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THE LEARNER-CENTERED
CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL

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LEARNER-CENTERED
CLASSROOM AND SCHOOL

→ Strategies for
Increasing
Student
Motivation
and Achievement

ISBN 0-7879-0836-3 90000



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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).

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.*

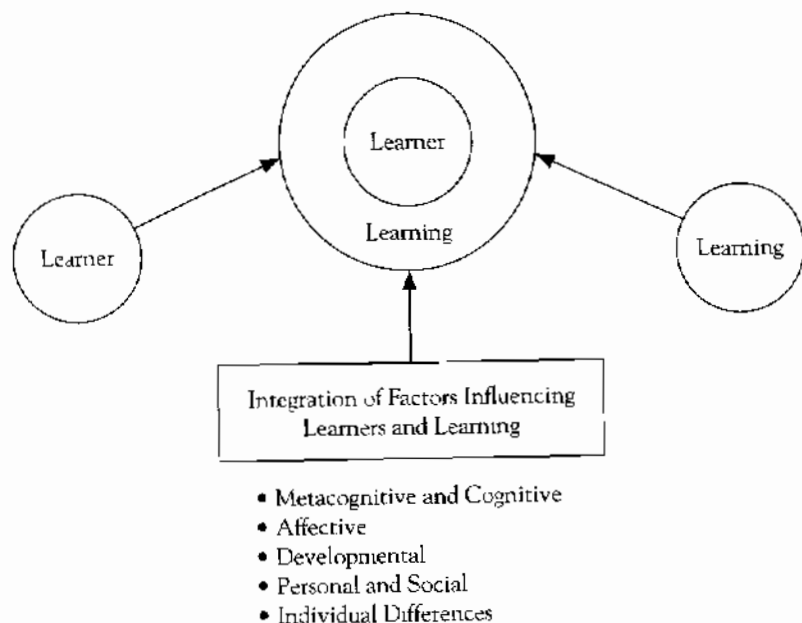
To make this model more meaningful and further clarify how learner centered differs from child or student centered, consider the following two examples.

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.

FIGURE 1.1 Learner-Centered Model: A Holistic Perspective.



When a student doesn't feel like putting in the effort and hard work she expects, she sits down with the student, and they talk about what issues or problems the student may be having that are interfering with wanting to learn. She assumes that once the student feels listened to and taken seriously, his or her natural motivation to learn will return. She continues to expect and "demand" the student's best effort and good work.

SECONDARY EXAMPLE

Mr. Jacobs teaches algebra to freshmen students. He knows that many of the freshmen are probably not going to use algebra in their other courses or jobs, so he spends most of the class period relating to the students, telling jokes, and making the class fun. The students don't learn a lot of algebra, but they think Mr. Jacobs is a great guy who really cares about them.

Mr. Stevens's freshmen algebra class is very different. He starts the class with exercises that help the students get to know him and each other as they apply simple algebraic concepts such as grouping relationships in equations. In this familiar context in which they are interested and having fun, the students realize that algebra can be a useful subject. The students leave Mr. Stevens's class believing that he knows them and respects them. They also know that they have been helped to learn a valuable subject they may not have thought they could learn or use.

Although these contrasts between child-centered and learner-centered practices may seem extreme, they represent what most individuals have experienced or observed about various educational practices. Many people see child centered practices as "soft," not rigorously attentive to the effective learning of needed knowledge and skills. Even though this characterization may be unfair, it exists, and one reason we have chosen the term learner centered is to move clearly beyond that concept to one that couples a concern with the individual learner with the best available knowledge about how learning occurs and with the use of practices that best promote high levels of learning, motivation, and achievement.

From Content to Learning and Learners

In the past, educators have most often approached the business of schooling with a concentration on the teaching of content—that is, on what and how much must be taught in various traditional academic subjects. Learning and learners are, at best, an implied component. This is particularly true at the high school level and beyond and is supported by the dominant method of teacher preparation: a focus on discipline knowledge often to the exclusion of pedagogical knowledge and skills. With the popularity of the standards movement, which identifies what is important for learners to know and be able to do, this attention to content has moved



to in-service teacher education as well. That is, with this shift from what to *teach* to a focus on what must be *learned* by each student, attention moves to the learner's performance or demonstration of the knowledge or skills identified as important by the standards.

