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## *Why This Is a Time for Change*

*Education [is] risky, for it fuels the sense of possibility. But a failure to equip minds with the skills for understanding and feeling and acting in the cultural world is not simply scoring a pedagogical zero. It risks creating alienation, defiance, and practical incompetence. And all of these undermine the viability of a culture.*

—Jerome Bruner (1996, pp. 42–43)

**B**runer’s words, written over ten years ago, continue to resonate today. As the world becomes ever smaller, the ability to understand, feel, and act in the cultural context of the global community takes on ever increasing importance. If our collective purpose in schooling is to create citizens capable of participating in and furthering the cultures and world in which they live, we need to radically alter our conceptions about schooling. We need particularly to alter our ideas regarding the purpose of schooling and how best to use what we know about learning and learners to design learning communities in which everyone involved is eager to learn and develop.

### **WHY READ THIS BOOK?**

We, the authors of this book, believe that at this moment in time, the global community is at the edge of a momentous shift in thinking about the many systems that influence our daily lives. This includes our thinking about the

educational, judicial, health care, social justice, welfare, and other systems that support human well-being nationally and globally. In thinking about the educational system, such a crucial shift will require a new kind of leader who has the passion and commitment needed to transform our educational system. This is a leader with the inner power to draw others to join in the process of learning and leading schools through the 21st century and beyond.

For a number of years we have lived through a time during which education, in particular, has been subjected to the industrial, corporate, or business model, emphasizing narrow content standards and curriculum, frequent high stakes testing, and student achievement as the sole indicator of learning. After experiencing the failure of this model, we are now ready to enter a kinder, more respectful age of valuing diversity, natural learning principles, and the innate human potential—from the very young to the very old—to learn and lead.

The Industrial-Age practice of viewing students as workers—and their achievement as products—creates an environment that has unintended and detrimental effects, for these reasons:

- the curriculum narrows, and real learning needed for life in this complex information and conceptual age suffers as students are pressured to achieve and given instruction on how to take tests;
- the emphasis on testing student achievement in basic reading and math skills results in cutting short or eliminating students' meaningful and creative experiences with science, health (physical and mental), economics, art, music, and drama; and
- the practice of basing instruction on one-size-fits-all curricula reflecting the content of the achievement tests required to show accountability shortchanges students' diverse talents as well as their introduction to and immersion in the types of learning, inquiry, thinking, and reflecting that underlie the creativity necessary for flexible problem solving in an ever accelerating world.

In short, the model of education currently in place is fundamentally flawed. It is based on outdated assumptions about human capacity and evidence-based, natural learning principles. The consequences are that this current model actually deprives students of the information and skills necessary to live meaningful lives as productive citizens in a global community.

Shifting from the current, industrial model of education will require visionary leaders who are dedicated to transforming schools into continuously evolving systems that are suited to the needs of a rapidly changing world. We have written this book in the hope that it will provide you with the information and ideas you need to bring about the changes necessary to create transformed and future-serving schools. It is clear that our children must be prepared and ready to solve the big issues arising in this ever more connected and rapidly changing globe.

We will be exploring three overarching questions:

- What are the leadership qualities necessary to lead a new transformational, learner-centered form of education that moves us beyond the one-size-fits-all model?
- Why are these leadership qualities needed to provide the kind of 21st-century education that our children—and we—deserve?
- What are the leadership tools and practices that can help you on your journey to creating learner-centered educational systems?

We will describe these qualities and practices while providing a vision for what it takes to lead in our existing and yet-to-be-created new models of schools. We believe our book is unique because, unlike others in the field of leadership, ours is a synthesis of what we know about learning, leading, and change, which, when considered in combination, serve as a framework for how we can successfully lead the transformation of our schools.

