' cultures, abilities, styles, developmental stages, and needs are accounted for and respected; and (4) learners are treated as cocreators in the teaching and learning process, as individuals with ideas and issues that deserve attention and consideration. The learner-centered model can be diagrammed as an integration of all this knowledge about learners and learning (see Figure 1.1). Applying this knowledge goes further, however. For teachers, it means *functioning in a manner consistent with the foundational knowledge represented in the premises of the model. This knowledge shows up in teachers' beliefs, dispositions, characteristics and practices.*

To make this model more meaningful and further clarify how learner centered differs from child or student centered, consider the following two examples.

ELEMENTARY EXAMPLE

Ms. Jordan teaches second grade. She loves this age level and shows it in her caring attitude toward her students. When a student doesn't feel like putting in a lot of effort and hard work on a project, she finds something else for the student to do and may even excuse him from the assigned schoolwork. Her students love her but know she won't demand much from them. Many of them later report that they wish she had also been a little more demanding of them in their learning and work.

Conversely, Ms. Williams, who also teaches second grade, expects all her students to work hard and develop a sense of responsibility for their own learning. She takes time to know each student personally and knows their strengths and interests.

