What Do We Know About Learners and Learning?
The Learner-Centered Framework: Bringing the Educational System into Balance

by Barbara L. McCombs

Abstract
This paper introduces “learner-centered” education from a research and theory base that integrates what we know about learners and learning both inside and outside formal school settings and describes the work of the author and colleagues in developing self-assessment and reflection tools for K–20 teachers and their students. Building on the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (APA, 1993, 1997), data on more than 20,000 students and their teachers in kindergarten through graduate school were collected with the Assessment of Learner-Centered Practices (ALCP) surveys (McCombs, 1997, 1999; McCombs and Lauer, 1997; McCombs and Pierce, 1999; McCombs and Quiat, 1999). The surveys identify teacher beliefs and discrepancies between teacher and student perspectives on practices, and help teachers to reflect on and change practices as well as to identify personalized staff development needs. Data indicated that the best predictor of student motivation and achievement, at all age levels, was a common domain of practice that creates positive relationships between students and teachers and a positive climate for learning. Implications for moving from personal to systems change based on student perspectives will briefly be presented.

Introduction
Our educational system is out of balance. Current reform efforts are focusing primarily on technical issues (e.g., high academic standards, increased student achievement, alignment of curricula and assessment) that emphasize accountability (e.g., “high stakes” testing, teacher responsibility for student achievement) and punitive consequences for teachers, students, and administrators when student achievement standards are not met (e.g., replacing school staff, retaining students in grade). To bring the system into balance and bring some of the joy of learning back into the educational process, the focus must also be on personal issues and the needs of all people in the system, including students and the adults who serve them in the teaching and learning process. First, however, it is important to clarify why this balance is particularly vital at this time.

Imbalance in the Current System
Although focusing school reform efforts on high academic standards does have its merits, this approach puts content, curriculum, and assessment, not students, at the center, contributing to students’ feelings of alienation. Even with clearer standards for what learners should know and be able to do, and the shift from what to teach to a focus on what content and skills must be learned by all learners, the needs of individual learners are often downplayed in the implementation of standards-based programs. Further, with the emphasis on knowledge and skill standards, our current educational paradigm defines the goal of learning as knowledge conservation rather than knowledge production (Carroll, 2000). This contributes to student complaints that school is boring and irrelevant.

From a learner-centered view based on research-validated principles of learning and change in complex human living systems, this focus must be transformed. Why? Because without a corresponding focus on individual learners and their learning needs, we are in danger of continuing to ignore students’ and teachers’ calls for...
help when they report that they feel disconnected from each other, think school is irrelevant, or drop out mentally or physically from a punitive and coercive learning environment.

In spite of these negative consequences for students and teachers, current state and federal approaches to increasing student achievement and teacher quality continue to emphasize content knowledge, standards, assessment, and accountability (Chase, 1999; Feistritzer, 1999; Finn, Kanstoroom, and Petulli, 1999; Kanstoroom and Finn, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1997). But is this focus the best? It may not be—particularly in light of new crises that have surfaced in our nation’s schools. These crises are outside the academic standards, achievement, and accountability area, but they are clearly being magnified as a result of the focus on this area. They include not only rising youth alienation from learning and associated non-academic issues, but also the rising evidence

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A Place Like This

After twelve years
I’m bored
I’m tired
The routine is getting old
It’s child labor, without a doubt
Using us to make a living
That’s a poor excuse
We could teach ourselves
A million times better
We’d even have an answer to:
“When will we need this in life?”
Or maybe...
We wouldn’t even have to ask
After a while the
Filth builds
The anger mounts
And smiles fade
How could you teach
In a place like this?
Much less learn
In a place like this?
The walls close in
I begin to hate it here
I just want to get out
But where is there to go?
There is no way out
There is nowhere to go
There is nothing to be without this
The anger subsides
Hopelessness forms
And I just go to sleep.

