WHAT ARE LEARNER-CENTERED SCHOOLS?

Jerome G. Delaney
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland
Winter 1999

At first blush, the above title may evoke a reader reaction to the effect that such a question is so basic to what education is all about that it hardly deserves a second thought. Hold that thought for a moment. We as educators would like to think that all schools are and should be learner-centered, but upon further reflection we may come to realize that schools do have some distance to go before they become truly learner-centered. This article will examine the theory and practice of the "learner-centered school" and hopefully shed some light on a movement that appears to be gaining considerable momentum in the current thrust to restructure and reform schools.

Background

According to Schrenko (1994), the concept of the learner-centered school is not new. She further explains that:

...in John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), a lab school is described as a plan for education with no discrete grades and much emphasis on "co-operative social organization". The Dewey lab school focused on the students' needs rather than on covering a well-defined scope and sequence of curriculum. Much of Dewey's philosophy is evident in the learner-centered classroom. Students become a part of the learning team, empowered to make choices and to move at their own pace. This learner-centered type of education prevailed throughout the early schools, until the onset of the industrial revolution changed America's vision of education (p. viii).

This "progressive" notion of what schooling should be was not without its critics and schools eventually embraced the industrial or factory model of education introduced to the United States by Horace Mann. In the "factory" school, all students were grouped chronologically, were taught the same material from the same textbook, and were expected to function in an obedient, non-questioning manner (Schrenko, 1994). This system was designed to prepare all students in the same way so they would be ready to work on an assembly line.

This model was indeed useful at the time. Today, however, most of the dull, routine, assembly-line work previously delegated to factory workers is now performed by computers and robots. Today's students must be able to think, make decisions, transfer knowledge, acquire new skills, and work together in teams (Schrenko, 1994).

For the past two decades the American educational system (which heavily influences our educational system in Canada) has been undergoing educational reform and

restructuring. The so-called "second wave" of reform presently underway has seen a call for "second-order" (Fullan, 1991) or systemic change. Fullan suggests that this second-order change consists of "changes that affect the culture and structure of schools, restructuring roles and reorganising responsibilities, including those of students and parents" (p. 29).

 By the 1990s, the call for this "second-order" or systemic change led people to question the basic principles and practices of the traditional "factory" model of education (Schrenko, 1994). There now seemed to be a renewed interest in the learner-centered concept but, according to Alexander and Murphy (1993), it was not until the American Psychological Association (APA) produced a concise, research-based summary of the basic principles of learner-centered schooling that a concise framework for defining the nature of the learner-centered school emerged.

 In 1990, the APA appointed a special Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education whose task 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 (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). "Taken as a whole [these principles] provide an integrated perspective on factors influencing learning for all learners. Together, they are intended to be understood as an organised knowledge base that supports a learner-centered model (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 3)."

Learner-Centered Principles

 The following is a list of those principles as developed by the APA (cited in McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 5-6):

Metacognitive and Cognitive Factors

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

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

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

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

Affective Factors

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

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

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

The phrase "learner-centered" is often equated with terms such as "child-centered" or "student-centered". However, "learner-centered" goes beyond that as Lambert and McCombs (1998) explain:

When one examines the learner-centered principles, it is clear that the concept suggests more than that. The principles apply to all of us, cradle to grave, from students in the classroom to teachers, administrators, parents, and others influenced by the process of schooling. Other people equate learner-centered with the affective side of education – quality interpersonal relationships, climates of caring, and focus on fostering students' competence and sense of well-being. Again, we think that's only part of the picture. When one looks across the domains covered in the principles – the metacognitive and cognitive, affective, personal and social, developmental, and other individual differences factors – it is clear that there is an emphasis on both the learner and learning. The central understanding that emerges from an integrated and holistic look at the principles, however, is that for educational systems to serve the needs of every learner, it is essential that every instructional decision focus on the individual learner – with an understanding of the learning process (p. 9).

From these twelve learner-centered principles has evolved the following 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 (McCombs & Whisler, 1997, p. 9).

