

Learners at the center.



What is meant by
learner-centered.

DISTINGUISHING A “LEARNER-CENTERED PARADIGM FOR EDUCATION”

Let’s begin by stating specifically what we mean when we use the term “paradigm.” In his groundbreaking book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn uses the term “paradigm” to mean a coherent and closed set of foundational assumptions, premises, or theories that are well accepted in a practitioner community. This set of foundational premises shape and constrain almost every practice but are themselves mostly unexamined and accepted without question.

According to Kuhn, when a practitioner is working on something, for example on improving or reforming a particular practice, they do so inside their closed set of assumptions and premises. It is the closed nature of that set which makes a paradigm difficult to penetrate or change. The set is closed in the sense that each premise or assumption refers back to the others—reinforcing each other and leaving little to no room for a different way to look at things. In fact, practitioners will go to great lengths to explain away data that challenges any aspect of their paradigm, rather than using that data to question their paradigm. In most cases, they are not even aware of the paradigm in which they are operating because it is just how they see the world—all of the assumptions, premises, and theories that make up their paradigm are operating in the background.

A paradigm, sometimes called a “worldview,” can be thought of as the particular lens through which a community of practitioners (and those in the broader community who are influenced by those practitioners) look at the world. Looking through any particular lens, some of what is being examined may appear more significant and some things may appear less significant—or their significance may even disappear entirely. Other things can be distorted by the lens, giving a practitioner a false impression regarding what is right in front of them. But, the practitioner is generally unaware of these limitations and distortions because they rarely look at the lens; rather, they look right through the lens.

In this discussion, we are interested in the particular paradigm or lens through which those supporting the growth and development of children and young people look. What do they see when they look at a child or young person or at the various methods for supporting a child or young person’s learning journey and well-being? Given their paradigm, how do they then think about providing the structures and conditions for broad populations of children and young people to learn and grow? We are specifically interested here in that particular paradigm for education we refer to as “Learner-Centered.” We are interested in: 1) the set of background theories and assumptions that are generally accepted by the community of learner-centered practitioners today; and 2) the shift from the conventional School-Centered Paradigm to the Learner-Centered Paradigm.

The Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education has as its fundamental assumption that each child is unique in meaningful and valuable ways—they have their own backgrounds, circumstances, interests, needs, and aspirations. By contrast, whenever an education system seeks to define and aim education at the “average” or “typical” child, the uniqueness and humanity of every child is not seen as something that needs to be directly dealt with.

In Learner-Centered Education, the aim is to nurture and support the development of whole human beings within caring communities where each learner is known, accepted for who

they are, and supported to learn and thrive now and into the future. Education itself is seen as a partnership amongst young learners, their peers, and adults. Emphasis is placed on developing each learner's own agency—growing their capacity to act independently and to effectively make meaningful choices regarding their learning, so that they are able to follow their own interests and pursue their own aspirations.

Before going any further in clarifying this paradigm, we will first head off a few common misconceptions by briefly discussing what the Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education is not:

1. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about caring more for the learners.** Everyone involved in education cares deeply for learners, regardless of which Paradigm is operating in the background of their thinking.
2. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about letting learners do whatever they feel like doing, whenever they feel like doing it.** While the learner's role in co-creating their learning journey will be critical, this is not about giving up our commitment that each young person is supported to develop themselves to their full potential and to contribute meaningfully to their families, community, and world.
3. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about individual learners working in isolation without supportive learning communities.** In the Learner-Centered Paradigm, learning is seen as a social process, and healthy learner relationships with both peers and adults are essential.
4. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about children learning different things, in different ways, or at different paces as a means for higher achievement on standardized tests.** Rather, this approach to education is about setting learning goals with each learner that reflect community standards and honor who each young person is, their lived experiences, how they learn, and their aspirations for their futures.
5. **The Learner-Centered Paradigm is not about providing an alternative only for those children and young people who cannot or will not fit inside a standardized system.** Learner-centered environments are designed to flexibly provide what each and every learner needs to pursue their unique life goals. The task is to partner with each learner to shape and create a learning journey that enables them to discover interests, develop aspirations, and navigate their circumstances effectively. All learners, without exception, are supported to pursue different arenas of learning, different ways of learning, and different ways of demonstrating that learning.

What, then, is the Learner-Centered Paradigm?