—Jenna Holland
Grade 10
New Jersey

No One

Questioning What?
No one knows.
Anyone Care?
Someone’s asking.
Asking ME?
Leave me alone!
I don’t know!
I’M NO ONE.
No one’s aware.
Why should they be?
Aware of anything,
That lurks inside of me.
I can’t even understand.
What should I expect of you?
Comprehension is at hand.
Dissension right there too.
Blowing stale wind,
Choking out truth,
Hiding vision behind,
Society’s curtain words.
Intended by the few
To misdirect the many
I need a LIGHT injection.
My soul is growing dark.
Show you know remorse.
You make it seem so hard,
It’s all I know. Is it enough?
Can I use it for protection?
Will it even help?
Does anybody care?

—Justin J.
Grade 12
Mississippi
of teacher stress, feelings of being overwhelmed, despair, and departure from the profession.

**The Need for Person-Centered Approaches**

Schools no longer have the luxury of ignoring the personal needs of students. The rising wave of youth violence, both in the community and in school settings, has generated increased attention to issues facing today’s school-age children. Associated rises in youth suicide, alcohol and drug abuse, school disciplinary problems, school dropout rates, and delinquent behaviors are of additional concern. School system and community responses run the gamut from fear-based attempts to expel or suspend all students who even appear to be troublemakers to more positive approaches that build the strengths and assets of even the most troubled youth. At the core of these youth issues, however, many experts as well as the youth themselves say that youth feel alienated, disconnected, and in a spiritual crisis, questioning who they are, their purpose in life, and the meaning of life (Brendtro, 1999; Wheatley, 1999). What is needed are educational models that reconnect youth and adults, models that are person-centered while also providing challenging learning experiences that prepare children and youth to be knowledge producers, knowledge users, and socially responsible citizens. We need models with a balanced focus on learners and learning.

**Restoring a Needed Balance**

Attention to the knowledge base about learners and learning is essential in focusing on the personal domain of educational systems. This domain focuses on the human processes and on personal and interpersonal relationships, beliefs, and perceptions that are affected or supported by the educational system as a whole. The foundation of research-validated principles is essential to designing person- and learner-centered programs and practices that attend holistically and systemically to the needs of all learners.

Youth alienation, with its relationship to problems such as school dropouts and suicide, is an issue of much current concern. Ryan and Deci (2000) maintain that alienation in any age population is caused by a lack of supports for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Unfortunately, there are too many examples in the current educational reform agenda of coercive and punitive consequences for students, teachers, and administrators when students fail to achieve educational standards as assessed on state and national tests. Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 76) argue: “Excessive control, nonoptimal challenges, and lack of connectedness . . . disrupt the inherent actualizing and organizational tendencies endowed by nature, and thus such factors result not only in the lack of initiative and responsibility but also in distress and psychopathology.”

Open School Movement founder Herb Kohl has thirty-six years of experience as a teacher working in dysfunctional, poverty-ridden urban school districts. In a recent interview (Scherer, 1998), Kohl emphasizes the importance of teachers projecting hope to students—convincing them of their worth and ability to achieve in a difficult world. This means respecting students and honoring their perspectives. Kohl also maintains

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**What Makes Me Want to Learn?**

Another important thing that makes me want to learn is that the material is interesting. Some things, like the Civil War, are just plain boring. Teachers, however, can do a lot to make things like the Civil War fun! For instance, instead of taking notes on the battle between the Monitor and the Merrimac, students can draw images of the battle and write small narratives about specific crew members. This offers the same amount of information as taking notes (maybe more), but it makes it more fun and interesting. Another instance is French. If we only sat and conjugated verbs in class it would get pretty boring pretty fast, but instead we can do oral exercises and watch movies, or discuss pictures. In essence the thing that makes me want to learn is having a good, interesting teacher who does engaging, educational things with educational material, and the constant reminder of what a good, high-quality education can do for my future.

—William S.

Grade 7

Kentucky
that quality learning is learning that engages students. He describes learning communities as those that are curious and encourage invention, creativity, and imagination. He believes that the curriculum needs to be shaped by what adults know and by student interests and learning preferences. The educational environment has to be changed and communities rebuilt with a focus on caring. Kohl advocates “personalized learning,” based on personal relationships between students and teachers and respect for the unique way each student perceives the world and learns.