Theory into Practice

Transferring the theory of learner-centered schools into actual practice is the challenge faced by classroom teachers and educational administrators. Such transfer begins with practitioners having a clear understanding of the various underpinnings of the concept – the principles that form the prerequisite foundation.

From those principles we are able, according to Schrenko (1994), "[to] build an underlying belief system about how schools and teachers can best stimulate learning" (p. 4). She puts forth the following premises for our consideration:

1. All children come to school willing and able to learn.

2. All intelligence is modifiable.

Teachers enable learning by creating conditions for learning by all:

1. Using mindful approaches, learner-centered teachers mediate learning by all.

2. Learning best occurs when individuals construct their own meaning.

3. Students must learn to work in teams.

4. Teachers facilitate learning by using different pacing and by recognizing multiple pathways to learning.

5. Learning occurs best when the school supports learner-centered instruction (pp. 4-12).

Understandably, the vision suggested in the learner-centered definition, the various principles, and the premises is "admirable and theoretically sound, but idealistic" (Rallis, 1995, p. 227). She ponders the challenges involved in translating the theory and vision of a learner-centered school into actual practice:

The change requires a shifting of perspective, the adoption of a new set of assumptions about schooling. People hold beliefs and assumptions about schooling that shape their expectations and drive their judgments. These expectations often run counter to what a learner-centered school delivers; thus, harsh public judgments prevent attempts to establish alternative schooling from the start or demoralize those that have begun. Society's survival instinct seeks to maintain the status quo, supporting schools that force children into existing molds and sabotaging those that encourage individuality. Most restructuring efforts such as site-based management teams disregard the learner and learning and focus only on improving existing governance structures and organizational procedures (p. 228).

According to Rallis (1995), "becoming learner centered requires more than structural alterations: it requires changing the culture of the school" (p. 228). She further elaborates on that change:

The culture of a learner-centered school is one of a learning organization (Senge, 1990); thus everyone is a learner, adults included. The active learning of the teachers in a learner-centered school is supported and honored as well. They learn to know their children; they learn in order to develop their teaching; and they learn as a result of their interaction with students. They model the inquiry process for their students and for each other… In sum, all inhabitants of the school are students [learners]. Consequently, they becomes we, and everything contributes to the prevailing culture of inquiry (p. 228).

The literature contains a number of other characteristics of learner-centered schools. Schrenko (1994) offers the following:

1. Unlike the "factory" model of schooling, the learner-centered school centers on thoughtful expectations and high standards. School is defined in terms of the performance desired by the local community and the results obtained by the students.
2. The learner-centered school or classroom focuses on the success of all students. In the traditional classroom, children at six years of age are expected to know and do the same things. In a learner-centered classroom, developmentally appropriate activities are designed to help students use the thinking and learning strategies they will need to succeed both in school and in life. In a learner-centered system, standards are

established, and each child is expected to achieve those standards. The time required to master skills may vary, but the standards do not.

3. Learner-centered classrooms focus on meaningful experiences. earner-centered teachers know that a "being there" experience is the best type of teaching so they provide as many real life experiences as possible.

4. Scheduling in the learner-centered classroom also differs from the traditional classrooms. Students do not change subjects every forty or fifty minutes but rather follow flexible schedules that integrate subjects enabling depth of study as well as breadth (pp. 28-29).

In learner-centered schools McCombs and Whisler (1997) proffer that students:

1. choose their own projects;

2. work at their own individual pace;

3. show excitement about learning new things;

4. work with students of different ages, cultures, and abilities;

5. demonstrate their knowledge in unique ways;

6. are actively engaged and participating in individual and group learning activities;

7. go beyond minimal assignments (p. 65).

On the topic of instructional strategies and methods utilized in the learner-centered classroom, McCombs and Whisler (1997) suggest the following:

1. utilizing time in variable and flexible ways to match student needs;

2. including learning activities that are personally relevant to students;

3. giving students increasing responsibility for the learning process;

4. providing questions and tasks that stimulate students' thinking beyond rote memorizing;

5. helping students refine their understanding by using critical thinking skills;

6. supporting students in developing and using effective learning strategies; including peer learning and peer teaching as part of the instructional method (p. 65).

Assessment and Evaluation

Assessment and evaluation are topics that cause contentious debate among teachers and administrators. How should students be graded? What criteria should be used in grading? Does one reward knowledge, effort, good behavior, or some combination thereof? These are but a few of the multitude of questions educators are continually asking themselves. Levin and Young (1998) summarize some of the inherent difficulties in evaluating students:

School grades have important consequences for a student's future. They may determine whether a student enters an enrichment program or qualifies for a particular university or college program. Yet grades in school are not particularly predictive of success in adult life. [Research done by Walberg, 1987 suggests that] grades in university programs, for example, correlate very poorly with measures of adult and occupational success. The problems with grades have been recognized for many years. In principle it ought to be possible to provide a thoughtful and thorough analysis of students' skills and weaknesses without using any comparative measure, whether it be letters or numbers. And [according to Maeroff, 1991] important changes have been made, particularly in elementary schools, in terms of assessing students' progress using other forms of evaluation (p. 269).

Acknowledging the kinds of concerns articulated in the previous paragraphs, many schools and school districts are now experimenting with alternative ways of assessing student learning and performance in an effort to become more learner-centered. Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Falk (1995) posit that:

These concerns are also related to the increasing demands for a kind of education that encourages students to do more than memorize information and use algorithms to solve tidy problems – an education that prepares students to frame problems, find information, evaluate alternatives, create ideas and products, and invent new answers to messy dilemmas (p. 5).

These alternative kinds of assessment practices are frequently called "authentic" assessments because they engage students in "real world" tasks rather than in multiple choice exercises and evaluate them according to criteria that are important for actual performance in that field (Wiggins, 1989). These assessments take the form of observation checklists, artwork/illustrations, oral projects and observations, artifacts, oral/written reports, and portfolios (Schrenko, 1994, pp. 135-142). Development of mathematical models, literary critiques, scientific experiments, dance performances, debates, oral presentations, defences of ideas, "domain" projects which enable students to work on practices central to a discipline such as rehearsing a piece of music or writing a scene for a play are additional examples of authentic assessments (Darling-Hammond, 1997).

According to Darling-Hammond et al., (1995), "a major goal of authentic assessment is to help students develop the capacity to evaluate their own work against public standards, to revise, modify, and redirect their energies, taking initiative to assess their own progress" (p. 12). The real world of work requires individuals to continually evaluate their performances on the job and authentic assessment provides

students with the opportunities to develop those self-assessment skills.

Lambert and McCombs (1998) suggest that learner-centered assessments should have 3 characteristics:

1. They should begin with a commitment to helping the learner function successfully in society by representing the content, skills, and dispositions that society values and is likely to value over the coming decade. For example, they might include the ability to solve loosely structured problems, work together in groups, and present information orally.

2. Learner-centered assessment tasks themselves function as learning events. The tasks areseen as opportunities for students to learn from one another and deepen their understanding of content.

3. Students are continuously encouraged to self-assess their progress by using publicly stated performance criteria to monitor their own work (p. 212).

Conclusion

Varying degrees of "learner-centeredness" exist in schools today. To suggest that our schools are totally lacking in "learner-centeredness" would be inaccurate and irresponsible; there are teachers and administrators, who, on a daily basis, make valiant efforts to teach from a learner-centered perspective. The message one would like to leave with the reader is that the concept warrants further investigation and study by classroom teachers, building and district administrators.

This article has given an overview of what learner-centered schools are all about – how they are defined, their underlying principles and premises, as well as various other elements of the concept. It is neither the "silver bullet" nor the panacea for the shortcomings and deficiencies in education today. Although it would be naïve and unrealistic to advocate a dramatic and wholesale change from the "factory" model of schooling to learner-centered schools, the concept and its potential to impact on the school reform movement in a positive manner merits further examination. Education in North America and indeed worldwide is at present attempting to respond to a public call for reform; learner-centered schools appear to represent one viable alternative worthy of consideration.

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Jerome G. Delaney, currently an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland, is on leave from the principalship of St. Michael's High School, Bell Island. His e-mail address is jgdelane@stemnet.nf.ca