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Creating Learner Centered Schools: Dreams and Practices

“WHAT ARE WE GOING TO do with all this stuff. Mr. Lee? I think you raided the recycling center again!” giggled Janey. She and her classmates in the multi-age house of Prospector School! were filtering into their space from the playground this morning. The floor was covered with several piles of materials, including cardboard, paper clips, tape, newspapers, towel cylinders, and other recycled items. The teachers, Daniel Lee and Valerie LeBain, ushered their students into groups of five around each of the piles.

“Do any of you know what an architect is?” asked Ms. LeBain. After some talk about what architects do, Ms. LeBain repeated a student’s summary: “I guess we could say they design buildings. But how do they know that their designs will work?” Again the students suggested a variety of ways that architects might test their designs.

“So, do we get to design something out of this junk?” asked William.

“Towers. Mr. Lee and I are your clients, and we need some towers. Each group is a small architectural firm, and you will submit to us your design for a tower.”

“What kind of tower do you want?” asked Amelia.

“We don’t really have the perfect tower in mind. You can decide, but we do want the tower to reach the ceiling. And it must be stable—we don’t want one that will fall over. You don’t have to build the whole tower, but you do have to be able to prove that you can,” said Mr. Lee. “The usual rules apply to your work in groups: Everybody has to be allowed to participate; nobody gets hurt . . . ,” and he reviewed the class operating procedures.

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The groups attacked their piles. The group near the windows began by taping the cardboard cylinders together and standing them up. Their tower quickly grew beyond their reach. “Whoops, our tower is already taller than anyone else’s, but what do we do now?” questioned Rocky. “I suppose we could pull over a table to climb up on.”

“Yeah, but none of us is tall enough still to reach the ceiling,” added Josh.

“Oh-oh! Look at how our tower is beginning to wilt!” warned Leila. “I guess the cardboard is not strong enough to stand up straight for long.”

“Hey, mira . . . alli.” Rosa pointed to another group across the room. These children had begun to stack their newspapers on top of each other. “They make una base. We . . . too!” Rosa’s difficulty with English was no damper to her enthusiasm, nor her ability to communicate. She showed them her idea of rolling newspapers into strong tubes, starting with large ones at the bottom and decreasing in size as they went up. They ran out of papers at shoulder height.

“I think we should draw the rest out on paper. I could draw, and then you guys could try it,” suggested Sally from her wheelchair.

The children worked together, drawing and constructing, gradually building up a solid tower as high as they could reach. This time, they had planned ahead, laying out the tower on the floor and lifting it into place in one piece.

As the groups worked, their teachers moved about the room, asking questions, making observations, noting if a particular child was not involved or if another was too controlling. As lunch time approached, Mr. Lee asked them to take a break. “I see some pretty impressive towers. I noticed that none of you just stacked up items to make a good tower on your first try! You all had to do some trial and error. So, what discoveries did you make?”

“Well, we figured out that balance was important,” said Albert.

“Can you tell us what you mean?” probed Ms. LeBain. Albert offered his construct of balance. Others joined in, comparing and contrasting their understandings of balance. Mr. Lee showed them some diagrams from a book on balance that affirmed their understandings. The group broke up for lunch with the promise that they would explore other discoveries from their design activity later in the day.

This classroom scene may not strike the reader as typical. It is a scene from a learner centered school, where students are in charge of their own learning. What they learn has not been previously prescribed; rather, learnings emerge within a framework of knowledge and skills children need to know. The teachers’ roles go beyond traditional instruction. Teachers must understand pedagogy and bring content knowledge, but they must also create the conditions that enable children to interpret and understand phenomena for themselves. At this school, it is assumed that learning is like breathing—all children do it. But it is recognized that not all learnings are positive, empowering concepts. The aim of the learner centered school is to support learning that is individually enhancing and socially useful.

This conceptualization of schooling is more than a fad; it is based on current research knowledge about human learning and development that reconfirms the perspectives of educational researchers and philosophers such as Piaget, Dewey, and Vygotsky (see Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer, & Scott, 1994). Piaget explored the process by which humans construct their knowledge of the world, and Dewey emphasized the learner’s interaction with the physical environment. Vygotsky developed the role of social interaction as a dimension of learning.

Yet it is hard to find schools operating effectively under the assumption that learners must be provided rich opportunities to interact with experiences. The practice of the traditional construct of schooling may constrain the implementation of other possibilities. Thus, while educators speak of the importance of nurturing individual development and of change toward realizing this value in schools, their actions are actually shaped by an opposing set of generally unarticulated and unexamined assumptions. This common mindset builds a barrier to the creation of a learner centered school.