This shift in focus from teaching required content to learning valued knowledge and skills goes only half the distance necessary, however, if the goal is to educate *all* students. Why? Because without a corresponding focus on individual learners, educators are in danger of continuing to ignore students' calls for help when these students say they think school is irrelevant, report feeling disconnected from their teachers and peers, or drop out mentally or physically because they just do not want to be in school. It takes more than the identification of the most important knowledge and skills to address these concerns, although student interest in standards and even input into the process of selecting them can contribute to addressing some concerns. Focusing on standards and learning is necessary but is in itself not sufficient.

The learner-centered model focuses equally on the learner and learning. The ultimate goal of schooling is to foster the learning of learners; and learners learn best when *they* are an integral part of the learning equation. This means that the following are recognized and taken into account in students' schooling experiences: the relevance and meaningfulness of what students are being asked to learn, students' distinctiveness and uniqueness, the support available to students from the environment, the relationships within which students' learning occurs, and educators' beliefs about the naturalness of students' learning. And as we stated earlier, it is by focusing on what is known about both learners and the learning process that educators gain a chance at having each student meet high academic standards.

Beliefs

The learner-centered model best serves as a lens through which to view and plan for schooling—from student-adult relationships to curriculum, instruction, and assessment to policies, procedures, and structures in classrooms, buildings, and districts. When educators adopt the learner-centered model, the five premises that

emanate from the learner-centered psychological principles become the foundation upon which they function. Although specific actions and programs may be extremely diverse, where people come from as they engage in those actions and programs is common and consistent, as is their understanding of what promotes maximum motivation to learn and successful learning by *all* learners. This commonality and consistency are reflections of the learner-centered model and its five premises.

Deborah Meier, founder and director of Central Park East School in New York City (a school with a more than twenty-five-year history of success), has stated that the educational system needs a wide diversity of schools that support stable personal relationships more than ever (Meier, 1995). We believe that educators also need to acknowledge that equal attention must be given to learners' individual needs and attributes if schools are to maximize the likelihood that all students will achieve identified standards. (And we agree that fundamental knowledge and skills do exist without which it is difficult for anyone to function in life and make the most of whatever gifts he or she has to offer.) We also believe that educators' thinking needs to take advantage of students' rich diversity of individual differences and talents, all of which are needed in today's complex world. We ought to honor multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993, 1995) as well as the goal that Elliott Eisner (1994, pp. 6-7) describes: "Rather than trying to ensure that every student gets to the same place at the same time, schools should strive to raise the mean in performance and increase the variance of students' interests and strengths. Educators ought to be cultivating productive idiosyncrasy, playing to the youngsters' talents . . . because in the long haul it's the cultivation of these positive aptitudes that will feed back into the culture."

How can we who are educators accomplish this goal? When we use a sound set of principles that guide our hearts, thinking, and decision making, we have a foundation for developing significant educational models that help all learners develop their unique capacities and talents and maximize their learning of those things



deemed critical by society. When we focus on learners—on our understanding of their needs and how they learn best—as well as learning, more students will be both more successful and more satisfied in school. In addition, many of our current innovations will be more effective in eliciting motivation, learning, and achievement from more of our students.

What needs to happen to shift educators toward this learner-centered approach? As stated earlier, it requires an understanding of the learner-centered psychological principles, the foundational knowledge of the learner-centered model, and functioning with beliefs, characteristics, dispositions, and practices that are aligned with the principles and the model. The remainder of this chapter explores learner-centered beliefs, characteristics, and dispositions.

