

TEACHING KINDERGARTEN

Learner-Centered Classrooms
for the 21st Century

EDITED BY

Julie Diamond

Betsy Grob

Fretta Reitzes

Foreword by Vivian Gussin Paley

Prologue by Ruth Charney



Contents

Foreword	<i>Vivian Gussin Paley</i>	v
Prologue	<i>Ruth Charney</i>	vii
Acknowledgments		ix
Introduction		1
	<i>Julie Diamond, Betsy Grob, and Fretta Reitzes</i>	
1. Learner-Centered Teaching		5
	<i>Julie Diamond</i>	
2. Kindergarten: Where It Starts and Where It Goes		29
	<i>Erin Hyde, Marilyn Martinez, and Yvonne Smith</i>	
3. Children as Changemakers: Ecology in Action		46
	<i>Katherine Clunis D'Andrea</i>	
4. Saim's Wheelchair: Making a Transportation Study Meaningful		56
	<i>Dana Roth and Renée Dinnerstein</i>	
5. "They Thanked the Bear, Then They Ate the Bear": An Integrated Block-Based Curriculum		69
	<i>Rebecca Burdett</i>	
6. The Museum of Experts, <i>El Museo de los Expertos</i>: Creating a Museum in the Kindergarten Classroom		80
	<i>Margaret Blachly and Andrea Fonseca</i>	

7. Getting Our Hands Dirty: Holding On to Our Beliefs	97
<i>Juliana Harris and Katie Vidal</i>	
8. The Chairs Are Theirs: Conflict Resolution in a Kindergarten Classroom	108
<i>Aaron Neimark</i>	
9. Kindergarten Math: A Math Specialist's Perspective	116
<i>Hollee Freeman</i>	
10. Courage in Kindergarten: Facing Our Wolves	126
<i>Kelly D'Addona, Laura Morris, and Cynthia Paris</i>	
11. Conclusion	136
<i>Julie Diamond, Betsy Grob, and Fretta Reitzes</i>	
Children's Book List	141
References	143
About the Editors and the Contributors	149

© Hawker Brownlow Education

Introduction

Julie Diamond, Betsy Grob, and Fretta Reitzes

At the time that the three of us began teaching, in the 1960s and 1970s, kindergarten curriculum was organized around core social studies and science themes, with play and the arts as central components. Children observed the class rabbit and discussed why the rabbit sometimes made his body very flat; they labeled and measured the rabbit's cage; looked at books about rabbits and wrote their own book about the rabbit. In these and other ways, literacy and math learning were integral parts of the curriculum. Children learned routines, gained a sense of responsibility, and became members of a classroom community. Kindergarten was where children built a solid foundation for learning in the elementary grades and in life (Rudolph & Cohen, 1984).

National policies intended to close the “achievement gap” have hijacked this model. Standardized testing has become the means of determining children's progress. Didactic instruction aimed at raising test scores and meeting the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) has taken over. Kindergarten has become “the new first-grade” (Bassok & Rorem, 2014).

We counter this shift with narrative accounts by kindergarten teachers from across the country, from rural North Carolina to urban California. Some are new teachers, some are experienced. Their stories are the heart of the book. Their teaching is *learner-centered*, based on progressive principles of education, and differs significantly from an instructional, skills-based model. We believe it is what we owe all children. What happens in classrooms is a question of social justice: As John Dewey (1916/1966) notes, education is ultimately a matter of the full valuing of individuals.

Teaching based on progressive principles is, we believe, “really equivalent to good education” (Lagemann, 2002, p. 11). It is compatible with the equity and accountability goals that the CCSS was set up to address. The chapter authors, in fact, connect many classroom activities with the CCSS. Yet while learner-centered teaching immerses children in basic skills, and creates a path for critical thinking, it goes well beyond those goals. Not only does it provide

for academic learning, it fosters a range of capacities, social and emotional as well as cognitive, necessary for children's optimal function in and out of school (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). The chapters provide evidence that having a rich imaginative life does not jeopardize children's acquisition of appropriate skills.

Several chapter authors work in underserved neighborhoods. Schools in low SES communities are more likely than schools in better-off communities to favor didactic "push-down" curricula as a result of pressure, from families as well as district mandates, for children to "catch up." We believe that children in low socioeconomic status (SES) communities—like all children—deserve, respond to, and benefit from firsthand experiences and opportunities for open-ended investigation and expression. At the same time, educators must deliberately plan for and monitor children's acquisition of skills, as well as their development as confident and intentional learners.

Chapter authors describe many ways to meet these objectives. They plan appropriate, interest-based, and challenging work for their students. They create classroom environments in which children know the expectations and feel safe. The following chapters provide evidence of the quality of work that results when teachers focus on children's capacities and strengths, observe and listen to them, and acknowledge their interests, identities, and cultures. The teachers devise opportunities for learning in an environment that challenges them to do so.