As with any Paradigm, the Learner-Centered Paradigm is constituted by a coherent and closed set of fundamental assumptions or premises which create a lens through which we look at education. These assumptions are about:

- Who the learner is and what role they play in their own education;
- What role adults play in a young learner's education;
- What is required to make a learning environment equitable for all children;
- How education systems are best organized; and
- What learning actually is.

Who the Learner is and What Role They Play in Their Own Education

The Learner-Centered Paradigm is built around a small set of fundamental assumptions about the young learners themselves. First, each learner is related to as unique in meaningful ways—there are no “typical” or “average” learners. They have unique backgrounds and circumstances, individual strengths and challenges, and their own interests and aspirations. Second, each learner is seen as having inexhaustible potential—potential that will unfold in different ways for different learners. Third, each learner has an innate desire to learn and grow. Every single learner can be supported in being extraordinary in their own way. Fourth, only when learners co-create their educational goals and pathways for reaching those goals will they be at the center of their own education.

What Role Adults Play in a Young Learner’s Education

There is also a small set of fundamental learner-centered assumptions regarding the role that adults play in a learner’s education. First, the role of the adults is to be a partner with young learners in setting their learning goals and creating and navigating their learning journeys based on those goals. To be partners, adults must respect and cultivate the initiative and agency of the young learner, allowing their uniqueness to be revealed and truly honored. Second, because the desire to learn is innate in all human beings, the role of the adult is to encourage and support that natural desire so that it has the space to flourish. Third, adults play the role of being a resource to a learner’s journey, at times facilitating and at other times providing expertise with regard to the learning challenge at hand. And finally, adults play a mentoring role: setting a positive example, believing in the inexhaustible potential of the learner, encouraging the exploration of new learning opportunities, and helping remove obstacles that may arise along the learner’s journey.

What is Required to Make a Learning Environment Equitable for All Children

A foundational premise held by those operating with a learner-centered worldview is that in order to support all children, we must confront and address social inequity and racism explicitly and intentionally. Under this premise, intentional focus is placed on: 1) ensuring the education system itself ends inequities connected to such factors as race, cognitive and physical difference, gender, native language, culture, religion and religious expression, and sexuality in its own operations, and recognizes and seeks to remedy the disadvantages stemming from past inequities within it; 2) mitigating the negative impacts of racism and other biases coming from other institutions and systems; and 3) increasing the awareness of conscious and unconscious racism and bias in each individual in the system and enabling them to do the work to eliminate it.

How Education Systems are Best Organized

The Learner-Centered Paradigm also includes a set of background assumptions regarding how education systems are best organized. The first assumption involves the goal of education. In the Learner-Centered Paradigm, the goal is to develop the enduring capabilities needed to enable lifelong learning and to support the pursuit of a great life. For learner-centered practitioners, these capabilities go beyond

the retention of knowledge in academic subjects to include competencies in such areas as:

- **Self-Knowledge & Identity** (The ability to know, value, and develop oneself);
- **Relatedness & Belonging** (The ability to know, value, and develop relationships with others);
- **Self-Direction & Agency** (The ability to set one's own goals and confidently pursue them);
- **Essential Human Literacies** (The ability to access, navigate, and make meaning of the world around them); and
- **Lifelong Love of Learning** (The ability to engage the world with curiosity and pursue those curiosities with a learning mindset).

The second assumption is that the central work performed in developing these capabilities is the work of learning itself, and therefore the central worker is the learner. Those who are involved in a learner's journey—including educators and youth development workers, families and friends, and participating community members—are supporting learners to make meaning of their learning and navigate their learning journey. It follows that the education system must then be structured to support and respond appropriately to each unique learner's agency and circumstances. Learner-centered education systems—including the approaches to assessment, credentialing of learning, accountability, funding, roles of adults, and governance—must be built to adapt to the needs, strengths, interests, circumstances, and aspirations of the learners and to enable learners to pursue and demonstrate learning in meaningful, myriad ways.

What Learning Actually Is

Finally, the Learner-Centered Paradigm includes assumptions about what learning is and can be. Learning is understood to be the exercising of our innate capacity to wonder, discover, and make sense of the world around us. It is a natural process going on all the time, beginning when we are born and continuing throughout our lifetimes. We know learning has happened when we are able to interact with the world in new and effective ways. In this paradigm, the most critical form of learning is learning to take ownership of and responsibility for our own learning journey—a journey that will last a lifetime.