□ **Shifting Beliefs and Assumptions About Learners, Learning, and Teaching**

Throughout history, all major changes have required a transformation in thinking, seeing, or interpreting reality—what is often called a *paradigm shift*. In this current era of educational reform, many shifts in thinking are being proposed. Educators are being asked to adopt thinking that holds that “all students can learn” and to see education as a “shared responsibility” among all constituencies—students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. Educators are also being asked to confront old models and beliefs about how individuals learn and how best to promote the learning process. In any time of significant change, people are forced to confront old beliefs and assumptions and to challenge themselves to revise these views based on evidence that a change is needed. For this process to be successful, however, people need to know why such a shift is needed, what the shift entails, and how to make the shift. This certainly is the case when educators are asked to adopt a learner-centered approach.

One current problem is that neither the public nor many educators are convinced that change is needed. Because all people have

been educated, most often by attending schools, they consider themselves experts about schooling and learning. Many people flock to their children's teachers, principals, and school boards and tell them what should be taught and how. Often they argue for a return to "how it used to be, because if it was good enough for me, it is good enough for my child." We believe this happens largely because people do not have sufficient knowledge of education beyond their own experience and fail to examine the knowledge they do have in light of the monumental changes in this society over the past fifty years. For example, all of us now live with tremendous technological tools such as the microwave oven, laptop computer, and cellular telephone—all of which were unknown even thirty years ago to all but the scientists developing them. Access to tremendous sources of information through the Internet is an even more recent development that is changing what and how people learn. At the same time, most people are unaware of what has been discovered about learning and learners in recent years and thus cannot take into account the implications of this new knowledge base.

Contrast the way people interact with educators with the way they interact with medical practitioners. Few people tell their doctors what to do or recommend treatment that "was good enough for me thirty years ago." They seem to understand that medical practitioners have at least some level of expertise in their fields and that new knowledge and conditions dictate new solutions and new ways of thinking. Yet when it comes to education, people often offer simplistic and familiar solutions and are quick to play expert.

Educators themselves are also often resistant to change. First, there always seems to be a new bandwagon, one that frequently "comes in with a bang and goes out with a whimper." Policies, programs, and practices commonly change with changes in school administrations or legislative mandates. Rather than evaluate the educational impact of each bandwagon, many educators, somewhat understandably, hope it will go away as have so many others before it. Second, educators often feel saddled with all the responsibility for student success or failure in school and in life. They know that

what they do in school, no matter how positive, can get “undone” outside of school. Such concern is valid, and the teacher’s work is often undermined outside the classroom, yet one teacher often can make the crucial difference for an otherwise certain-to-fail student (see, for example, Gordon, 1992, and Levine and Nidiffer, 1996, for stories of individuals from poor and disadvantaged situations who have “beaten the odds” because of teacher support).

Even educators who are open to change feel uncertainty about what kind of changes will be most effective and how best to go about making them. They also question whether any changes can be successful given what appears to be a complex and overwhelming set of problems and issues underlying educational systems change. Feelings of fear, frustration, hopelessness, and despair abound, as well as a sense that “we’re already doing so much—how can we possibly do more?” In such an atmosphere, it is easy to hold on to old beliefs and assumptions, to stay within the comfort zone of old ways of thinking about and doing education, and to avoid the issue as long as possible. Is there a way to break through this resignation and inertia? What might increase hopefulness about change and thus willingness to change?

Self-Assessing Personal Beliefs

We have been taking these questions seriously as we ourselves examine our own beliefs and thinking about learning, learners, and teaching. We have looked to the research literature to inform us about what needs to change and why. We have challenged ourselves to discover a sound foundation of research-based principles that can guide the change process. In our efforts, we have learned to question even the most pervasive assumptions and ideas being proposed. For example, we have learned from the research that not only *can* all students learn but all students *do* learn. Research from cognitive and developmental psychology clearly supports the view that learning is a natural and ongoing process, that it occurs continuously for all learners, cradle to grave (Alexander & Murphy, in press; McCombs, 1994c). We

have examined the differences in educational systems based on the "can learn" versus the "do learn" philosophy and have seen clear evidence of the superiority of those systems that assume all students do learn (McCombs & Stiller, 1995). The "do learn" environments respect and accommodate student diversity by assuming that learning and motivation are natural and that students can be trusted to guide their own learning process; they do not have to be sorted by others into presumed categories of ability. Learning methods, content, and performance demonstrations are variable and determined with student input, not selected for students in ways that may limit student potential. Practices are inclusive and accepting of multiple abilities, and they value the cultivation and demonstration of diverse talents, both academic and nonacademic.