This article presents a research-validated definition of “learner-centered” that integrates what we know about learners and learning, inside and outside formal school settings. I will describe the work of my colleagues and me in developing self-assessment and reflection tools for K–20 teachers and their students, highlighting the role of student perspectives in defining classroom practices and contexts that best support high academic achievement and high motivation for learning. I will also discuss how self-assessment results are used to promote teacher change and the implications of these results for moving from personal to systems change based on student perspectives. I will conclude with a summary of what must be done in practice to achieve a balanced focus on technical and personal educational issues.

What Knowledge Base Is Needed to Achieve a Balance between Learners’ Learning and Motivational Needs?

What is the foundational knowledge base needed to define the learning experiences and conditions that create quality learning and meet social, emotional, and cognitive learning needs? Research supports the contention that a focus on personal and motivational outcomes balanced with a focus on high academic achievement and high motivation for learning. I will also discuss how self-assessment results are used to promote teacher change and the implications of these results for moving from personal to systems change based on student perspectives. I will conclude with a summary of what must be done in practice to achieve a balanced focus on technical and personal educational issues.

The Learner-Centered Principles as a Foundational Framework

Education is one of many complex living systems that function to support particular human needs (cf. Wheatley, 1999). Such systems, unpredictable by their nature, can be understood in terms of principles that define human needs, cognitive and motivational processes, development, and individual differences. The research-validated Learner-Centered Psychological Principles (APA, 1993, 1997) provide a knowledge base for understanding learning and motivation as natural processes that occur when the conditions and context of learning support individual learner needs, capacities, experiences, and interests. This foundation is essential to designing programs and practices that attend holistically and systemically to the needs of all learners—including students, teachers, administrators, families, and community members.

The Learner-Centered Psychological Principles

In 1990, the American Psychological Association (APA) appointed a special Task Force on Psychology in Education, one of whose purposes was to integrate research and theory from psychology and education in order to surface time-
tested general principles that can provide a framework for school redesign and reform. The resulting document originally specified twelve fundamental principles about learners and learning that, taken together, provide an integrated perspective on factors influencing learning for all learners (APA, 1993). This document, revised in 1997 (APA, 1997), now includes fourteen principles, with attention to diversity and standards. [Note to readers: Those interested in research support for the principles are referred to the research and theory reviewed in developing the principles, described in McCombs and Whisler (1997). Further research support is also provided in Alexander and Murphy (1998) and Lambert and McCombs (1998)].

The fourteen learner-centered principles are categorized into four research-validated domains important to learning, as shown in Table 1: metacognitive and cognitive factors; affective and motivational factors; developmental and social factors; and individual difference factors. An understanding of these domains and the principles within them establishes a framework for designing learner-centered practices at all levels of schooling. It also defines what “learner-centered” means from a research-validated perspective.

**Defining “Learner-Centered”**

From an integrated look at the principles, the following definition emerges:

“Learner-centered” is 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. Learner-centered education is a reflection in practice of the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles—the programs, practices, policies, and people that support learning for all. [Summarized from the APA Work Group of the Board of Educational Affairs (1997, November). Learner-centered psychological principles: Guidelines for school reform and redesign. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.]

This definition of “learner-centered” is based on an understanding of the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles as a representation of current knowledge on learners and learning. The principles apply to all learners, in and outside school, young and old. Learner-centered is also related to the beliefs, characteristics, dispositions, and practices of teachers—practices primarily created by the teacher. When teachers derive their practices from an understanding of the principles, they (a) include learners in decisions about how and what they learn and how that learning is assessed; (b) value each learner’s unique perspectives; (c) respect and accommodate individual differences in learners’ backgrounds, interests, abilities, and experiences; and (d) treat learners as co-creators and partners in the teaching and learning process.