The Learner-Centered Paradigm is made of a closed set of fundamental assumptions or premises that shape and constrain how we think about the challenges of education, as well as the solutions to those challenges. Thomas Kuhn points out, our paradigm determines what we observe, what questions we ask, how we investigate those questions, and how we interpret the results. And, all this happens in the background of our thinking, rarely examined or questioned. It takes something to stop ourselves and ask what fundamental assumptions and premises underpin the way we look at our world and, as importantly, to ask if those assumptions will guide us towards the world we want to live in.

Clarifying the Paradigm Shift: From School-Centered to Learner-Centered

When people first hear the term “Learner-Centered,” they may initially think, “How else can someone look at the challenge of education? Doesn’t everyone take a learner-centered perspective?” In our way of distinguishing “Learner-Centered,” the answer to that question is “no.” Of course, everyone involved in education cares deeply about the learner, but that does not make them Learner-Centered.

Learner-Centered thinking overturns the dominant, School-Centered worldview with its fundamental assumptions about who the learner is and what role they play in their own education; what role adults play in a young learner’s education; what is required to make a learning environment equitable for all children; how education systems are best organized; and what learning actually is. Because these fundamental assumptions are generally left unexamined to operate in the background, they can be difficult to see at first. And, because School-Centered assumptions about education are so pervasive in the United States, it can be startling the first time someone escapes them.

The School-Centered Paradigm for Education emerged in the late 1800s and early 1900s, during the early stages of the industrial revolution. It was a time when European colonialism was at its zenith and when the European economies were shifting from an agrarian labor force to an industrial one. European colonialism had normalized the idea that one group of people can dominate and exploit another. This destructive practice sought to rob nations of their resources, while simultaneously eradicating their native culture and ways of being. The education system was a significant mechanism for achieving that latter aim. Although society does not openly subscribe to this belief currently, many of the systems and structures that were created in the initial design still result in that outcome.

Moreover, at the time, industrialization had brought about the new challenge of preparing a labor force for their new industrial jobs, and mass production—with its efficient assembly lines—was enabling rapid growth in one industry after another. So, an education system was built that would sort people according to what role they would play in the industrial economy (largely segregated along lines of race, gender, and socio-economic status) and then prepare them to play that role. Applying the industrial approach to make education more universally available, we created standardized schools that looked a lot like factories and a standard progression from kindergarten through 12th grade that looked a lot like assembly lines. Learners could be seen as unfinished works in progress, as vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge in subject after subject as they moved down the assembly line.

The system was designed to move learners, grouped by age, at an average pace through a standard curriculum and to sort them according to who had the innate potential (according to the standards and norms set by the system) to play different roles in the economy—some would be managers and professionals, others would be workers and technicians. Learning was assumed to be about teaching students a standard set of knowledge deemed appropriate for that age and then assessing what was retained so students could be sorted according to their potentials. The sooner we can sort above average, from average, and below average, the more efficiently we can make the assembly lines work.

The assessments of learning had their own biases built in to them. The largely white, neurotypical, male European academics who created the tests favored methods and topics which they themselves excelled at. The sorting and sifting of students would perpetuate a colonial order for another century.

While some students were able to move effectively through this new education system, it did not and does not serve anyone particularly well. The concept of “average” is a single dimensional mathematical construct, which does not actually apply to multi-dimensional human beings. There is no “average human being,” and there is no “average learner.” So, when learning experiences are designed for this “average learner,” they are designed for no one in particular. Every learner in these school-centered environments, regardless of the ways in which they are unique or extraordinary, is expected to adapt and conform to the standardized system.

Learners who performed well on standard tests in these standard subjects are deemed more capable (not surprisingly, these are most commonly the learners who are most like the people creating the tests). Separate lines, or tracks, are created to respond to the perceived differences in capability. For nearly 150 years, this School-Centered Paradigm for Education has dominated our thinking in the modern world. It seems normal.

What happens when we seek to improve this education system? In a School-Centered Paradigm, the assumption is that education happens in a school. So, when we improve the school, we improve education. The basic question from a School-Centered perspective is: What will make this school more efficient and effective in the task of teaching our young people? Follow-up questions include: How should a school (factory) be organized? How do we ensure this school (factory) is meeting its goals? How come some schools (factories) do better than others? How do we fix “failing schools”? How do teachers increase their control of student behavior? How can we close the standardized test score gap between white students and students of color? How can we increase student engagement with the content in the classroom? What do we do with “failing students”? In a School-Centered Paradigm, the industrial school is placed at the center of our thinking as the obvious place to get to work.

By contrast, in a Learner-Centered Paradigm, the unique learner is placed at the center. And, no longer do we narrowly think of learners as above average, average, and below average. Instead, we see each learner as being unique in meaningful ways, and every learner is seen as having inexhaustible potential. When you put the learner at the center of every decision and make those decisions with the learner, rather than for the learner, you are in a different world. The basic questions from a Learner-Centered perspective are: Who is this learner? What and who will support each learner to develop their own agency; discover their gifts, interests, and talents; and build the skills to pursue their goals? What are this child’s aspirations for their life and for their community? Are we ensuring race, zip code, socio-economic status, and learning differences are not predictable indicators of a learner’s success in life?

Follow-up questions in the Learner-Centered Paradigm include: Are we supporting each learner to know, value, and develop themselves and to build healthy relationships with others? Are we nurturing each learner’s ability to set and confidently pursue their own goals? Does every learner equitably have the opportunities, supports, and resources they uniquely need to learn and thrive, particularly those who are most marginalized in our society? How do we best support learners to explore their interests and meaningfully contribute to their communities now and in the future? Are we effectively including all of the local community and global resources in learners’ journeys? Are we equitably providing opportunities, supports, and resources appropriate to each unique child’s needs, regardless of their race, socio-economic standing, learning differences, or zip code?

The Learner-Centered Paradigm for Education asks us to transform our way of thinking about education. It requires us to make a shift from School-Centered thinking to Learner-Centered thinking. The following chart outlines this shift.

| FROM: SCHOOL-CENTERED | TO: LEARNER-CENTERED |
|---|---|
| Students arrive not yet ready for life and work. They must be prepared with an appropriate standardized base of knowledge and based on their performance, sorted according to their potential. | Learners arrive as whole human beings whose context, lived experience, interests, and aspirations should inform and guide their learning and human development. They are living life now and their potential has no limit. |
| Students are known by how they compare to their class averages on standardized assessments. | Learners are known as individuals—each with their own lived experiences, interests, goals, aspirations, and ways of contributing to others and their communities. |
| Equity in education is a commitment to students reaching their full potential through high expectations and closing achievement gaps. | Equity in education is a commitment to every learner having access to what they need to live fulfilling lives, and to each person in diverse and inclusive groups being supported to attain all relevant outcomes. |
| Education is done to the students. | Education is done with and by the learner. |
| Learning happens in schools during a school day. | Learning happens wherever the learner is. |
| Learning happens best when students are focused on the teacher and content, compliant with institutional expectations, and competing against one another for the best test score. | Learning happens best in environments that foster joy in learning, vulnerability amongst adults and learners alike, and mutualism—a reciprocal partnership among learners and adults. |
| All students follow standard paths within age-based, rank-and-sorted cohorts. Students work within standardized timeframes, demonstrating their knowledge retention and skill development in standardized ways, absent of meaningful context. | Each learner moves through their own unique learning journey in the context of caring communities. Learners work within an appropriate and adaptable timeframe, demonstrating their proficiency with relevant competencies in meaningful contexts and in many ways. |
| Students are deemed to be successful when they have demonstrated average or above average knowledge retention as demonstrated by standardized exams on historically selected and sequenced subjects. | Learners are deemed to be successful when they have developed what they need to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives of their own choosing. |

Looking at education through a Learner-Centered Paradigm brings us to a very different place when it comes to designing an education system and learning experiences. The result of a Learner-Centered focus will invariably be an entirely different way to educate our children and an entirely different approach for ensuring that a great education is made available to each learner—including an unwavering stand for equity, diversity, and inclusion. We will design systems, learning environments, and experiences with the learner at the center of our thinking.

Update in Progress: May 2021 • This document was originally generated by the 28 signatories of “A Transformational Vision for Education in the US” and has been updated by learner-centered leaders based on practice and work in communities on the ground.

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