Our examination has led us to a recognition that educational systems are more successful with more learners when they are designed from a research-based set of principles that *focus on learners and learning* and that are translated into a core philosophy and culture. We also have realized that change is more likely to occur when educators and others are assisted in self-assessing and reflecting on their basic beliefs and assumptions, and in engaging in critical inquiry about issues identified in the research on learners and learning. We believe these are essential steps in the change process. We now challenge you, our readers, to assess your fundamental beliefs and assumptions about learners, learning, and teaching. Take a few minutes to engage in the self-assessment exercise in Exhibit 1.3. The more truthful you can be in your responses and the more you resist the temptation to give what you believe to be "acceptable" or "right" answers, the more useful the results of this assessment will be to you. To determine how your beliefs "measure up" to those identified as learner centered, turn to Appendix A for self-scoring instructions and score explanations.

Do teachers' learner-centered beliefs have a positive impact on student motivation, learning, and success? Our research (McCombs & Stiller, 1995) looked at the impact of teacher beliefs on teacher perceptions of their classroom practices and at how teacher perceptions

EXHIBIT 1.3 Teacher Beliefs Survey.

Please read each of the following statements. Then decide the extent to which you agree or disagree. Circle the number to the right of the question that best matches your choice. Go with your first judgment and do not spend much time mulling over any one statement. PLEASE ANSWER EVERY QUESTION.

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Students have more respect for teachers they see and can relate to as real people, not just as teachers.	1	2	3	4
2. There are some students whose personal lives are so dysfunctional that they simply do not have the capability to learn.	1	2	3	4
3. I can't allow myself to make mistakes with my students.	1	2	3	4
4. Students achieve more in classes in which teachers encourage them to express their personal beliefs and feelings.	1	2	3	4
5. Too many students expect to be coddled in school.	1	2	3	4
6. If students are not doing well, they need to go back to the basics and do more drill and skill development.	1	2	3	4
7. In order to maximize learning, I need to help students feel comfortable in discussing their feelings and beliefs.	1	2	3	4
8. It's impossible to work with students who refuse to learn.	1	2	3	4
9. No matter how bad a teacher feels, he or she has a responsibility not to let students know about those feelings.	1	2	3	4

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
10. Addressing students' social, emotional, and physical needs is just as important to learning as meeting their intellectual needs.	1	2	3	4
11. Even with feedback, some students just can't figure out their mistakes.	1	2	3	4
12. My most important job as a teacher is to help students meet well-established standards of what it takes to succeed.	1	2	3	4
13. Taking the time to create caring relationships with my students is the most important element for student achievement.	1	2	3	4
14. I can't help feeling upset and inadequate when dealing with difficult students.	1	2	3	4
15. If I don't prompt and provide direction for student questions, students won't get the right answer.	1	2	3	4
16. Helping students understand how their beliefs about themselves influence learning is as important as working on their academic skills.	1	2	3	4
17. It's just too late to help some students.	1	2	3	4
18. Knowing my subject matter really well is the most important contribution I can make to student learning.	1	2	3	4
19. I can help students who are uninterested in learning get in touch with their natural motivation to learn.	1	2	3	4

EXHIBIT 1.3 (continued)