Others who have used the term “learner-centered” (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1996; Sparks and Hirsh, 1997) refer to learning new beliefs and visions of practice that are responsive to and respectful of the diverse needs of students and teachers as learners. All learning, for students and teachers, must support diverse learners, provide time for reflection, and offer opportunities for teachers and students to co-create practices that enhance learning, motivation, and achievement. This view of “learner-centered” is a research-validated paradigm shift that transforms education—including how best to design programs to support the new vision (cf. Sparks and Hirsh, 1997).

“Learner-centeredness” is not solely a function of particular instructional practices or programs (McCombs, 2000; McCombs and Lauer, 1997; McCombs and Whisler, 1997). Rather, it is a complex interaction of qualities of the teacher in combination with characteristics of instructional practices, as perceived by individual learners. That is, “learner-centeredness” is in “the eye of the beholder”: it varies as a function of learner perceptions, which in turn are the result of learners’ prior experiences, self-beliefs, and attitudes about schools and learning as well as their current interests, values, and goals. The quality of “learner-centeredness” does not reside in programs or practices by themselves, no matter how well-designed the program may be.

When learner-centered is defined from a research perspective that includes the knowledge base on both learning and learners, it also clarifies what is needed to create positive learning contexts and communities. When this approach
The Learner-Centered Psychological Principles

**COGNITIVE AND METACOGNITIVE FACTORS**

**Principle 1: Nature of the learning process**
The learning of complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience.

**Principle 2: Goals of the learning process**
The successful learner, over time and with support and instructional guidance, can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge.

**Principle 3: Construction of knowledge**
The successful learner can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways.

**Principle 4: Strategic thinking**
The successful learner can create and use a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to achieve complex learning goals.

**Principle 5: Thinking about thinking**
Higher-order strategies for selecting and monitoring mental operations facilitate creative and critical thinking.

**Principle 6: Context of learning**
Learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instructional practices.

**MOTIVATIONAL AND AFFECTIVE FACTORS**

**Principle 7: Motivational and emotional influences on learning**
What and how much is learned is influenced by the learner’s motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual’s emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking.

**Principle 8: Intrinsic motivation to learn**
The learner’s creativity, higher-order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn.

Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control.

**Principle 9: Effects of motivation on effort**
Acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner effort and guided practice. Without learners’ motivation to learn, the willingness to exert this effort is unlikely without coercion.

**DEVELOPMENTAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS**

**Principle 10: Developmental influence on learning**
As individuals develop, they encounter different opportunities and experience different constraints for learning. Learning is most effective when differential development within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains is taken into account.

**Principle 11: Social influences on learning**
Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others.

**INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES FACTORS**

**Principle 12: Individual differences in learning**
Learners’ different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning are a function of prior experience and heredity.

**Principle 13: Learning and diversity**
Learning is most effective when differences in learners’ linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account.

**Principle 14: Standards and assessment**
Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner and learning progress—including diagnostic, process, and outcome assessment—are integral parts of the learning process.
occurs at the classroom and school levels, it increases the likelihood of success for more students and their teachers. It can also increase clarity about the requisite dispositions and characteristics of those in service to learners and learning—particularly teachers. From this perspective, the learner-centered principles can become a foundational framework for determining how to assess the efficacy of existing programs and practices in enhancing the teaching and learning process. Learner perceptions of how well programs and practices meet individual cognitive, social, and emotional needs are part of the assessment of ongoing learning, change, and improvement.

The Role of Self-Assessment for Learning and Change

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

Even those educators who are open to change may be uncertain what kind of changes will be most effective and how best to go about making the changes. It may seem unlikely that any change can be successful, given the complex and overwhelming set of problems and issues facing educational systems. 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 for as long as possible. Is there a way to break through this resignation and inertia? What might increase willingness to change and hopefulness about the possibilities?