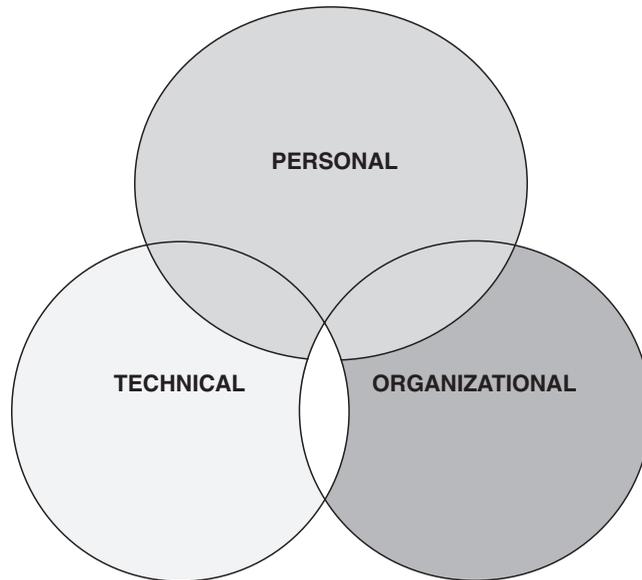
## SCHOOLS AS LIVING SYSTEMS

You are probably already aware that many of the people thinking and writing about educational reform view learning and change as complex living systems, or ecologies, that foster the factors both inside and outside learners that influence learning. Figure 1.1 shows the primary aspects of living systems: the technical, personal, and organizational. Living systems, or ecologies, function as a result of the dynamics arising from the interactions among the three aspects of the system. None of the three aspects in isolation can function as a system, nor can the system operate unless the three aspects are fully functional. What this means is that the aspects of a living system are interdependent. In addition, to become stronger, a living system (ecology) must create strong relationships with itself so that the individuals within the system can grow through learning, change, and continuous improvement.

The people in a system and their relationships with each other—too long neglected as the heart of true system transformation—are the learners and leaders who, in concert with community, must lead the way. Balance must be restored to our systems. The change begins with uncovering the deeply held beliefs, values and shared vision of what is possible and what needs to be created together so that technical and organizational decisions flow from these values, and vision.

One of the most compelling features of living systems is that, like networks, they can amplify whatever effects they create. For instance, in a school in which learners are supported in learning, changing, and continuously improving, everyone in contact with these learners is affected similarly—family members, friends, and community members. When a student is treated as a capable, motivated learner with a voice in what she or he sets out to learn, friends of that student’s family want the same for their child. As parental demand for this type of learning increases, schools become more sensitive to the learner-based model and become more likely to undertake it themselves.

**Figure 1.1** Conceptual Framework: Domains of Living Systems as Levels of Interventions Related to Systemic Research on Engagement<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> The intersection between the three domains represents the core of the framework—the people as learners from each key constituent group and the values, beliefs, philosophies, and vision for their educational system.

The natural growth processes that arise within living systems underlie the kind of learning we believe our children need and deserve. These natural and organic processes reflect how humans are related, interdependent, and connected in the world in general. What is missing in most current models of education, however, is attention to the personal aspect of the ecology. Two of our goals in this book are (1) to demonstrate the importance of the *personal* aspect of any given educational system, and (2) to illustrate how you as a leader can focus on this personal aspect through a combination of moral purposes, values, and actions. Focus on the personal (including the interpersonal) serves as a rebalancing of the system (school, district, or agency) so that, in the intersection among the three aspects, people—teachers, families, administrators, students, and community members—are all seen as learners whose values, beliefs, philosophies, and visions serve as the basis for the entire system.

The prosperity of such systems requires leaders who

- know who they are as learners and as leaders;
- value everyone involved as learners;
- understand that diversity and difference mean greater opportunities for everyone in the system; and
- value personal growth and development in all learners.