The rhetoric behind the reform movements of the past decade implies that the purpose is to re-

structure schools in a way that will empower children, and help them to make sense of their world and contribute positively to the shape of the future. Yet in few reform efforts do these goals play out in the classroom. This article presents the traditional view of schooling as a barrier to reform, explicates the alternative, that is, a learner centered vision of schooling, and explores how this vision of schools as learner centered environments might be enacted.

What is a Learner Centered School?

Schooling in our nation has been dominated by a set of assumptions based largely on a narrow and conservative philosophy that limits inquiry to existing conditions and ignores the future (Astuto, Clark, Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1993). This traditional construct of schooling, grounded in the scientific management principles of Taylor (1911), promotes the school-as-factory metaphor, in which the raw materials—children—are shaped to meet the demands of an industrial society. The practice of schools, in this view, is geared toward information accumulation and perpetuation of the existing social order. The success of a school is measured by the degree to which its students accumulate established information and approximate the mold of a model citizen (see Tyack, 1974).

The prevailing legend holds that the public school has opened the door for equity and possibility in America. In practice, however, schools have more accurately sorted and slotted America’s youth, constraining both the able and the disadvantaged (Greer, 1972). While these assumptions have dominated American schools for the past century and can be posited to have limited the reform efforts of the past few decades, an alternative set of purposes and practices for schooling also exists.

These alternative purposes and practices, that is, those at play in learner centered schooling, provide a different basis for school reform. They are founded on a countering set of values that recognizes the uniqueness and potential of each individual as a contributing member of a democratic society. The primary assumption of this construct is that *all* people learn. Based on this assumption, the school does not ask *if* a student can learn, but rather under what conditions a student *will* learn individually enhancing and socially beneficial concepts and skills. From this perspective, the practice of schools is focused

on the learner's own knowledge construction and use. The success of schools is judged by the quality of the experiences provided for the learner, the depth of the meanings the learners create out of the experiences, and the ability of the learners to communicate and act on their learnings (see Rallis & Rossman, 1995). For example, a classroom where children generate questions about space exploration, design their own telescopes and space ships, and explain their discoveries is considered superior to one that informs students what is known about the topic and tests them on what they remember.

A learner centered school is one that acknowledges that children do construct their own meanings for the events, objects, and people with whom they interact. It recognizes the differences and appreciates the abilities of the individuals who occupy it daily. Learning here is not passive; all are expected to participate and contribute to the learning. Students make discoveries instead of following directions or memorizing facts. Furthermore, their learning is guided by their own questions, not by those from a textbook or curriculum.

The learning activity has been chosen to allow participation by all children—including those who may be different in some way, with special needs, or for whom English is not the primary language. The activities demand that children use information, think critically, and communicate their constructs, but children's learnings are not limited by existing expectations for what they can learn. No ceiling limits their learning possibilities. According to one teacher of such a classroom, "I used to believe that I could not expect a second grader to do a research project on family poverty—now that I have let the children choose, I see that they can!" (Uhl, Pérez-Sellés, & Rallis, 1995).

Learner centered teachers recognize that knowledge construction is not entirely an individual process. Children need access to the conventional concepts and models already accepted, valued, and shared within the culture (Bruner, 1985). Thus, while teachers introduce students to accepted social constructions (see Driver et al., 1994), they also help them build their own. The teachers question and probe—to help children make meaning—rather than direct. They listen carefully, encouraging reflection and stimulating new connections and interpretations.

Duckworth (1987, p. 96) suggests the kinds of questions that support this process: "What do you

mean? How did you do that? Why do you say that? How does that fit in with what she just said? Could you give me an example? How did you figure that?" The questioning demands that learners interact profoundly with their experience. The teacher also models a way for learners to interact with each other. Children become comfortable questioning and probing each other. Their interactions provide the stimulus of differing perspectives. This is a learner centered classroom.

How Are Learners and Learning Viewed?

Teachers in these schools see individual children, not categories. While they know that all children bring unanswered questions and minds open to learning, they recognize that children have different questions and interests. They are aware that many students arrive with empty stomachs, some carry guns, and all bring their insecurities as well as their strengths. The goal of the school is to provide for each of them experiences through which they can make sense of their environment in ways that will contribute to their success in the world. Such a school must be inclusive, one where all children belong—the athletic girl, the recent immigrant, the gifted boy, the class clown, the quiet one, and the dyslexic boy.