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**Untitled**

Imagine this, you are a student in high school. Your day is okay until you get to those teachers you are dried out and just like to lecture. You slouch in your seat and the next thing you know, you are being yelled at to wake up or take your head off the desk. This is the everyday story of most students around the United States. Most of the blame for students being bored or falling asleep in class could be placed on the student, but some of this blame could be shifted to the teachers. No student in the United States wants to go to the same dried out teacher, who sits and lectures to him or her all day long, or will teach and test without making school fun. All teachers prepare their students for college, but school should be fun and interesting everyday. A student should want to not only go to class to learn, but go because they like the teacher. No matter what the age of the teacher, they should be energetic and exciting to where the student wants to go to class. So any teacher can do some quick and easy steps that can help make their class interesting. First, a teacher can stop lecturing and testing everyday. Second, the teacher can add fun activities at least once a week to spruce up their class. Third, the teacher can get the students involved in some type of teaching and learning that the student will like. With these steps, any teacher can create an environment that a student will love to work in and learn in everyday.

—Bryan G.
Grade 11
Illinois
We have taken these questions seriously in our work. We examined our own beliefs and thinking about learning, learners, and teaching; looked to the research literature to learn what needs to change and why; and 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 research on learning 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, and that it occurs continuously for all learners, cradle to grave (Alexander and Murphy, 1998; McCombs, 1998). After examining the differences in educational systems based on the “can learn,” versus the “do learn,” philosophy, we have seen clear evidence of the superiority of those systems that assume all students do learn (McCombs and Whisler, 1997). The “do learn” environments respect and accommodate student diversity by assuming that learning and motivation will be natural and that students can be trusted to guide their own learning process—not selected and sorted into presumed categories of ability. Variable learning methods, content, and performance demonstrations are determined with student input, not selected for students in ways that may limit their potential.

To address motivation, learning, and achievement, as well as variables dealing with health and positive functioning, in addition to focusing on learning, our work with the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles has focused on providing tools for addressing the personal domain of educational systems. These tools were developed to foster a process of personal learning and change for teachers.

**The Assessment of Learner-Centered Practices (ALCP)**

The ALCP contains a set of short teacher and student self-assessment surveys for teachers and students in grades K–20 (McCombs, 1999). The Teacher (or Instructor) Survey measures two primary variables: “Teacher Beliefs” and “Assumptions and Teacher Perceptions of Classroom Practices.” Three factors that relate to learner-centered, versus nonlearner-centered, beliefs about learners, learning, and teaching are measured in the Teacher Beliefs section of the survey. Depending on the level of schooling, four to five factors that define domains of learner-centered classroom practice are measured in the “Teacher Practices” section of the survey. These domains are based on the principles and cover practices associated with metacognitive-cognitive, affective-motivational, developmental, personal-social, and other individual needs of learners (McCombs, 1997; McCombs and Whisler, 1997).

The student survey measures students’ perceptions of their teachers’ practices, assessing the same four or five domains of practice from the students’ perspective (McCombs, Lauer, and Pierce, 1998; McCombs, 1997; McCombs and Lauer, 1997). This survey provides teachers with feedback about how each of their students experiences classroom practices. (Note: There are other measures in the ALCP for administrators, mentor teachers, and parents, cf. McCombs and Whisler, 1997).

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**What do my teachers do that helps me to learn?**

Every teacher here at my school motivates students to do their best by making class fun and interesting. Using a variety of teaching techniques, teachers here intrigue students to learn. Because each student learns differently, teachers use different methods to help us understand what is being covered in class.

Some students understand things by visualizing while others learn best by lectures. In history class, for instance, my teacher uses PowerPoint presentations, lectures, videos and various activities to help us understand.

My teachers are also always available when students need extra help.

—Stephanie Y.