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
20. No matter what I do or how hard I try, there are some students who are unreachable.	1	2	3	4
21. Knowledge of the subject area is the most important part of being an effective teacher.	1	2	3	4
22. Students will be more motivated to learn if teachers get to know them at a personal level.	1	2	3	4
23. Innate ability is fairly fixed and some children just can't learn as well as others.	1	2	3	4
24. One of the most important things I can teach students is how to follow rules and to do what is expected of them in the classroom.	1	2	3	4
25. When teachers are relaxed and comfortable with themselves, they have access to a natural wisdom for dealing with even the most difficult classroom situations.	1	2	3	4
26. Teachers shouldn't be expected to work with students who consistently cause problems in class.	1	2	3	4
27. Good teachers always know more than their students.	1	2	3	4
28. Being willing to share who I am as a person with my students facilitates learning more than being an authority figure.	1	2	3	4

	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
29. I know best what students need to know and what's important; students should take my word that something will be relevant to them.	1	2	3	4
30. My acceptance of myself as a person is more central to my classroom effectiveness than the comprehensiveness of my teaching skills.	1	2	3	4
31. For effective learning to occur, I need to be in control of the direction of learning.	1	2	3	4
32. Accepting students where they are—no matter what their behavior and academic performance—makes them more receptive to learning.	1	2	3	4
33. I am responsible for what students learn and how they learn.	1	2	3	4
34. Seeing things from the students' point of view is the key to their good performance in school.	1	2	3	4
35. I believe that just listening to students in a caring way helps them solve their own problems.	1	2	3	4

Source: Developed by Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL), 1994. Reprinted with permission of McREL.

- of practice differ from student perceptions of these same practices. In a large-scale study, we confirmed our hypothesis about the positive impact of beliefs and practices consistent with the research on learners and learning. We also found that teachers who are more learner centered are more successful in engaging more students in an effective learning process and are also more effective learners themselves and happier with their jobs. Furthermore, teachers report that the process of self-assessment and reflection—particularly on discrepancies between their own and their individual students' experiences of classroom practices—helps them identify areas in which they might change their practices to be more effective in reaching more students. This is an important finding that relates to the “how” of transformation. It says that helping teachers and others engage in a process of self-assessment and reflection provides a respectful and nonjudgmental impetus to change. Combining the opportunity for teacher self-assessment of and reflection on beliefs and practices with skills training in how to create learner-centered schools and classrooms can help complete the transformation.

Profiles of Learner-Centered Teachers

To show a clear picture of the differences between a learner-centered and non-learner-centered orientation, we have created two contrasting profiles, each based on the beliefs described in the Teacher Beliefs Survey (Exhibit 1.3). As in any two-category profile, assumptions must, by necessity, fall into one category or the other, and thus the profiles may appear to paint absolute pictures. However, in reality, most teachers do not subscribe to all the beliefs in either profile but have a combination of beliefs, although usually attributes of one profile or the other will be dominant.

PROFILE OF TEACHER WITH LEARNER-CENTERED ASSUMPTIONS

All students have the potential to learn. In order to maximize learning, I need to help students feel comfortable discussing

their feelings and beliefs. Addressing students' social, emotional, and physical needs is important for learning to occur. Helping students understand how their beliefs about themselves affect learning is as important as working on their academic skills. Students have the natural ability to direct their own learning.

When teachers are relaxed and comfortable with themselves, they have access to a natural wisdom for dealing with even the most difficult classroom situations. Being willing to relate to each student as a unique individual facilitates learning more than does being an authority figure. In addition to focusing on what needs to be taught, teachers need to support students in pursuing their own interests in school and in connecting learning to their life situations.

Accepting students where they are—without condoning their behavior—makes them more receptive to learning. I have faith in my ability to make a difference with all students. Seeing things from the students' point of view is a key to their good performance in school. I believe that listening to students in a caring way helps them solve their own problems.

PROFILE OF TEACHER WITH NON-LEARNER-CENTERED ASSUMPTIONS

If students are not doing well, they need to go back to the basics and do more drill and skill development. My most important job as a teacher is to help students meet established curriculum standards. Left to their own devices, most students can't really be trusted to learn what they need to know. If I don't prompt and provide direction for student questions, students won't get the right answer. Knowing my subject matter really well is the most important contribution I can make to student learning. Good teachers always know more than their students.

There are so many complex reasons why students misbehave that it's not worth my time to figure out what I should do. Besides, I can't affect the things that happen outside of

school. If I give too much control to students in my class, they will take advantage of me. For students to respect me as a teacher, it is essential that I maintain my role as an authority figure. One of the most important things I can teach students is how to follow rules and to do what is expected of them in the classroom. Innate ability is fairly fixed and some children just can't learn as well as others. Some students just don't want to learn. Teachers shouldn't be expected to work with students who consistently cause problems in class. I know best what students need to know and what's important; students should take my word that what I'm teaching will be relevant to them sometime in their lives.

Again, most teachers do not fall totally within one profile or the other but share some attributes of each. In general, however, we have found that teachers who lean toward the non-learner-centered profile tend to direct what students learn and how they learn it, assert their authority through dictates and arbitrary rules, try to keep students on their toes (by giving pop quizzes, for example), concentrate solely on building students' intellectual capacity, and focus on getting through the required curriculum.

Those who tend toward the learner-centered profile focus on the student as well as on the student's learning. A focus on the student generally entails better communication and cooperation with the student. These teachers are more likely to take into account what students want to learn, include students in the setting of learning goals, and support students as they learn to take increasing responsibility for their own learning, sometimes individually and sometimes in cooperative groups. These teachers are more inclined to draw on students' unique talents, capacities, and strengths to bring about desired learning outcomes—that is, they focus on learning outcomes desired by both teacher and student. Learner-centered teachers also have a propensity to cultivate not just intellectual but also social and emotional growth within and among students.

Teacher Beliefs About What It Means to Be Learner Centered

Conversations with teachers clearly reveal that they have very different beliefs and assumptions about what it means to be learner centered. Teachers, like everyone else, form their beliefs and perceptions from personal experience, education, and values. Teachers' fundamental beliefs about education are important because they consciously and unconsciously shape how teachers see and relate to learners, learning, and teaching. For example, teachers can see learners from a *strength* or a *deficit* perspective (as having everything they need within them to succeed or as missing motivation and capability to learn, which qualities then need to be added or fixed); they can see learning as a natural process or as something students have to be taught to do; and they can see teaching as a process of facilitation and guidance or a process of directing and controlling learning. Thus, what teachers believe and assume about learners, learning, and teaching affects what they do, their behaviors and practices at the school and classroom levels. More importantly, teachers' *awareness* of their specific assumptions and beliefs about learners, learning, and teaching helps prevent *hidden cultures* in classrooms, cultures that are felt by both students and teachers but that cannot be addressed because they are unacknowledged.

It is thus important to define and help teachers become more aware of those beliefs and assumptions about learners, learning, and teaching that are consistent with an instructional orientation toward the *learner's needs, capacities, and perspectives* and toward *learning as a process of personally constructing meaning*. These are the beliefs and assumptions that lead to practices that are respectful, empowering, and facilitative of learning. These beliefs define the learner-centered teacher. Conversely, beliefs and assumptions about learners, learning, and teaching that reflect a deficit perspective about students and an interest in content alone are often but not always consistent with a traditional orientation that can be defined as non-learner centered. One of our goals in our ongoing research

and examination became to define these two orientations more specifically; that is, to identify those beliefs that help learners feel valued and respected as individuals and those beliefs that alienate students or lead them to feel devalued as learners.

We found in our research that teachers were not absolutely learner centered or completely non-learner centered. Different learner-centered teachers had different but overlapping beliefs. At the same time, however, because specific *beliefs or teaching practices* could be classified as learner centered or non-learner centered, learner-centered teachers can be simply defined as those that have more learner-centered than non-learner-centered beliefs and practices. Clearly, *believing that all students learn* is quite different from and more learner centered than *believing that some students cannot learn*. Learner-centered teachers see each student as unique and capable of learning, have a perspective that includes the learner (knowing that this promotes learning), understand basic principles defining learners and learning, and honor and accept the learner's point of view (McCombs & Stiller, 1995). As a result, the student's natural inclinations to learn, master the environment, and grow in positive ways are enhanced.