A learner centered school offers each child many opportunities to learn. Rather than expect every student to conform to a "norm," the school broadens to encompass those students it finds dwelling within. The teachers learn who their students are; they ask what talents and life experiences each child brings and what each child needs. If a child does not meet a "standard," the child is not dismissed as a failure; rather, the teachers consider what can be done to enable this child to learn.

While teachers in learner centered schools believe all children learn, they recognize that each child has a different approach and brings a somewhat different perspective. All children do not look alike, nor do they think or learn alike. Learning in these schools is understood to be individuals constructing their own meanings for an event, object, person, idea, or activity. Deep understanding occurs when new information prompts the learner to rethink and reshape prior ideas (Brooks & Brooks, 1993). Once students have constructed their own meaning for something, they own it. They can manipulate it, play with it, use it, even teach it to someone else.

Because each person brings a different set of prior experiences to each new experience, each person's construction or interpretation of the experience will be somewhat different. Learning, or constructing meaning, is interactive. The learner plays with the event, object, idea, or person, asking questions, trying out various answers. The resulting knowledge is fit into an existing mental framework, and it serves to change this framework somewhat. The interaction creates products—a piece of writing or art, a solution to a problem or puzzle, a new definition for a phenomenon, another question.

Teachers in learner centered schools understand learning to be a self-regulated, ongoing process of making sense of the world through concrete experience, collaborative discourse, and reflection (Fosnot, 1993). They believe they are responsible for providing multiple, complex opportunities for these interactions as well as an environment conducive to making sense of the experiences. Thus, a learner centered school reflects the following principles:

- Human beings are born as learners; thus, all people do learn all the time.
- Learning is a social process, taking place through interactions among learners.
- Interacting with others of different styles and perspectives enhances learning.
- Learning and self-esteem are enhanced when the learners appreciate each others' unique talents and accept each other as individuals. (adapted from the Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education, 1993)

Learner centered schools provide students opportunities not only to act, but also to know the meaning of their actions; not only to think, but to understand the impact of their thinking. As in the opening vignette, learners consciously construct meanings and test their validity by sharing these constructs with others. Together, they develop shared understandings.

This "progressive" conceptualization of learning grows out of a long tradition of educational philosophers and researchers. For example, Plato's classical theory recognized innate capacities and saw learning as the discovering or remembering of what one knows.² Plato might say that the children in the opening scenario knew how to build towers; their classroom gave them the opportunity to remember how to do so. Dewey (1916/1958) contended that people learn from interactions and that people approach interactions with purpose and awareness of consequences. To Dewey, the learners actively transform their en-

vironment, creating and developing from their experience.

While Piaget believed the mind had few innate cognitive structures, he agreed that learning is an interaction between experiencer and environment. "Knowledge results from continuous construction . . . in each act of understanding, some degree of invention is involved" (Piaget, 1970, cited in Phillips & Soltis, 1985, p. 44). Like Dewey, Piaget believed that in order to know objects, a person must act upon them and transform them; the learner must displace, correct, combine, take apart, and reassemble them.

To this image of a learner centered environment, Vygotsky (1978) has added the role of social interaction. Learners need to interact with others who know things they do not know. Vygotsky speaks of zones of proximal learning, which become actual learning. Again, as in the opening vignette, one group's observations of another's activity spurs them on to new discoveries. From Vygotsky's perspective, learner centered schools are places where children eavesdrop, listen and watch, and then try—where one learner "primes the pump" for another. External constructs become internalized.

Finally, the cognitive scientists confirm that multiple complex and concrete experiences are essential for meaningful learning and teaching, and that the overwhelming need of learners is meaningfulness (see, for example, Caine & Caine, 1991; Presidential Task Force on Psychology in Education, 1993). Thus, creating a rich, interactive, and complex environment, such as Lee and LeBain's classroom, is more than advantageous; it is essential for learning.

Learner centered schools are places where the learning of each child is enhanced because the teachers recognize the value of children, diversity, and learning. They believe that learning is natural, diversity is a resource, and each child can contribute to an emerging society. They see that each person learns in a unique way, making their own sense of the world around them. The purpose of learner centered schooling is to enable each child to reach his or her full potential within an emergent society.

How Can Learner Centered Schools Exist in Practice?

The vision just painted of a learner centered school is admirable and theoretically sound, but idealistic. It represents a radical shift from traditional practice. Traditional schools still act to train and sort

children to fit existing slots in a static workforce, and today's classrooms are not designed to help all children—handicapped, minority, or “normal”—feel welcome, comfortable, and included. Schools should be guided by an inclusive and learner centered philosophy; currently, they are not.