Grade 9

Hawaii
Results of Self-Assessing Personal Beliefs and Perceptions of Practice

Our research (McCombs, 1998; McCombs and Lauer, 1997; McCombs and Quiat, 1999; McCombs and Whisler, 1997) looked at the impact of teachers’ beliefs on their perceptions of their classroom practices, as well as how teacher perceptions differ from student perceptions of these practices. In a large-scale study of teachers and students, we confirmed our hypothesis about the importance—for student motivation, learning, and achievement—of those beliefs and practices that are consistent with the research on learners and learning. We also found that teachers who are more learner-centered are more successful in engaging all students in an effective learning process and are themselves more effective learners and happier with their jobs. Furthermore, teachers report that the process of self-assessment and reflection—particularly about discrepancies between their own and their individual students’ experiences of classroom practices—helps them identify areas in which they might change their practices to reach more students effectively. This is an important finding that relates to the “how” of transformation. Helping teachers and others engage in a process of self-assessment and reflection—particularly about the impact of their beliefs and practices on individual students and their learning and motivation—creates a respectful and non-judgmental impetus to change. The transformation is completed when this opportunity for self-assessment and reflection is combined with skill training in and dialogue about how to create learner-centered K–20 schools and classrooms.

We found in our research that teachers were not absolutely learner-centered or completely non-learner-centered. At the same time, however, specific beliefs or teaching practices could be classified as learner-centered (likely to enhance motivation, learning, and success) or non-learner-centered (likely to hinder motivation, learning, and success). Learner-centered teachers are defined as those with more beliefs and practices classified as learner-centered than as non-learner-centered. For example, believing that all students learn is quite different from believing that some students cannot learn, the former being learner-centered and the latter being non-learner-centered. Learner-centered teachers see each student as unique and capable of learning, have a perspective that focuses on the learner, understand basic principles defining learners and learning, and honor and accept the student’s point of view (McCombs and Lauer, 1997; McCombs and Quiat, 1999). As a result, the student’s natural inclinations to learn, master the environment, and grow in positive ways are enhanced.

The results of our research with the ALCP teacher and student surveys at both the secondary and postsecondary levels have confirmed that (a) student perceptions of their teachers’ instructional practices are significantly related to their motivation, learning, and achievement; (b) teacher perceptions of instructional practices are not significantly related to student motivation and achievement; and (c) student perceptions of a positive learning environment and interpersonal relationship with the teacher are the most important factors in enhancing student motivation and achievement.

For K–3 students, three domains of classroom practice are best at predicting motivation and achievement: (1) establishing positive relationships and classroom climate; (2) adapting to individual differences; and (3) facilitating students’ learning and thinking skills. For middle and high school students, there were four domains that included the three for K–3 students, but with the addition of (4) honoring student voice and providing individual choice and challenge. Results with undergraduate and graduate students and their instructors revealed five domains of practice important to motivation and achievement: (1) establishing positive interpersonal relationships; (2) facilitating the learning process; (3) adapting to student learning needs; (4) encouraging personal challenge and responsibility for learning; and (5) providing for social learning needs. Thus, at all levels of our educational system, teachers and instructors can improve instructional practices and move toward more learner-centered practices by attending to what students perceive and by creating positive climates and relationships—those critical connections so important to personal and system learning and change.

Moving from Personal Change to System Change

A focus on the learner has also emerged from those who see schools as “living systems”—systems that are in service to learners and serve the basic function of learning for the primary recipient (the learner) as well as for the other humans who support learning (teachers, administrators,
parents). Building on the living-systems concept, proponents of this “learner-centered” perspective contend that education must concern itself with how to provide the most supportive learning context for diverse students—a context created primarily when teachers value and understand individual student needs (e.g., Marshall, 1998; Sarason, 1995). From this perspective, curriculum and content are the important but not deciding factors in achieving desired motivation, learning, and achievement. Attention to individual learner needs and assessment of how well these needs are being met are as important and fundamental to learning.

Those working within a living systems framework also contend that systems change is the result of personal change and of critical connections (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1998). That is, personal change in one’s perceptions, values, attitudes, and beliefs results from transformations

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**Fifth Grade at My School**

Being in the fifth grade at the Horace Mann School gives me a good opportunity to learn. My teachers make it fun for us to learn. For example, my teachers put on a little skit to start off our unit on the American Revolution. Also, we play math games and those amuse all of the fifth graders a lot.