## WHAT DOES “LEARNER-CENTERED” MEAN?

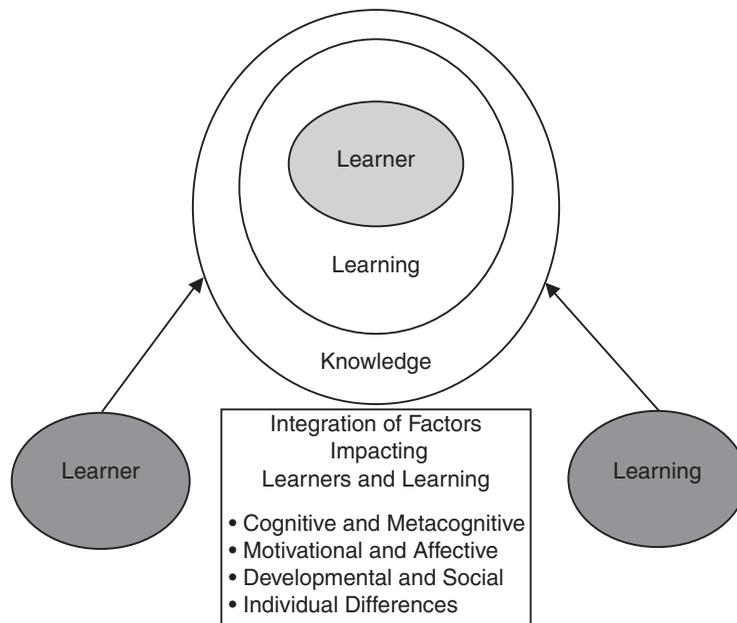
Being learner-centered means three things. First, each learner learns through a unique combination of factors, including “heredity; temperament; experiential history; beliefs, values, and perspectives; talents; interests; capacities; and needs” (McCombs & Miller, 2007, p. 15). This means that each learner approaches any given learning situation with a set of strengths and challenges built on the history of her or his previous learning experiences, and each person’s history is at least slightly different from everyone else’s. For learning to be effective, it must take into account the various factors and histories associated with each learner. The people in the system must value diversity, trust the natural dispersion of talents and interests, and strive to help each learner discover and develop his or her own unique place in the world.

Second, being learner-centered means focusing on the best available evidence about learning, how it occurs, and which teaching practices are most likely to result in the highest levels of student motivation and achievement (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). What we know (and will describe in Chapter 2) is that the most highly motivated learning of all is self-motivated learning, which occurs “only when learners possess (1) choice and control about how, what, and when to learn, and (2) choice and control over what they want to achieve” (McCombs & Miller, 2007, p. 16).

Third, being learner-centered means that the content of learning—the knowledge and skills needed for our future world and present realities—must equip learners with the capacity for complex and systemic thinking; for focused inquiry and reflection on who they are and what the world needs. The curriculum is the curriculum of life, with basic skills integrated into authentic, real-world problem solving. Learning paths and learning content must be allowed to vary as students and their teachers solve real-world and complex problems in joint inquiry and with a moral and ethical concern with the future of ourselves and the world across personal, social, economic, political, and environmental boundaries.

In summary, then, learner-centered means focusing on individual learners and their learning desires, needs, and experiences, using the best available evidence and knowledge about learning and the teaching practices that best support learning for everyone—students, teachers, families, and administrators. Figure 1.2 shows our Learner-Centered Model (LCM) including the evidence-based factors that impact both learners and learning, which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 2.

The core of the LCM is that all instructional decisions begin with knowing who the learners are—individually and collectively. This is followed by thoroughly understanding learning and how best to support learning for all people in the system. Finally, decisions about what practices should be in place at the school and classroom levels depend upon what we want learners to know and be able to do. The LCM puts the *personal domain*—the learners—at the heart of a system dedicated to learning and leading. It brings the educational system back into balance with what we know about learners, leading, and living systems.

**Figure 1.2** Learner-Centered Model: A Holistic Perspective

## HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

We have organized the book as both inquiry and journey toward our call for new leaders who can step up to the challenges and benefits of designing a new paradigm for learning, leading, and schooling. In this chapter, we have introduced you to the concept of learner-centered schools, viewed as living systems, and we provided a brief definition of our Learner-Centered Model, which serves as the foundation for the practical tools we provide in later chapters.

In Chapter 2 we look at what research evidence shows about effective leadership, what we know about learning and change, what it means to be learner-centered, what the learner-centered principles are, and what schooling and school leadership look like when seen as part of living systems.

In Chapter 3 we demonstrate (and ask you to reflect on) what our learner-centered model means for practice, first, by addressing the issues involved in sustaining a learner-centered model, including how to

- lead schools as moral communities;
- support learning and leading at all levels of the school community;
- negotiate political and policy environments; and
- create with others the powerful changes needed when schools are viewed as living systems.

We then present research showing the effectiveness of learner-centered models of schooling, including evidence from our own investigations of schools using the learner-centered model we described earlier in this chapter. We conclude

Chapter 3 with a description of how the learner-centered principles (introduced in Chapter 2) translate into practice at the school level and what the implications are for leadership and building communities of learners.