How can the theory and its vision translate into 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 (see Astuto & Clark, this issue). 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 (Fullan, this issue).

Becoming learner centered requires more than structural alterations; it requires changing the culture of the school. 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. LeBain and Lee in the vignette, for example, do not start with any plan or model for the tower. Through questioning and encouraging, they learn with the children. In sum, all inhabitants of the school are students. Consequently, *they* becomes *we*, and everyone contributes to the prevailing culture of inquiry.

Collaboration, caring, and growth, not competition, are the ruling ethics of a learner centered culture. Concern about the well-being of each and every member requires that all members work together, that *we*, adults and children, collaborate. According to a teacher practicing in a school with a learner centered culture, “My learning is enhanced, not threatened, by yours. As we collaborate, we see that the whole product of our work is equal to more than the sum of each person's

contribution.”³ Knowledge is not an already known quantity. Rather, knowledge is generated; it emerges. We discover new knowledge together.

Because the culture accepts that knowledge is to be discovered, we see outcomes as multiple and emergent. We do not limit our documentation of outcomes to traditional and standardized testing. If we do not know what is possible, our discoveries cannot be measured by existing definitions. We can only learn by doing and subsequently defining what we have done and then considering its value (see Fullan, 1993, Chapter 3). The culture of the school becomes a safe haven to test the value of new definitions.

Establishing a safe environment requires that schools manage to shake the prevailing ethic of competition and become grounded in an ethic of caring and collaboration. Then they can adopt learner centered practices. For example, in our collaboration with schools working to become learner centered, we have seen schools use their site-based management teams to design and build “caring communities” in and around their schools. All aim to reject any one “winner” or “solution” practice and to accept the viability of multiple routes to success. For example, one K-8 school holds several “houses,” each operating with very different approaches ranging from the more traditional to multi-age teams with integrated curricula. The various houses function under one roof, offering choice and opportunity.

Becoming a learner centered school also requires an openness to new knowledge and perspectives. Many schools that have joined our partnership or others such as the Coalition of Essential Schools or Comer's Schools report they have done so because of the access to new knowledge or perspectives these networks offer. Because learner centered practitioners recognize that knowledge is temporary and conditional (Fosnot, 1993), they seek ways to capture their unique ways of seeing and knowing the world, celebrating ambiguity and uncertainty as a resource rather than a threat.

A truly collaborative culture can open whole new ways to think about knowledge for practice. For example, at one of our partner schools, teachers use action research to ask: What are we choosing to do with our students? How are students responding? What does this mean for student learning? For our own learning? Studying their own practice produces new knowledge. Such a school is moving toward a new paradigm of professional development, one that

enables its teachers to create knowledge out of their own practice within the school. This alternative model, while not yet common practice, does support the growth of learner centered schools.

Conclusion

The learner centered school is a place where those inside truly inquire. Together, adults and children generate questions and solutions. We search, gather, and make judgments about what we have gathered and what we have proposed. We act, testing our conclusions, constantly revisiting our judgments. The environment of a learner centered school is safe, so that we may take risks, flexible, so that we may tolerate ambiguity, and accepting and supportive, so that we may learn from our mistakes.

A day in our school demands hard work. Generating genuine questions requires curiosity and observation. Generating viable options in answer requires stamina and endurance. Our success depends on informed and intelligent risk taking. Forging into the unknown, we face uncertainty and challenge. Yet because we are not satisfied with the status quo, we judge the effort necessary and worthwhile.

Learner centered schools embody change. Because we value individual and organizational growth, we expect change. Outcomes are multiple, unpredictable, and emergent. The future is uncertain and unknown. Uncertainty is accepted and seen as a resource for the school. As a result, risk and tension are expected. The message in these pages, then, is that learner centered schools can and do exist—but anyone attempting to implement them can expect a difficult and challenging road ahead.

Notes

1. Prospector School and its inhabitants are fictional. However, the scenario is derived from observations at the action research sites of the Designing Schools for Enhanced Learning project of the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, funded through the Office of Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education. The project facilitates learner centered school transformation.
2. This interpretation of Plato comes from *The Republic* but draws on the discussion of Plato's philosophy in Phillips & Soltis (1985).
3. Personal communication from a teacher at a design team working party, summer 1994, the Regional Laboratory for Educational Improvement of the Northeast and Islands, Andover, MA.

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