In my fifth grade, there is something called Enrichment. In January, my teachers picked about eight children from each class who they thought were gifted and talented and I was one of them. Then, twice a week, these children work in three different groups on a project. This year, we are making bridges out of toothpicks, and then we are going to see how much mass they can hold. In each group there is an architect, a transportation chief, a project director, a builder, and an accountant. I am the architect of my group.

There are some ups and downs regarding fifth grade. The ups are that we get to go on a lot of field trips. We are about to go to Environmental Camp. Also, we learn in fun ways. We do a lot of science experiments. We have a volunteer science teacher who teaches us a lot about science. For our last experiment we made parachutes out of plastic bags. We took these to the top of the fire escape and let them go. One bad thing about fifth grade is that we work side by side at our tables doing work sheets. Often, everybody talks and I can’t concentrate on my work. Also, some of the work I do is busy work and is really boring. But I really do like fifth grade.

I took the MCAS test last year and did extremely well. Some fourth and fifth graders are worried about the MCAS, but I’m not, since I took it and did well on it last year. The thing I don’t like about the MCAS is that I feel like I am wasting several days of the week taking an easy test.

I enjoy being in the fifth grade at my school. I like hanging out with my friends and being there for them when they need me. I like to learn and to figure out new things each day. I especially like to read and write. This is my last year at this school so I should make the best of it. I am going to miss this school, but I am looking forward to learning new and interesting things at the middle school!

—Katrina Faulstitch

Grade 5

Massachusetts

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in thinking. These transformations in thinking most often result from critical connections made in one’s own understanding, knowledge, and ways of thinking, as well as from critical connections—personal relationships— with others of significance in the learning environment. For example, a teacher confronted with the awareness that prior instructional practices aren’t working with a new group of students is most likely to change those practices to more learner-centered approaches if (a) he or she learns that this group of students has a higher level of prior knowledge about the topic being covered than prior groups of students (new information component) and (b) a valued colleague has worked with similar students successfully using new instructional practices that give the students more choice and control over the instructional process (personal relationship component).

As people in living systems such as education are given more opportunities to be creatively involved in how their work gets done, Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1998) contend that not only will they create conditions that facilitate rapid change (new relationships, new insights, greater levels of commitment), but they will also increase their capacity for learning and growth. When individuals are engaged in designing change, they create more and better connections and relationships that can help the system change from within. Although the availability of new and richer information helps people change personal constructions of meaning and understanding, increasing the number, variety, and strengths of interpersonal connections and relationships is what moves the system toward better functioning and health. Standards of functioning and plans for change should not be imposed or mandated from outside, but need to come from within—through ongoing dialogue and conversations in which people share perceptions, seek out a diversity of interpretations, and agree on what needs to be done. In this process of learning and change, research-validated principles can be guides to what will work well in the current situation or context, helping to create a system designed to take care of self, others, and the place (Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers, 1998).

In most educational institutions and progressively within the K–12 system, teachers and disciplines are isolated from one another. It is difficult to find examples of cross-department collaborations in course design, multi-disciplinary learning opportunities, or organizational structures and physical facilities that allow interactions and dialogue among teachers or instructors. Content and people are isolated and fragmented. Change is often mandated from above or outside the system. Since critical connections are not being made, it is not surprising that change often meets resistance. The fears and insecurities that create resistance disappear when people participate in creating the system through which their work gets done.

In conclusion, by using research that integrates what we know about learners and learning as a framework and foundation for transformed practice at K–20 levels of our educational system, we can achieve a needed balance between meeting personal needs of learners and technical demands for high standards and accountability. Our research shows that learner- or person-centered systems can improve learning and motivation by meeting students’ needs for belonging, control, and competence. Transforming our K–20 educational system with a consideration of the needs and perspectives of the people in the system is one of the most powerful ways to enhance learning, motivation, and achievement. Continuing to mandate and coerce higher achievement can at best produce only compliance among those too fearful, disheartened, or tired to contest these practices. We can do better than that, and we have research evidence and research-validated principles to point the way.

References


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