Characteristics and Dispositions of Learner-Centered Teachers

Learner-centered teachers also tend to have some general characteristics and dispositions in common. McKeachie (1990, 1992, 1995) talks about what makes a good teacher great. We believe that those whom he and others call good teachers have characteristics and dispositions we call learner centered. Evidence from the Purdue studies (Remmers) that took place from the 1920s to the 1960s shows that student ratings identify good teachers as those who demonstrate interest in their subject, a sympathetic attitude toward students, fairness in grading, a sense of humor, and a liberal attitude. The Michigan studies of the 1950s (described in Pintrich, Brown, & Weinstein, 1994) show that students believe that good

teachers put across material in interesting ways, stimulate intellectual curiosity, give clear explanations, are skillful in observing student reactions, are friendly, and provide clear structure and organization to the materials presented. Good teachers are also found to give quality feedback, are available and helpful, are fair, have a concern for their students, are enthusiastic about their subject matter and teaching, organize materials and information, and give clear explanations.

McKeachie also reports what teachers believe to be characteristics of good teachers; most of these characteristics overlap with those students identify. Good teachers are enthusiastic, seem interested in teaching, use good examples, are concerned about student learning, encourage students to express opinions, and are well organized.

What do good teachers do? Observations of good teachers (Murray & Renaud, 1995) show that good teachers speak expressively, move around, use humor, are enthusiastic, are clear (use concrete examples, signal transitions, repeat difficult material), call students by name, ask questions of students, are respectful of students, and have rapport with them (these teachers are friendly, flexible, available to talk to, and the like). Again, many of these actions are ones we define as learner centered.

Interestingly, many of the characteristics and dispositions that we believe define learner-centered teachers are similar or identical to those that describe *expert teachers* as well. For example, in a study aimed at differentiating between expert and experienced teachers, Henry (1994) cites the following as differentiating an expert teacher: knows the content, works with all students, nurtures, takes risks, respects students, is interested in individual student needs, participates in continuing professional growth, is self-confident and reflective, adjusts the context to learners, is slow to close the learning process, makes multiple concept connections, is enthusiastic, uses teachable moments, uses a variety of strategies, has good classroom management, and acknowledges own lack of knowledge (shares the ownership of knowing).

reciprocal. We thus have yet more evidence that answers the question why learner centered?

Summary

There is little argument that traditional modes of schooling are no longer adequate. Students—and, for that matter, all individuals in the educational system—operate as whole persons, with intellectual, emotional, social, and physical needs. In addition, students' behavior is based on their perceptions and evaluations of situations from their own perspective—a perspective that considers meaning and value relevant to personal and cultural contexts. Because conventional education often ignores current understandings of learners and learning, it does not incorporate student perspectives, needs, and talents. The result is the increased devaluing of schooling and learning by too many of our students.

Many of these students are frustrated by the lack of caring they experience in their schools as well as the absence of a sense of relevancy about what they are being asked to learn and do. This is true for many urban, suburban, and rural students of all ability levels but is particularly true for minority students, for whom race and culture can be sources of alienation. More students of color are entering schools and are finding the dominant school culture to be in conflict with their home culture. Many teachers have difficulty working with ethnic minority students. Understanding and accommodating different frames of reference can be an enormous and overwhelming challenge.

Not only are students left wanting something different but teachers also feel frustrated. They report that relationships with students have suffered as they feel pressured to cover curriculum and prepare students for tests. They also report a lack of administrative support, and relationships with administrators that are mostly centered around rules, regulations, and results. Teachers complain about not being trusted or respected by legislators, parents, and even colleagues. Policymakers may generate mandates without

understanding what really goes on in classrooms or what it takes and how long it takes to bring about personal and systemic change. Teachers thus feel confused and put upon by these mandates because the mandates often do not take into account the realities of schooling and what is involved in bringing about change.

Administrators also feel pressure to meet policy-driven demands and are frustrated because they have little time to devote to the fundamental issues of teaching and learning or to meeting with teachers about their work in the classroom. Administrators are often the ones who are called on to negotiate problems between teachers and parents, having to walk a fine line between the two. In short, such forms and degrees of alienation among such key participants make it hard for schools to do their best. The time has come to reevaluate the foundational principles that underlie this country's educational system, a task we have addressed in the first chapter.

The answer to the question why learner centered? can be summarized as follows:

- The research evidence is abundant and accumulating that motivation, learning, and achievement are enhanced where learner-centered principles and practices are in place—practices that address the personal domain, which is often ignored.
- The benefits of learner-centered practice extend to students, teachers, administrators, parents, and all other participants in the educational system.
- The changes in our society necessitate a change in the role and function of schools so that they better meet the needs of the learner as a whole person, whether that person is a student, teacher, administrator, or parent.
- Change itself requires a transformation in thinking (and thus a process of learning); this transformation can be facilitated by an understanding of basic principles about learning and learners.

Some learner-centered teachers have lots of rules and require quiet and strict behavior; others have looser, less formal guidelines. Some are serious; others are funny. Some are more authoritarian (tempered with caring and respect); others are more laissez-faire. Again, being learner-centered is as much a matter of personal disposition—where teachers come from in their interactions—as it is the specific actions teachers take in managing the classroom.

Summary

There is no question that many classrooms in this country produce students who are motivated to learn, learn, and achieve academic success. We have proposed that the classrooms in which this occurs are what we would call learner centered and that many of the teachers in these classrooms are the way they are and do what they do naturally and somewhat intuitively. We also have maintained that being learner centered does not look any one particular way. Not all learner-centered teachers believe or think in exactly the same way or engage in the same practices. We have said repeatedly that learner-centered teaching is as much a way of being, a disposition, as it is doing one thing or another.

At the same time, we have also asserted that there are some important commonalities in beliefs, qualities and characteristics, and practices of teachers whom we would call learner centered. Basically they operate in accordance with the premises that emerge from the learner-centered psychological principles. That is, they *acknowledge and attend to students' uniqueness*, by first getting to know their students well and by then using this information to accommodate students' unique qualities and needs; they know that *learning is a constructive process* and thus they do whatever they can to ensure that what is being taught is meaningful and relevant to students and they provide opportunities for students to be actively involved in the learning; they *create a positive climate* by caring for and respecting their students as human beings with nonacademic as well as academic needs and by providing an environment that is

safe, supportive, and comfortable; and they *assume that all of their students want to learn*, and thus they come from that assumption in their interactions.

These premises, as described in Chapter Two, emerge from the learner-centered psychological principles, which reflect the research on both learners and learning. While we acknowledge that many teachers are learner centered somewhat naturally and intuitively, we also believe that these teachers, as well as those who are not particularly learner centered, can benefit from knowing and understanding the principles and thus the research base these principles reflect. For teachers in the former group, learning about the principles might validate their experience, provide them with a rationale for what they are doing, foster more purposefulness in doing what they are doing, reinforce what they are doing well, and perhaps give them a few ideas. For teachers in the latter group, we hope that learning about the principles is an eye-opener, that it gives them a reason to reassess what they are doing and motivates them to recreate their relationship to their students and what they do in the classroom.

Deming (quoted in Glasser, 1990, p. 26) makes an interesting point in creating a case for the importance of understanding theory: "Knowledge is prediction, and knowledge comes from theory. Experience teaches nothing without theory. Do not try to copy someone else's success. Unless you understand the theory behind it, trying to copy it can lead to complete chaos."

While we might not agree entirely with this position, we do believe that there is power in understanding the theory behind why one thing works well and produces the result one is after and another thing does not. Francis Bacon said, "Knowledge is power." We agree. Therefore, we encourage teachers to become knowledgeable about the learner-centered psychological principles that reflect the research about learners and learning from which ways of being, strategies, and practices may be identified that can be used to maximize motivation, learning, and achievement for *all* students.