Teachers are central to what happens in these classrooms; the chapters showcase their professional knowledge. The teachers' voices lend reality to discussions of what goes on in classrooms, which is particularly important because their voices are largely absent from sites of policymaking.

These authors communicate to other teachers as colleagues. They provide resources for teachers and student teachers who may lack personal experience of learner-centered classrooms. Their accounts will make sense for student teachers and new teachers as well as experienced teachers. Many teachers are caught between their knowledge of theory and development, and imposed schedules that leave children little time for meaningful play and exploration. Teachers struggle to find time and space for the active learning they know children need. The authors also describe how they demonstrate children's learning for administrators, families, and for the children themselves.

The current era offers opportunities as well as challenges. The evidence of the teachers in our book reinforces our convictions about what young children need and deserve. We hope that the chapter authors will inspire the many teachers who refuse to see children as test scores, teachers whose goal is to aid children in developing the traits and dispositions about learning they need as students and, eventually, for full lives as thoughtful, caring, and well-educated adults in a demanding world.

To provide a foundation for the teacher narratives, Julie Diamond offers a theoretical base for learner-centered teaching in Chapter 1, a framework that takes into account the responsibility for educating “diverse learners in diverse times” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009).

Each succeeding chapter tells the story of one teacher or team of teachers. Throughout the book, pseudonyms are utilized for all students, except in the case of Saim in Chapter 4. The editors comment at the end of each chapter, drawing out specific implications.

Chapter 2 is written in two parts by three New York City teachers. In Part I Erin Hyde demonstrates how she adjusts the classroom environment for the particular children she teaches. Part II is based on an interview with Marilyn Martinez and Yvonne Smith. In their responses to questions, they explain how their children can function well, feel competent, and approach literacy and math standards through richly provisioned classroom areas.

In Chapter 3, Katherine Clunis D’Andrea describes how her Boston, MA, class learned about the environment at the same time that they learned to see themselves as changemakers.

Brooklyn, NY, kindergarten teacher Dana Roth and staff developer Renée Dinnerstein document in Chapter 4 how children’s curiosity about a wheelchair used by a child in the class leads to a lengthy investigation of how wheelchairs work and how people in them get around the city. The chapter shows how an inclusion program can benefit children with and without disabilities.

Rebecca Burdett highlights children’s block building and dramatic play in Chapter 5. Their play reflects their growing knowledge of the way of life of the Lenape Indians, who lived in their New Paltz, NY, area.

In Chapter 6, in Margaret Blachly and Andrea Fonseca’s dual-language immersion class, children learn about New York City’s museums and create a class museum, motivated by their desires to become experts on self-chosen topics.

In Chapter 7, Juliana Harris and Katie Vidal, members of a team of North Carolina teachers, recount the team’s efforts to create a yearlong project on gardens in a district and school dominated by mandated curricula.

Aaron Neimark, in Chapter 8, describes the implementation of conflict-resolution routines in his San Francisco classroom. Using composite sketches of various students, he shows how children’s great sense of imagination and fun make the routines their own.

In Chapter 9, Hollee Freeman, a math specialist, writes about math work that taps children’s thinking and also builds skills; she lists the principles—including equity principles—that should inform teachers’ thinking about teaching math.

In Chapter 10, Kelly D’Addona, Laura Morris, and Cynthia Paris, in Newark, DE, look at the struggle of Kelly, a new teacher, to develop the courage to balance her beliefs and practices when challenged.

In Chapter 11, we editors look at common threads among the teacher narratives and draw conclusions relevant to the qualities that characterize learner-centered teachers. We take a brief look at the implications for teacher preparation programs.

This book concludes with a list of children's books mentioned by the chapter authors, as well as the reference list of academic books cited.

© Hawker Brownlow Education

Learner-Centered Teaching

Julie Diamond

*What does [the child] need? What is he interested in? What is he ready for?
What are his purposes? How does he follow them? What are his questions?
What is he playing?*

—L. Weber, 1971 [emphasis in the original]

This book makes the case for learner-centered teaching in kindergarten. Measures to improve school accountability and educational equity, however well-intentioned, have had severe and deleterious effects on early childhood education. Teachers struggle daily to manage the conflicting claims on classroom time, space, and priorities, and to resist the rigid instructional mandates of local school districts. These concerns lie behind the creation of this book.

The teacher/authors of the next chapters illustrate a counter-model in which children talk, construct, play, and explore the world outside their classrooms, building academic skills as they do so. In this chapter I present a theoretical framework for learner-centered teaching and describe specific learner-centered practices. In addition, the chapter addresses the educational consequences of poverty, and the impact of the national focus on accountability and standards, including the Common Core State Standards.

A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The next sections discuss the historical roots of learner-centered education and the perspectives that define it: a developmental perspective and a social-cultural perspective responsive to the diversity of children's worlds. The related educational principles include teachers' trust in the capacity of all children to learn, and the importance of beginning with what students know and can do.

THE LEGACY OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves towards and into. . . . It is then the business of the educator to see in what direction an experience is heading . . . so as to judge and direct it.

—J. Dewey, 1938/1997

Learner-centered teaching is rooted in John Dewey’s comprehensive and powerful philosophy of education. Dewey was critical of educators who equated learning with students’ absorption of a static body of knowledge. He saw children as active learners whose experiences moved them, with adult guidance, toward increasingly complex understandings.

The approach outlined in this chapter and illustrated in the chapters that follow shares this outlook, in which firsthand “educative” experiences propel children’s learning. Dewey’s framework has been expanded by educators and psychologists who considered children’s learning from the perspective of development and from the perspective of children’s diverse social and cultural worlds. Learner-centered teaching focuses on the totality of *children as learners*. It conceives of learning as something shaped by children’s developmental capacities as well as by the associations and dispositions they gain in the social and cultural worlds they inhabit. Together, these should inform teachers’ planning.

If we compare learner-centered kindergartens with kindergartens strictly responsive to the demands of testing and accountability, we see stark differences. Learner-centered teaching is concerned with children’s *well-rounded* development; it promotes children’s powers of expression as well as their academic proficiency. It supports social and emotional development in addition to cognitive growth. Learner-centered classrooms target a range of capacities in addition to the skills and concepts associated with the CCSS.

In learner-centered classrooms, children have multiple opportunities to participate: to explore, ask questions, and have questions heard. Children play decisive roles in how curriculum evolves. Teachers have “faith in the child as a thinking, capable person, always learning”; children are assumed to have an “intrinsic desire and need to make sense of the world” (Perrone, 1999, pp. 3, 4). Children’s participation is visible in the chapters, whether children are using various materials to represent their knowledge of a topic, or communicating their questions and understanding in discussions.

The belief in children’s powers is central to progressive education. It entails adult responsibility for taking seriously children’s varied cognitive interests—for example, their interest in the physical and social worlds around them, their interest in books and reading, and their curiosity about abstract concepts like numbers. Children’s varied involvements—which teachers plan and monitor—can become ever more purposeful, engaging children “in

reflecting on meanings,” and moving them “towards coherence in thought” (DeVries et al., 2002, p. 10). We see this, for example, when a teacher questions a child’s strategy in solving a math problem, asking why he stopped at a certain number (see Chapter 9).

When children’s curiosity and love of learning fuel their education, children are more likely to grow into open-minded and curious adults. Teaching that encourages children to be “architects of their own learning” provides “the strongest foundation for nurturing life-long learners” (Schwartz & Copeland, 2010, p. 3). In learner-centered classrooms, children gain the tools and build the dispositions they will need to be competent and caring adults in an increasingly complex world. Indeed, in the words of Britain’s Plowden Report, “The best preparation for being a happy and useful man or woman is to live fully as a child . . . Children need to be themselves, to live with other children and with grown-ups, to learn from their environment, to enjoy the present, to get ready for the future, to create and to love, to learn to face adversity, to behave responsibly, in a word, to be human beings” (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, p. 188). Learner-centered teaching promotes playfulness *and* introduces children to inquiry and academic skills and knowledge. To forge lively connections between child and content, teachers must pay attention to children’s current notions and interests, and be deeply knowledgeable about content.

This sort of education is a necessary ingredient of a just and democratic society. It nourishes a concerned and active citizenry. By collaborating, children build a sense of community. They develop a sense of autonomy, too, as they explore their environment, think critically, and ask questions. This is also the kind of education that children are owed in a democratic society. For Dewey, to live fully as an individual implies the individual’s engagement as a citizen. Core values are: belief in the inherent worth of each individual; belief that each child is unique, “active, individual, and whole” (Weber, 1971, p. 173); and belief that schools should deliberately foster democratic values. Yvonne Smith makes these beliefs real when she asks children in her class to recognize one child’s idea (Chapter 2); Aaron Neimark does so when he gives children the opportunity to solve social conflicts with the help of routines he introduces (Chapter 8).

Inclusiveness is a related value for progressive educators. It requires teachers to create rich opportunities for all children’s participation in classrooms, both because of “inclusion mandates . . . for children with special needs” and because of the increasing diversity of populations (Levine, 2000, p. 96). It commits teachers to actively broaden their understanding of development, and of learning and growth. To do this, teachers must learn to see students’ competencies—observing, recognizing, and utilizing children’s strengths. Erin Hyde does this when she gives a disruptive child a job he excels at (Chapter 2). She recognizes the child’s competence and gives him a productive role in the classroom.