Chapter 4 asks you to reflect on what tools are needed for your journey to becoming a learner-centered school leader. In this chapter, we introduce you to the self-assessment and reflection process and how these can be applied at the school and classroom levels. You will have the opportunity to reflect on how these tools can support you in your own learning and leading journey. We discuss the concepts of distributed leadership, ongoing learning, change, and improvement, as well as how to identify leaders and change agents. We conclude the chapter with a summary description of the School-Level Assessment of Learner-Centered Practices (ALCP), a self-assessment and reflection assessment tool for maximizing student motivation, learning, and achievement. We show you how research has demonstrated positive relationships between learner-centered practices and the development of students' lifelong learning skills.

We devote Chapter 5 to an exploration of issues confronting school leaders and what learner-centered assessment tools can accomplish. We provide a thorough description of and examples from the ALCP, including discussion of how it was developed, how it relates to measures of lifelong learning and positive school climate, and how to take learner-centeredness to a systems level. In this chapter, you will have an opportunity to try out the ALCP survey for yourself.

Building on the material in Chapters 1 through 5, we ask you in Chapter 6 to explore how we can move educational systems to new student and system outcomes. These outcomes include those for all the learners in the system with a focus on motivating learners beyond content standards to becoming lifelong learners and forming learning partnerships. You will have an opportunity to

- identify the outcomes currently in place in your school and community and discover how they align (or not) with your state's learning standards;
- determine how your state learning standards reflect the learner-centered principles we have described here; and
- determine how the outcomes currently in place in your school and community can be expanded to include those valued by your staff and community.

You will learn what creates lifelong learners and how to identify which learning partnerships are needed in your school and community.

In Chapter 7, we explore the question of how to develop leadership qualities from within. We then describe some exciting new leadership concepts for developing leadership capacity from within. You will have the opportunity to clarify your vision for your school and identify what you need to do in order to incorporate the learner-centered model and principles into your school's practices. We provide guidelines for

- developing capacity from within your school and community;
- identifying the most successful teachers and leaders;
- forming learner-centered support groups; and
- utilizing networking and technology.

We conclude by identifying those simpler principles that can help you navigate through the complexities of a new school leadership role. We extend an invitation to build leadership capacity in everyone within your system so that, together, you can create the new learner-centered educational systems we need for the future.

In the final chapter, Chapter 8, we provide a summary of the first seven chapters. This summary is a good tool for you to use to check your understanding of the major points made throughout this book. It also is a tool for you to see how the complex topics of leadership can be reduced to simpler leadership principles and concepts.

In the following section we offer two exercises to start you on your way.

## HOW DO YOU LIKE TO LEARN?

We all know something about learning, just as we all have a theory or model of learning, whether or not we can actually articulate what our model is. Although you have probably had numerous opportunities to describe how you think learning works, how recently have you stopped to consider how *you* learn? Before we describe our model of learning, we invite you to begin two exercises, which we will return to in each chapter, to discover how you learn best and to reflect on how you can use what you discover about your own learning to guide yourself along the path to creating a school (or schools) in which communities of learners collaborate to enhance the achievement of everyone.

The first exercise involves responding to the questions in Box 1.1 and then answering the three questions in Box 1.2. In each of the following chapters, we'll expand on this so you can build a detailed description of yourself as a learner. In the final chapter, you'll have an opportunity to apply what you've discovered to the question of how you can be an effective leader of a school in which everyone is a learner and collaborator for success.

The second exercise involves discovering what kind of leader you are. Jot down your responses to the prompts in Box 1.3. When you've finished, take a moment to reflect on your responses.

In the next chapters, you'll have a chance to revisit your responses and, if you wish, to revise them as you consider the ideas and processes we'll discuss in each chapter.

**Box 1.1** How Do I Prefer to Learn: I

Answer each of the 14 questions below<sup>1</sup>. There are no right or wrong answers. Some of the responses may not express your exact feelings; nevertheless, answer as best you can. **Choose as many responses as you like for each item.** Assume that price is not a factor in choosing your responses. Ignore the letter codes for now.

