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The learner-centred school

The concept of the learner-centred school is not new. 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 "cooperative social organisation." The Dewey lab school focused on the student's needs rather than on covering a well-defined scope and sequence of curriculum. Much of Dewey's philosophy is evident in the learner-centred classroom. Students become a part of a learning team, empowered to make choices and to move at their own pace. This learner-centred type of education prevailed throughout the early schools, until the onset of the industrial revolution changed the vision of education.

Schools moved away from Dewey's concepts and embraced the industrial or factory system of education



introduced by Horace Mann. In the “factory” school, all students are grouped chronologically, taught the same material from the same textbook, and expected to function in an obedient, nonquestioning manner. This system was intended to prepare all students in the same way and to ready them for work on an assembly line. At one time, this system was useful, but in today’s world, computers and robots do much of the dull, routine assembly-line work that was previously delegated to factory workers. Today’s students must be able to think, to make decisions, to transfer knowledge, to acquire new skills, and to work together in teams. The old method simply does not work anymore. In fact, some argue it probably never worked.

Prior to the industrial revolution, education was carried out either by private tutoring or in mixed-age groups (e.g., the one-room school). Older students were expected to help younger classmates, and a spirit of co-operation, caring, and teamwork was the philosophy of most schools. These early attempts at educating the whole child were much more in line with learner-centred instruction than the factory system developed in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The advent of the industrial revolution created a need for education of the masses. In time, teachers became more familiar with these factory-style practices and increased reliance on standardised test results made different styles of learning difficult for teachers to address. Consequently, the learner-centred school seemed to disappear.

In *The Nongraded Elementary School*, John Goodlad and Robert Anderson share the following story.

Greek mythology tells of the cruel robber, Procrustes (the stretcher). When travellers sought his house for shelter, they were tied onto an iron bedstead. If the traveller was shorter than the bed, Procrustes stretched him out until he was the same length as the bed. If he was longer, his limbs

were chopped off to make him fit. Procrustes shaped both the short and the tall until they were equally long and equally dead (Goodlad & Anderson, 1987, p. 1).



Educators need not be guilty of the same kind of thinking. Flexibility is the only sensible way to approach the education dilemma. Schools must stress learner-centred approaches that allow teachers and students the flexibility to create motivational, exciting education. Empowering both teachers and students to set goals, determine methodology, and conduct ongoing research and assessment is the only way to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse population.

Prediction Chart

Having previewed the table of contents and the introduction, make some predictions about concepts you will learn from material in this book.

- 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
 - 5.
 - 6.
 - 7.
 - 8.
 - 9.
 - 10.
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What is the learner-centred concept?

When educators use the term *learner-centred*, what do they mean? Many think of learner-centred instruction as the use of learning centres for a theme, topic, or subject, such as maths or art. Others think of alternative types of assessment where students are evaluated in nontraditional ways. Still others think of continuous progress models, integrated thematic instruction, and cooperative learning. In truth, learner-centred education is all of these things and more. When planning a learner-centred school, it is important that teachers, administrators, parents, and students converse about the different concepts of learner-centred instruction and develop a common vocabulary that facilitates its creation.