1. When I walk into a stadium for a sporting event, I focus on:
  - a. the athletes warming up. (p)
  - b. what the spectators are wearing. (s)
  - c. the conversations around me. (li)
  - d. any musical sounds. (mu)
  - e. how many people are there. (qu)
2. To relax, I:
  - a. daydream. (ra)
  - b. listen to or play music. (mu)
  - c. balance the checkbook. (qu)
  - d. plan a vacation. (lo)
  - e. exercise. (p)
3. My favorite household chore is:
  - a. mowing the lawn. (p)
  - b. loading the dishwasher. (lo)
  - c. balancing the checkbook. (qu)
  - d. choosing the color scheme for the living room. (s)
  - e. anything I can do by myself. (ra)
4. What captures my attention in a restaurant is:
  - a. the amount of the bill. (qu)
  - b. the presentation of the food. (s)
  - c. the music. (mu)
  - d. reading the descriptions of the dishes. (li)
  - e. how I feel there. (ra)
5. What is my favorite thing in a restaurant:
  - a. eating alone (ra)
  - b. figuring the tip (qu)
  - c. eating with friends (er)
  - d. music (mu)
  - e. looking at the décor (s)
6. What is the most important aspect when I travel:
  - a. being completely alone (ra)
  - b. being in a group (er)
  - c. having a planned itinerary (lo)
  - d. reading about where I will be going (li)
  - e. playing or listening to music (mu)
7. What is the most important factor in choosing a place to live:
  - a. financial considerations (qu)
  - b. proximity to live musical entertainment (mu)
  - c. potential neighbors (er)
  - d. proximity to recreational activities (p)
  - e. storage space (lo)

(Continued)

**Box 1.1** (Continued)

8. I like proximity to:
  - a. a library or bookstore (li)
  - b. art galleries/museums (s)
  - c. people to interact with (er)
  - d. musical events (choir, concerts, music clubs) (mu)
  - e. health club, gym, or rec center (p)
  
9. My favorite hobbies are:
  - a. crossword puzzles (li)
  - b. things I can do alone (ra)
  - c. sudoku (lo)
  - d. collecting music (mu)
  - e. playing a computer game with great graphics (s)
  
10. To reduce stress, I typically:
  - a. read (li)
  - b. listen to or play music (mu)
  - c. stretch (p)
  - d. organize drawers or closets (lo)
  - e. look at art (s)
  
11. When making a meal for a group, my favorite thing to do is:
  - a. plan the menu (lo)
  - b. measure ingredients and calculate the portions (qu)
  - c. coordinate flowers with table arrangements (s)
  - d. select music (mu)
  - e. read recipes (li)
  
12. What do I notice most at a wedding:
  - a. clothing (s)
  - b. my feelings (ra)
  - c. number of guests (qu)
  - d. music (mu)
  - e. what people are saying (li)
  
13. When I go to a public event such as a sporting event, concert, or play, I:
  - a. estimate the collected revenue (qu)
  - b. listen to the music (mu)
  - c. read until the program begins (li)
  - d. walk around whenever I can (p)
  - e. look at faces in the crowd (s)
  
14. What is the first thing I think about when buying new clothing:
  - a. how I look in it (ra)
  - b. function/what it is for (lo)
  - c. appearance (s)
  - d. what others will think (er)
  - e. comfort (p)

<sup>1</sup> The questions and scoring system used in this book are from Miller, L. and Miller, L. C. (1994). *The Quick Smart Profile*. Austin, TX: Smart Alternatives, Inc. Used by permission.

*Note:* The meanings of the abbreviations can be found in Chapter 5, pp. 142–143.

**Box 1.2** How Do I Prefer to Learn: Reflection I

In the spaces that follow each of these three questions, jot down the first thing(s) that you think of in response.

1. What is my favorite way to relax?
2. What do I pay closest attention to when I am anonymous in a crowd of people?
3. What is my preferred way to reduce stress?

**Box 1.3** What Kind of Leader Are You: I

1. Right now, these are my primary concerns about my school/district/area:
2. I believe successful schools are based on these qualities:
3. The most important stakeholders in schools are:
4. My hopes for the students in my school/district/area are:
5. My top five qualities as an educational leader are:
6. Five things I am eager to learn in order to be a better leader are: